

## TO RIDE THE SURF OR DIVE BENEATH THE WAVES

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This contribution to the Internet arises from two invitations. The first was to offer workshops in Rome and Florence in relation to my work in Personal Construct Psychology, the second to prepare a text for the "Internet". The title is, in fact, the subtitle for one of two workshops that I gave and the overall theme is "constructs and their exploration". As both the title and the theme suggest I am inviting some challenging thoughts and actions in those areas of psychological involvement usually called counselling or therapy and which, in my own practice, I have called "constructive intervention". There is a third reason for the contribution and this will be given towards the end.

In the process of writing it became apparent that there was a structure underlying my thinking and it would help the reader, therefore, if I were to make it clear at the outset. The first part is made up of observations about constructs and language, in turn pointing to a problem. The second part is about using drawings as one solution to that problem, describing a method and giving two examples of its use, the latter pointing to the third reason mentioned above.

### Observations about constructs

It is common practice, and perhaps a matter of convenience, that constructs are seen as verbal labels, albeit more complex than simple adjectives since for completeness each involves a contrast. As I see it, however, the reality is rather different. I would put it this way, and for brevity, constructs are the implicit choices whereby we live. They are experiential rather than verbal. They acquire a verbal representation only when we are asked to produce them, as with the standard triadic elicitation procedure. And how common it is that when a contrast is asked for in that procedure an "un" is used to prefix the first response, a process that merely negates rather than amplifies. It follows that, if the aim of an enquiry is to elicit and communicate meaningful options, it is an unspoken assumption that some commonality of language will carry us through. Yet it can be demonstrated experientially that if you and I each write down three adjectives which we use to describe people, and our associations to those adjectives, the associations we give to each other's description will have little in common. Needless to say when this becomes apparent, as in a workshop, there is considerable surprise, if not shock to the participants. As I have said in other contexts, language is like Janus in pointing in two opposite directions, inwards to "individuality" of meaning and outwards to "commonality". In everyday interactions we assume the commonality aspect but when it is our task to be involved with people and their problems we need the more sophisticated view of language which it's Janus nature implies.

If I might now take up the metaphor in my title, it seems to me that it is common practice in interviewing to "ride the surf" of language. There is nothing wrong with that, and ridden skilfully, it can be very effective in promoting change. In this sense we are still "riding the surf" even when we use "laddering" or "pyramiding" techniques of exploring a person's constructs. Each of these is a skilful "riding of the surf". Yet each is basically an exploration of the "known" as exemplified by language. But what about the "unknown"? And this leads me back to a further consideration of "constructs".

We can certainly recognize that many everyday constructs are relatively peripheral in our lives and in our sense of self. Not so easily recognizable are the "core" constructs about self and circumstances which seem to operate at a far more profound level of awareness. Indeed we seldom have any need to become aware of them except that when we are confronted with profound problems these are almost certainly involved. How then to get at them? And this is where the second half of my metaphor takes on meaning. Is it possible to "dive beneath the waves" to see what can be brought up? Granted we would need to find the meanings

through the medium of language, but language would then be the tool, skilfully used, to bring into consciousness that which had previously been hidden. And that itself is potentially "reconstructive". But how?

### **A use of drawings: technique and two examples**

A simple answer is through the use of drawing, not completely free drawing but drawing minimally structured, as I shall show below. Workers with children, psychologists, psychotherapists, psychiatrists, have used drawings from time immemorial. Winnicott's "Squiggles" were an important part of his techniques. "Draw-a-Man" (Goodenough), "Draw-a-Person" (Machover), "Kinetic Family Drawing" (Burns and Kaufman) have all been traditional interviewing and assessment techniques with children and free drawing have been an open invitation to non-verbal communication in therapeutic interventions. As such they open up a child's awareness without relying primarily on the use of their language. Surprisingly, although Kelly operated a travelling school psychological service before developing his theory, the only mention of "drawing" in the indices of his two volumes is to "DAMT" and "DAPT" (see above), and those, interestingly enough, he uses as indices of potential "body dysfunction". It seems as though for Kelly, the use of drawing to access awareness was unknown territory.

My own contribution in this matter appeared (unpub) in 1980 and in print in Ravenette (1997, and currently, in press). The title was "A drawing and its opposite: an application of the "construct" in children's drawings", which, it can clearly be seen is adopting a Personal Construct approach to the subject. The technique was developed over time and I describe below its current form. It will be seen that it is minimally structured and that is for two related reasons. The first is that it enables the user experientially to acquire normative data over a series of cases which might conceivably be of "diagnostic" value, but which in any case would be interesting in its own right. Secondly, by the same argument the technique might be used on a normative sample for orthodox research.

The method of eliciting the drawings is simple. At the centre of a sheet of A4 placed horizontally I draw a horizontal line about 3 inches (75mm) long, bent over at angle of about 45 deg. at one end to a length of about 1 inch (25mm). (It is perhaps fortuitous that this was my first and only "experiment" in that direction and, because it was fruitful, I retained it, never subsequently regretting that decision.) I then say "I would like you to turn this line into a picture, and if you do it will probably say something about yourself that you don't know." If the child draws just an object I point out that I asked for a picture and ask further questions such as to elicit a context. The wording is not exact as the procedure is a "response eliciting" technique and not a test. When that is completed I say to the child "Look carefully at what you have just drawn and now on this separate sheet draw me the opposite." One is free to clarify this part of the instruction if the child queries it but not by giving an example. Only when both drawings have been finished is the child invited to talk about them, the aim in the conversation being, by skilful questioning, to elicit whatever the contrast(s) might be. Although I have presented this technique as developed for children it has proved even more valuable in counselling and therapy with adults, hence my presentation of it in workshops.

I would like to insert here a comment on the use of the instruction "opposite" or "contrast" or "not like that" (i.e. equally implying a contrast). Both to my way of thinking, and experientially, I see this notion of Kelly as one of the most profound in the armamentarium of questions he has bequeathed to us when we are intervening in peoples' predicaments. They open up buried knowings, alternative understandings and more productive actions far beyond their use in "construct elicitation".

To return to the technique: it is appropriate to consider the psychological processes which are involved in this task. There is certainly a double surprise when the client is not asked to talk about their picture and is asked instead for a further drawing, this time a contrast. Surprise has its own "waking up" value. Then it becomes necessary really to look again at what one has produced in order to abstract some feature, at some level, for which a contrast, categorical, conceptual or descriptive, might be discovered. The subsequent representation, at a non-verbal level, then requires further internal searches in order to communicate that contrast in visual form. This is, metaphorically, "diving beneath the waves". And what is finally produced will

communicate both more and less than the original contrast.

The two drawings are usually of situations and the aim of the interview is to go behind them in order to arrive at personal constructs previously unverballed, or even unverbalisable. Clients are asked to give an account of, or to describe what is happening in the contrasting situations, listening all the time for contrasts either explicit or implicit. They are invited to place themselves in these contrasting situations and then asked such questions as "When might you find yourself in situations like these?", "How would you be feeling in situations like these?" "What might you do?" "What sort of person could never get into situations like these?" etc. Needless to say the reasoning underlying this analysis did not come ready made with the invention of the technique. It came only after long experience of its. Invention and reasoning have their own separate sources but in their eventual confluence comes their fertility.

### **The first example**

Bella is a 15 year-old troubled young lady in a residential special school. I interviewed her at the request of the staff the better for them to understand her and hopefully for Bella better to understand herself. She was a willing participant. I used this technique towards the end of the interview, and preceding a story telling technique which then brought the interview to an end. It would not be appropriate to report the whole interview and I give this part for illustrative purposes only.

Bella turned my line into a railway engine on the tracks but was puzzled by my request to draw a contrast. She thought that there was a correct answer that I knew and how could she know what it was. I reassured her that that was not the case, she could draw her own contrast. She then produced the drawing of an aircraft labelled AIR TOURS, diving towards the earth.

Of the train she said "transport, machine, big, noisy, transports people to the coast."

Of the aircraft she said "flies, carries people on holiday, machine, very noisy."

In a way she is giving what they had in common so a question was called for from me to elicit a contrast. Hence I was asked "Where does the aircraft fly?". She got the point immediately and replied "In the air." "And the train ... " "On the ground." It is still necessary to personalise this contrast so "When is Bella up in the air?" "When I'm angry" "And when you're on the ground?" "I'm relaxed." Bella had described being "angry" previously in the interview but never "relaxed" and the construct "angry — relaxed" is therefore is a newly verbalised discovery which has the possibility of promoting change. It certainly has implications for the residential and teaching staff of the school in their interactions with her since they can now use her word "relaxed" in discussions about dealing with her difficulties.

### **The second example, and the third reason for writing this contribution**

This example is taken from the one of the workshops pointed to in my opening sentence. It also represents work unfinished, at the time, but finished imaginatively in retrospect. Hence it provides my third reason for writing.

It is my practice in workshops to work with each pair of participants. This, as I described above, is to illustrate the verbalisation of the two drawings in order to arrive at the personal discovery, and verbalisation of, some underlying construct. Clearly problems of both time and language make this difficult, especially in a workshop given in another's native language. This particular subject however, had a good command of English, nonetheless translation in the interest of her partner added linguistic complications. In the outcome I failed to achieve the most fruitful exploration. In the hour before rising on the next day, however, I relived the interchange in my imagination and then brought it to a more satisfactory conclusion. By presenting this on the Internet it is just possible that she might read it and try on my formulation "for size". And if it doesn't fit it may provoke one that does.

The first drawing, neatly and carefully drawn, turned my line into a small house flanked by two trees. This is a not infrequent response. The contrast line represented a desert landscape with a sand dune and a

bright sun in a clear sky. On the top of the dune was a recumbent camel, a human figure and baggage by the side of the camel. In trying to explore meanings of the drawings the dialogue was rather frustrating to both of us as each time the participant isolated a feature in one, she found a parallel feature in the other. Eventually she said, I think in some despair, "I think I haven't drawn an opposite." I should have then said something like "If not an opposite, what then is the similarity, how are they the same?" (i.e. the use of "contrast" in reverse). Instead I congratulated her on this discovery, but failed to move the matter forward. Therein, in my own eyes, was my failure.

To the best of my recollection there is a literature, based on research, related to the after-effects of unfinished tasks. Whether or not that is so, a memory of the two drawings and the questions that I did not ask came to mind in the early hours of the following morning. What I then saw was that each of the drawings, and the detail that I had been given about them, represented to me aspects of e.g. "being, living, existing, dwelling". If that was the case what then was the contrast? It dawned on me that when the underlying theme was put in that there was indeed an obvious contrast, namely "settled — nomadic". And that was exactly what the two pictures could be seen to represent. Conceptually, and at the level of words, that contrast may seem obvious but not necessarily so experientially. I would like to meet that participant again and in the light of my new awareness ask questions such as: "What sort of persons would be happy to live in the two contrasting situations?" "What would be the relative advantages and disadvantages?" In the light of such questioning she might herself become aware of this construct. The next question follows: "If you were to review your life along the dimension "living a settled life — living a nomadic life" would it give added meaning to your experiences?" In my imagination that would lead then to a termination of the interview. I would like to think that had this interview happened in reality it would have followed a similar course. Be that as it may, my using of this example has provided an opportunity of demonstrating firstly, that one cannot always be fully adequate in an interview and secondly, by offering an imaginary construction of what one might have done, providing an example of a way of interviewing appropriate to the task.

By way of a conclusion, I said at the beginning of this paper that, in search of commonality of meaning, a reliance on words is to use the "known" to push the "known" to its limits. But it is still "the known". The technique of "Drawing a line and its opposite" lays bare aspects of the "unknown" and then uses words to make that "unknown" "known". The outcome may well then be the promotion of change in the resolution of personal problems.

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