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‘Bunches of grapes and bananas’: un-construing the human body in life-drawing.

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In a sense, PCT could be said to be centrally concerned with innovation and creativity. For example, although Kelly argued that we make choices that produce either greater definition or greater extension of our construct system, he clearly felt that we should ultimately favour extension; we should never remain content with our current ways of seeing the world. Both the model of the person as scientist and the claim that ‘man [sic] is a form of motion’ emphasise the inventiveness of human beings. Kelly (1955) put forward the ‘creativity cycle’ (p514) as a model of this innovative process. The creativity cycle involves a movement between the ‘loosening’ and ‘tightening’ of constructs in order to allow the emergence of new ways of thinking. Kelly saw this cycle at work as clients in therapy struggled to construe themselves and their lives in a more facilitative way. Some aspects of later work within the mainstream creativity literature can be seen to involve similar ideas to the creativity cycle. For example, work within the trait theory tradition emphasises the tolerance of ambiguity and uncertainty, the work of De Bono and Hudson focus on ‘divergent’ thinking, and the humanistic approach calls for an ‘openness to experience’ and the ‘ability to toy with elements and concepts’.

Kelly (1955: 514) says that the creativity cycle has to do with a person's originality, and this is certainly part of what we understand by creativity in the Arts. To compose a completely new piece of music or a poem, or to create a piece of sculpture, or to write a story or a play would seem to be axiomatic of what we take creativity to be. When we describe someone as 'creative', we often imagine a person producing artistic artefacts of some kind.

However, although our everyday understanding of the term 'creativity' would seem to include artistic creations as almost axiomatic, all these theoretical approaches, including PCT, appear to focus principally or wholly upon the creation of new ways of thinking. For Kelly (1955: 515): 'The creativity cycle has to do with the way in which a person develops new ideas'. Neither Kelly nor other construct theorists seem to have said much more on the subject. Fransella (PCP encyclopaedia) says of the creativity cycle that it "describes a process of construing that moves from loose construing to tight construing and back and forth until a person feels that something has been 'created' that can be tested out."

The fact that Kelly and others have talked about creativity within this narrow focus is not necessarily a criticism- if the range of convenience of the creativity cycle is limited to personal change, this is not an indictment of it. Most other psychological approaches to creativity, like PCT, seem to focus on creativity as innovative thinking. Psychoanalysis does attempt to understand the process of artistic creativity, but does so only in terms of the sublimation of neurotic needs. As part of his paper, Nigel will explore constructivist

alternatives to psychoanalytic views of 'the unconscious', such as Kelly's notion of 'pre-verbal' construing and Neimeyer's 'tacit construing', and will look at what might be added by using the existential-phenomenological notion of 'pre-reflective' action. My own paper will also draw on the phenomenological concepts of the natural attitude and the epoche, and so our papers have a wider theoretical focus than just PCP.

Most approaches to creativity appear to see the creative process as taking place within the enclosed psychological space of the individual, and a further issue that Nigel's paper will explore is the social context of creative production. PCP can be seen as, amongst other things, a social psychological theory, since it recognises that construing always takes place within the context of social relationships, and the implications of this for the creative process will be examined.

Introduction to my paper

In this paper, I will use the subjective experience of life drawing to explore the usefulness and limitations of PCT in understanding this creative activity. In particular, I will examine the extent to which the creativity cycle can be used to understand this activity. My purpose here is to see whether in fact PCT does have something to offer in understanding the creative process, since other psychologies seem to have neglected this.

Life drawing

I have been taking part in a life-drawing class for a little over 10 years. It is a small group and very informal, run by a local artist called Alan. The format is simple. Every Thursday

evening he engages a model (we have a pool of about two or three) and we sit and draw from 7.30 to 9.30. with a break in the middle. There are no rules, and Alan has little time for the idea of a 'right' way of drawing or learning to draw.

So what I now have to say on the subject of producing artistic artefacts is inevitably coloured by this environment.

Here are some examples of his work, by the way.

So let's get some of the parameters in the open. This class is not about producing a representation of the human body that is 'accurate' in the sense that it is a good likeness of the model. It is about producing an aesthetically pleasing image, one that in some way is evocative of the weight and mass of the body and its occupation of space, of the relationship of the body parts to each other, and that perhaps captures some of its 'movement' (even in repose). In the drawing we should 'recognise' the model and her/his pose without the drawing being photographically correct.

For the first few months, perhaps years, of attending this class, I struggled to understand why my drawings largely failed to capture any of these things. They often didn't even look much like people, or else they depicted distorted beings- improbably tall with tiny heads, or in postures that in reality could never be held (show some examples?). One of the few pieces of advice from Alan helped me to understand why: "you are looking too much as your drawing- keep your eyes on the model" he said, and " Draw what you see,

not what you know.” The problem of how to draw at all without looking much at my piece of paper was a trifling issue left to me to resolve.

But this was an important lesson. It reminded me of the very first piece of research I was involved in as a research assistant, when I was a PhD student. The member of staff I was assisting was interested in children’s drawings, and the extent to which their awareness of everyday images influenced their own representations. We asked them to draw a picture of a diamond shape, and almost exclusively they drew a shape (demonstrate) like the one you see on playing cards. We then showed them pictures of diamond shapes where the horizontal angles were more acute (show examples) and then asked them to draw what they had seen. The results were intriguing- when we measured the angles they had drawn, they were invariably more acute than the examples we had shown them. In other words, their drawings tended towards the ‘diamond shape’ with which they were already familiar. They were drawing what they knew, not what they saw.

How much more complex, then, is the human body than a diamond shape? In all its complexity, I was drawing what I knew instead of what I saw. A human body is, in our normal experience, a person. It lives, breathes, talks, moves and interacts with us. This is what we know. Decades ago the perceptual constructivists made a convincing case for the view that our perceptions of the physical world are governed by its meaning for us: a coin was perceived as actually larger to a poor child than to a rich one (Bruner and Goodman, 1947).

By extension, it seems that our efforts to represent a person on paper will inevitably be influenced by all the meanings, both personal and social, that people and bodies have for us. Drawing what you 'know' will not produce an image that actually looks like a person- rather it will be analogous to the drawing of the person as it would look if the body parts were proportionate to the amount of cells in the cortex devoted to them (see picture).

So, in order to draw the body as it is we must somehow set aside what we know. In PCT terms, I think this is certainly understandable within the concept of 'loose construing'. Kelly wrote : "Loosened construction...sets the stage for creative thinking...The loosening releases facts, long taken as self-evident, from their conceptual moorings." (Kelly, 1955/1991 p1031/ Vol 2 p330, cited by Fransella in PCP encyclopaedia).

In the same way, I believe, in our artistic endeavours, our perception of the human body must be set free from its moorings. Now, this can be disturbing. We have all had the odd experience of staring so long and hard at something familiar that it begins to look strange to us, but this is just what we are striving for in drawing the human body. It is a recurring joke in my drawing class that feet and hands are terribly difficult to draw. Commenting on evening on his own lifelong efforts, Alan said "I couldn't understand why feet always turned out looking like bunches of grapes and hands like bunches of bananas. And then I realised that's what they are like- hence the title of this paper.

I have previously written about artistic artefacts from a phenomenological perspective, and it seems to me that this is one area where PCT and phenomenology are often saying

similar things but using different concepts. From a phenomenological approach, this striving to distance oneself from one's everyday understanding in order to reach a more accurate perception would be understood as the epoché, the attempt to hold at bay what they term the 'natural attitude'. Loosening, in PCT terms, can be thought of as trying to hold at bay our taken-for-granted assumptions about the world.

Artistic activity and the creativity cycle

So to what extent can the creativity cycle offer us an understanding of this creative activity?

One way in which Kelly's cycle seems to echo artistic creativity is that you don't know what's going to come out of it. It is a risk. Alan commented on the work of a fellow, well respected local artist, who had once said to me that he knew exactly how a finished painting was going to look before he started it. 'Then why bother?' was Alan's response. He is always on the look-out for when our drawings start to look predictable, where we are doing what we know how to do rather than taking risks. At these moments he recommends some disruptive change, for example drawing with the left hand if one is right-handed, or using unfamiliar materials. Kelly's vision of creativity certainly would not include any notion of fore-knowledge or prediction. The creativity cycle is dangerous and risky because we just don't know where it will take us.

Loosening seems to me to be a good way of understanding the psychological process that must be engaged in if our drawings are to be psychologically accurate (rather than

representationally accurate, as through the camera lens). But for the duration of the creative activity it seems to me it important not to tighten. We must free our perceptions from their moorings and keep them floating there. The body must cease to signify as a human person. So is there any sense in which the tightening part of the creativity cycle applies here? Of course, eventually the drawing is finished, the model puts on their clothes and becomes a 'person' again; loose construing cannot continue indefinitely. In phenomenological terms, the natural attitude returns. Kelly was clear that there must be both loosening and tightening: "If the therapist succeeds only in producing the loosening phase of the cycle, he may, as many therapists do, succeed only in precipitating a schizoid reaction." (Kelly, 1955 Vol 1 p 529), and of course Don Bannister's work is widely known for his investigation into the theory that thought disorders such as schizophrenia are in fact the product of extremely loose construing. .

And it is true that, when the drawing is done, something has changed. The human body never quite looks the same again- some, perhaps minimal, reconstrual has taken place. If this can be regarded as 'tightening' then perhaps the creativity cycle as conceived by Kelly does give us an insight into artistic creative activity. But an alternative explanation is that the artist's eye eventually becomes accustomed to loosening. It looks for lines, balance, weight and mass. It comes to find it easier to put out of immediate experience what it knows. What one might call a 'perceptual loosening' comes more easily and more naturally.

However, as I mentioned at the beginning, the creativity cycle is pretty much couched in cognitive terms, and there is nothing cognitive about the creative process that I have described- the creative process here is not best understood as arriving at a new way of thinking about the human body. But we must also remember that PCT is not a cognitive theory. It is a psychology that refuses to artificially divide our functioning into thoughts, feeling and behaviour. Although much PCT writing concerns our, often unarticulated, thoughts this focus on cognition is understandable given the kinds of issues and problems that the theory is used to address. Finding ways of helping people to think differently about themselves and their lives is central to the business of PCT practitioners. That Kelly described the creativity cycle in cognitive terms may simply reflect this focus.

Conclusion

My own, limited, experience of artistic creativity suggests to me that it is loosening which is the primary or perhaps only part of the cycle that is important here. My experience of life drawing is that it demands that we hold in abeyance the meanings that the human body holds for us- it is what I have referred to as 'un-construing' (hence the sub-title of my paper). It seems to me that, paradoxically, at least some of those activities we are most likely to label 'creative' are not easily conceptualised through the creativity cycle. In this context it is interesting that Fransella (PCP encyclopaedia) says that the paintings of Picasso can be seen as encapsulating the 'thought disorder' typical of loose construing (show image). Perhaps creative activity is always a temporary madness!

Bruner, J.S. and Goodman, C. C. (1947) Value and Need as Organizing Factors in Perception. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 42, 33-44.