

SIMON BURNHAM
LET'S TALK

Using Personal Construct Psychology
to Support Children and Young People



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What use is Personal Construct Psychology? Nine case studies

As yet, few, if any, scales have been developed which tap the child's perception of their own behaviour. Personal construct theory offers the possibility of understanding what sense the child makes of his own actions. (Butler and Green 1998)

In this chapter a range of case studies is offered to give some illustrations of the value of using PCP when working with children and young people. The intention is also to demonstrate 'real world' outcomes of the techniques that were discussed in the previous chapter. I want to emphasise a few points before looking at each case study in detail, principally in the interests of keeping a sense of perspective. Much as I feel passionate about this area of psychology I would be doing more harm than good if I were to give anyone the impression that it is a panacea.

It's sometimes said that 'happy endings' are just stories that haven't finished yet, and whilst I might not agree with the implied pessimism of this view, it does offer a useful warning about presenting too tidy a narrative when describing any kind of intervention into another person's life. All of the situations described in these case studies were complex. Such is life. Although use of PCP often occasioned what we might call 'Aha!' moments for me, the young people I was working with, their families and other adults involved, these moments of insight and re-construing rarely functioned like magic bullets, transforming troubled or unhappy people into relaxed, confident souls through the power of applied psychology. Sometimes the best thing to arise was the asking of a different sort of question about what was going on. Sometimes it was 'merely' that someone felt they understood someone else better, even if the original 'problem' hadn't immediately gone away. So no quick fixes here, but plenty of new possibilities.

I'd also like to put some distance between the work described here and the tenacious myth of the lone hero-innovator professional. I am not attempting to present anything like exemplary casework. In none of these case studies was the

use of PCP the only support or influence being brought to bear on the young people involved. What I'm presenting might be better described as snapshots: small sections cut from longer conversations which were in turn only small parts of complex lives. I cannot do justice to that complexity here: there were often other professionals involved with these young people and there were always parents, carers, teachers, friends, peers etc. exerting their influences and playing their parts. Where PCP was effective and useful in these cases it was effective and useful within that larger network of relationships, not in spite of it or alongside it. What I can't do here is give a fair picture of all those other involvements; that would require a different sort of book.

One last caveat: the restrictions of space do not even permit me to report and discuss all the PCP-based work that I carried out with each young person. In most cases only the exploration of a single construct, perhaps two, that seemed to be pivotal or particularly influential in the presenting situation is given here. In each case other constructs were elicited and explored and many other issues were raised in the conversations that took place, often through use of the Let's Talk programme.

Although I wasn't aware of overarching patterns when I was doing this work with children and young people, reflecting much later on the outcomes suggested to me that the very different situations these people were in often had elements in common. These elements seem to me to represent broader dilemmas that I feel we all face from time to time. With this in mind I'm presenting the case studies in groups under three headings that try to capture those human dilemmas: 'Why should I be normal?', 'How can I change?' and 'Appearances are deceptive'. All the case studies have been anonymised. In some cases minor details in the conversations reported have been changed or removed where failure to do so might have made identification of the young person more likely within the local authority where the work took place.

Appearances are deceptive

Work with Annie, Sean and Robbie is described in this section. In each case the theme that seemed to emerge most powerfully was the revealing of another greater and more immediate problem for them than the one that had brought us together in the first place.

Annie

I met Annie three times over a period of 6 months or so. She was a 10-year-old girl described as isolated from her peers and frequently the victim of bullying in

the form of name-calling and deliberate ostracising. Annie was described as having difficulty making and keeping friends and her self-esteem was felt to be low by adults who knew her well. In school Annie was felt to be annoying other children through well-intentioned but socially 'clumsy' attempts at ingratiating herself with them.

Using the triadic elicitation method with Annie revealed that 'geek' was a term she used to describe herself and sometimes others. Treating this as an emergent pole I asked Annie what she would call people who aren't geeks. Her response was 'popular' and she expressed a very strong wish to be a popular person. This was not particularly surprising given the information that I already had about Annie before I met her. Indeed, without ever meeting her I might have guessed that she would wish she were more popular with her peers. Where PCP proved its worth, as it almost always does in such situations, was in allowing me to unpack with Annie exactly what 'popular' (and 'geek') meant to her, or rather, what the corollaries of being popular were for Annie. It's likely that at a superficial level Annie and I both agreed on the dictionary definition of 'popular' but in this context 'popular' had a much more specific and personal meaning for her, and Laddering the construct of which it was one pole was able to reveal this meaning.





Friendly** **Bullies**

More friends

Get less friends

Stick up for you when bullies come

No help if someone stronger comes along

Otherwise you'd just be beaten up

Lazy* **Hyperactive***

Slower,

Get stronger, fitter

Can't run fast

Thicker skin

Will get hurt more

Can run away if someone tries to attack you

* where I'd like to be

+ where I am

This is a good example of an occasion when it felt absolutely right to reflect the contents of both constructs straight back to Sean. I told him how unexpected it



Let's Talk

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Let's Talk





1



Before we start



CONFIDENTIAL?



2



About you



Your date of birth?

Your age?



Things you like to do in the evenings,
weekends and holidays?





3



Who lives with you at home?





4



Your friends ?



Who are your friends?

When do you see your friends?

What sorts of things do you like
to do with your friends?



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