

Personal Construct Psychology
in
Cardiff Educational Psychology Service

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The aim of this article is to explore how Personal Construct Psychology (PCP) can be used by Educational Psychologists (EPs). In Cardiff, we have undertaken the Personal Construct Psychology Association (PCPA) Practitioner's Certificate and this article describes how we have used PCP in our work.

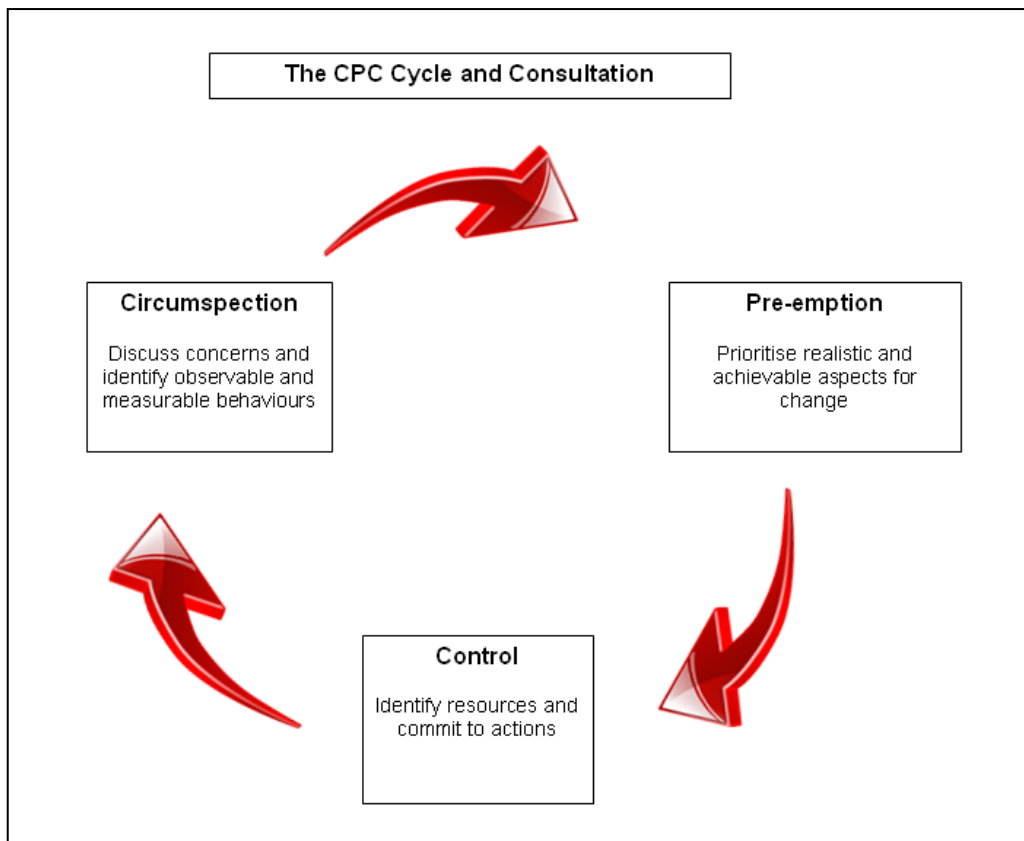
The British Psychological Society (BPS) states that EPs apply psychology to tackle problems encountered by young people relating to teaching, learning, behavioural, emotional and social difficulties. Our work can involve assessment, observation, consultation and planning of interventions either through direct work with pupils or in consultation with key stakeholders, e.g. teachers.

In PCP the notion of a person as a scientist is central (Kelly, 1955). This fits with the work of EPs who explain a person's behaviour as 'their best experiment'. Another aspect of our work is to facilitate joint problem solving (Farrell, 2006). In PCP, all parties try to construe the construction process of each other. The relationship is one of equals searching for meaning in which the EP tries to avoid the role of expert (Truneckova and Viney, 2006). PCP can support EPs in relating to others, managing meetings, facilitating consultations and understanding behaviour.

PCP and the Consultation Model

In Cardiff, we operate Consultation as a model of service delivery based on the work of Patsy Wagner (1995). Consultation involves working with key stakeholders, often teachers, to develop solutions together (Gutkin and Curtis, 1990). It aims to facilitate change at the level of the individual, group or organisation. It is a process where concerns are raised and a collaborative process is initiated which combines joint exploration, intervention and review. The model of Consultation we have adopted is underpinned by three main theoretical frameworks: PCP, Symbolic Interactionism and Systems Thinking.

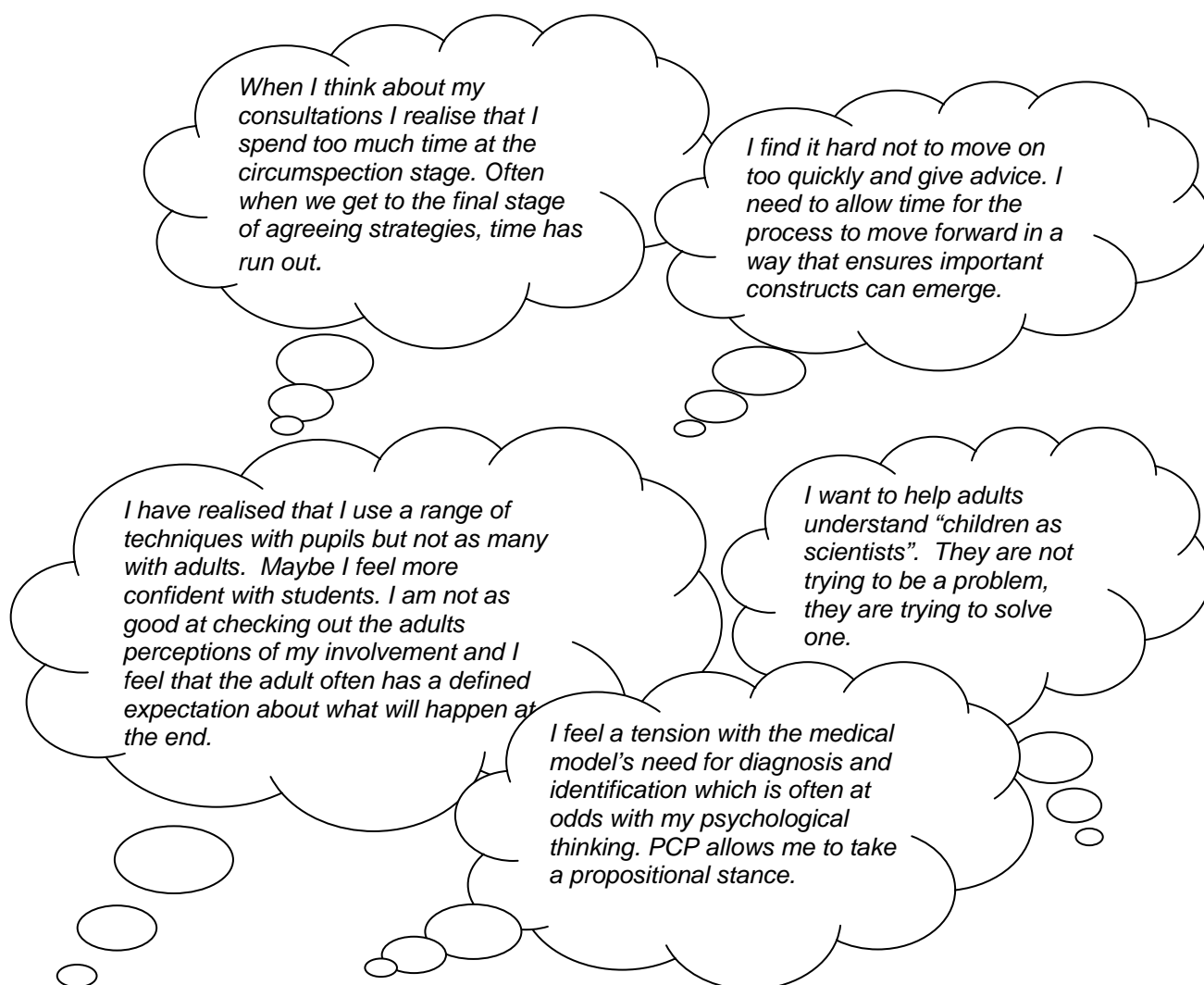
Ravenette (1999) looked into the reasons why a child may be prioritised for EP involvement and found that all the reasons related to the constructs of the teacher. He also identified that the children prioritised by teachers were often not those with the highest level of need. These studies suggest that effective interventions need to take into account the constructs of teachers. During a consultation this needs to happen at each stage of the CPC cycle:



Consultation is language based and relies on shared understanding. PCP shows how important it is to be clear when using language and how infrequently we all take the same meaning from the same words. PCP allows EPs to clarify what others mean. When EPs ask questions in Consultation, they are exploring individual understanding (individuality corollary) and moving towards joint understanding (sociality corollary). Only then can effective ways forward be developed.

Most Consultations involve responding to teachers' requests for involvement in relation to a child's needs. It is different from a therapeutic situation because, usually, neither the teacher nor the child have asked for help for themselves. When an EP works with a child they bring their own constructs, as do other adults involved, e.g. parent, head teacher. Whilst it is important to be aware of all these, PCP encourages us to avoid putting our own labels on problems. Kelly (1967) is reported to have used the example of a Greek mythical figure known as Procrustes. This figure was said to have an obsession that any overnight guest must fit his spare bed, therefore he either stretched them or chopped their legs off. In other words, he tried to make them fit his constructs. As EPs we must guard against making a child fit with the constructs of others.

The following are individual reflections on the use of PCP in Consultation:



PCP with Individual Pupils

The following examples show how we have used PCP with pupils. They illustrate a range of techniques and contain (in italics) the personal reflections of EPs on the process. However, it is important to recognise that the relationship between the EP and the child and the process they engage in together is key to making a change.

Example 1: Lisa is a Year 9 pupil who had stopped attending school.

A Repertory Grid was constructed and explored using the triadic method (Banister et al, 1993). Friends and children who bullied her were used as elements in the grid. This generated a hypothesis that Lisa is fearful of groups of children as she construes groups as being bullies (over-tight construct). Therefore school, where there are many groups of children, may cause anxiety and leave her feeling unsafe. This could be the reason why

she had stopped attending. Lisa's behaviour (avoiding school) was her best attempt at managing her anxiety.

PCP allowed me to gain an understanding of how Lisa construed her behaviour (individuality), and to identify areas of over-tightening or excess loosening of constructs. Agreed information was fed back to teachers to inform the problem solving process (sociality).

In future I would not use such a formal technique. I think the same understanding could have been arrived at in a more conversational way using laddering and pyramiding.

Example 2: Bob, a Year 10 pupil whose teachers and mother perceived him as exhibiting disruptive behaviour.

Laddering and pyramiding techniques were used to establish core constructs. This revealed that Bob did not think that the school could offer him the necessary subject choices for him to achieve his future goals. Bob told me that he sometimes found it hard to make choices because people always told him what was best for him.

Using PCP allowed me to establish Bob's understanding of his own behaviour. I did not think it appropriate to rely on the explanations given by the adults. I took an eco-systemic approach to this case and used PCP to gain a better understanding of the systems (the family, the school and Bob himself).

Example 3: Nia is fifteen and she anticipated that she would not do well in her GCSE examinations because she thought that she had not worked hard enough.

Using laddering, pyramiding and rating of statements, several hypotheses were explored and refined. I asked Nia to draw and describe the person she would most and least like to be like. The elements identified included being focused, attentive and motivated, characteristics which Nia thought that she did not display. This led to key themes around motivation, feeling under pressure and revision. When revising, it seemed that Nia exposed herself to large amounts of information and felt overwhelmed, which in turn led to feelings of anxiety. In PCP terms, she seemed to be over dilating in her exposure to revision material. She saw no alternative. I hypothesised that Nia needed to constrict her exposure to revision information by breaking it into smaller parts.

PCP helped me to loosen Nia's construing around her performance in examinations. When thinking about this case I wondered what constructs regarding ability, achievement and exam performance did I bring to this interaction? Was I imposing my own constructs on Nia?

Example 4: Ben, a Year 7, pupil had found the transition to secondary school difficult. School records showed a number of incidents of aggressive

behaviour and staff perceived that the number and seriousness of incidents was increasing. He had received two fixed term exclusions.

Constructs were elicited using the Blob people, ideal self drawings and triadic elicitation. A recurring comment made by Ben referred to being 'funny' and 'making people laugh.' This was explored using laddering and pyramiding. The core constructs elicited seemed to be that making people laugh was important because 'people will like you' and it was important not to be 'geeky' because then people 'would ignore you'. Ben conducted an experiment to see how 'geeky' he could behave without being teased. The techniques of contrast reconstruction and employing another construct were then used to help Ben gain a different perspective on his behaviour. Ben agreed that he would meet weekly with a member of the school staff to report on how he was doing in the more difficult lessons and what he might do to make the lessons more successful. Teachers reported they had seen an improvement in Ben's behaviour.

Although working with PCP allowed me to understand the views of the child and engage him more fully in his own intervention, time constraints did not allow me to engage with Ben's teachers. As PCP emphasizes the importance of others in confirming or disconfirming a child's beliefs about themselves, it would be helpful to involve them in pupils' experiments in the future.

Example 5: Sam, thirteen, lived with his father and stepmother. He did not have contact with his birth mother. He had started to show some disruptive behaviours in class. Staff were concerned that he was an able pupil who had been doing well but whose behaviour had deteriorated.

I asked Sam 'What sort of boy are you?' then laddered and pyramided his responses.

feel like they're there for you people will help you out if you get into trouble they're there for you other people will hang around with you funny, a bit stupid talkative don't listen act silly to be popular have lots of friends	—————	you get more money, a big house so you get a good job so you get good qualifications you're on the teacher' good side a nerd not funny quiet listen well-behaved close to the teacher might get bullied
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Sam commented on the conflict facing him, wanting to study and do well at school but also wanting to be popular. I suggested he carry out an experiment to notice people who are funny and work hard. He found this hard and I felt stuck (Kellyian hostility), so I got out some pictures and asked Sam to pick one that said something about how he was feeling. He chose a picture of a dog shut in by a gate. He said the dog is "sad and wants to get over the fence" because "The thing that he loved walked out and closed the gate on him." I asked "What would make the dog happy?" and he said "The person would go back to the fence, open the gate and walk in."

My hypothesis was that Sam was talking about his birth mother. He said that he did not know why his Mum had left and maybe it was something to do with him. He gave me permission to speak with his family. When I next saw Sam he told me that his Dad and Step Mum had explained about his Mum and he knew that her reasons for leaving were nothing to do with him. He also said that things were better at school (staff agreed) and had noticed someone who was 'funny' and 'worked hard' – his favourite teacher. So, in Sam's words, he had found someone who was 'funny, a bit stupid' but also 'a nerd'.

This case highlighted how powerful using images can be. I learnt that it is worth exploring other techniques if I am stuck. Most importantly, it reinforced that individuals know themselves better than anyone else, we just need to ask the right questions.

PCP and the Voice of the Child

EPs have a role as child advocates and in promoting the voice of the child. The Special Educational Needs (SEN) Code of Practice (DfES, 2001b) suggests that professionals need to listen to the views of pupils and incorporate them into school-based interventions. PCP offers techniques which help EPs to establish children's views of themselves, their strengths and their problems. Once an intervention has begun, PCP can be used to monitor how a child's views are changing and therefore whether interventions are effective. "PCP can compliment a problem-solving approach, which values the contribution of the young person rather than imposing an intervention with no personal investment or meaning." (Hardman, 2001 p 44)

Statutory Assessment

EPs are expected to assess students with a variety of additional learning needs and advise others on the support a pupil may require to access the curriculum. In Statutory Assessment we include a section on pupil's views. What follows is one EP's reflection on how PCP has supported her in gathering this information.

I employ a range of PCP techniques to gather this information. I aim to reach a shared understanding of the pupil's world e.g. their thoughts and feeling around school and home, and their interpretation of their strengths and needs. Following my assessment, I ask the young person how I can provide feedback, suggesting I write them a letter as a reminder of the assessment, our discussion and any agreed next steps and experiments.

Previously, I had been in the habit of asking the same questions with a pre-conceived idea of the answer. PCP allows me to hear the pupil's voice and has impacted on the quality of my listening. I reflect what I hear to check out my understanding of what has been shared and this involves a deeper level of interaction.

Supervision

From a PCP perspective, the transition from one professional role into another could be viewed like an experiment, with supervision helping the Trainee Educational Psychologist (TEP) to test out hypotheses and experimenting with alternatives. As supervisors we need to be 'walking with' and 'feeling with' trainees (Ravenette, 1999). What follows is an account of using PCP in supervision.

The TEP was interested in which 'qualities' make a good EP so as a way of exploring this we did a Repertory Grid. For the elements she chose herself, herself as she would like to be, some of her colleagues from her course and some EPs she had shadowed. We explored every combination of elements, then we looked at the constructs, identified the favoured poles and she rated herself. We further explored some of her constructs using pyramiding and laddering. She said that it helped clarify what traits she valued in EPs. It helped us to think about what we needed to work on in supervision and enabled her to observe her own transition to becoming an EP.

This process involved 'Kellyian aggression' as she constantly experimented. She tried 'acting as if' she were particular psychologists which lead to some rich conversations. We always returned to the rep grid in our supervision sessions. Without it we would not have had such rich conversations about the nature of educational psychology and our core constructs about it. It helped minimise the hierarchical nature of supervision and increased sociality.

PCP and Multi-agency Work

PCP has been used in multi-agency meetings to develop joint understanding of professional language and to develop consistency when working with schools. In one example, when a team of Local Authority professionals met to discuss how to communicate a new initiative to schools, it became apparent that there was no shared understanding of how to do this. Some colleagues favoured telling the schools what to do and others believed that schools should be empowered to bring about change themselves. PCP questioning reframed the thinking of the group and resulted in an agreed way forward.

I found that PCP helped to clarify professional jargon and achieve more effective multi-agency working.

PCP at a Whole School Level

PCP can be helpful when making changes at a systemic level. One school identified difficulties in managing SEN, in particular relating to the confidence of staff.

Through a process of questioning and elaboration, it emerged that the Head Teacher and I were construing differently. Whilst I envisaged that the Head would be coordinating work, her constructs seemed to relate to doing the majority of the work herself, amplifying her Kellyian anxiety and hostility. Discussion around working as a team and the need to clarify roles and

responsibilities led to a shift towards commonality. It was agreed that I would facilitate group work with the staff to explore their construing around issues of SEN and change.

Using Leitner's version of the ABC method (Leitner, 2001) to look at losses and gains associated with the change, we developed visualisations of what it would look like (pyramiding). This gave staff concrete actions. A subsequent meeting with the head indicated that a significant change had occurred. The staff also expressed positive feelings about their ability to manage SEN.

The extent and ease with which PCP brought about change at a systemic level surprised me. I had hypothesized that the issue was too big and broad to tackle. The school and I were stuck (Kellyian hostility). Key to bringing about change was developing staff commonality, sociality and individuality and also developing specific actions. It felt uncomfortable to rely solely on my PCP skills and to resist the temptation (and school expectations) to provide solutions.

Our Challenges

As illustrated in this article, the use of PCP in EP practice can be wide ranging and valuable. However, we are aware of a number of challenges that we face if we are to use it to its full potential. One of the greatest challenges is the pressure we feel from schools to solve problems or come up with answers. We need to be mindful that this may influence the openness of our thinking and listening.

As EPs, we fulfil different roles. This means that service users don't always have an understanding of our role at a particular time (e.g. assessment, consultation, therapeutic work). The challenge for us is communicate the purpose of our involvement with each interaction and we hope that PCP assists us in this.

Our time allocation system sets the number of sessions we deliver to schools per term, with sessions to schools being limited due to staffing levels. Our use of PCP would be more effective if we had more time in schools and were able to use it more flexibly.

The Statutory Assessment process can constrain our ability to apply psychology. The expectation that is placed upon us in this role is to carry out normative assessments that can be matched against Local Authority criteria. Although Cardiff is attempting to reduce the number of Statutory Assessments, these continue to take up a large proportion of our time which limits our opportunities to use PCP.

The use of PCP relies heavily on the skills, theoretical preferences and motivation of individual Psychologists. Our challenge is to be aware of our own preferences and be mindful that we are working within subjective hypotheses and not searching for definitive answers.

Although PCP cannot be used to provide all the information we require, we have found it useful in many areas of our work. Its theoretical approach has significant potential as a foundation for our work.

Where next for Cardiff?

We really enjoyed undertaking the PCP course and feel inspired to continue to develop our skills. We have established a PCP interest group that meets twice each term to share practice and develop our understanding and skills. Meeting as a group increases our confidence, broadens our experience and facilitates reflection. It is hoped that meeting regularly will help integrate theory and practice.

Areas we intend to explore in the group include:

- using PCP with teachers and adults,
- using PCP with children and young people with limited or no language,
- using PCP with children and young people at the early stages of development,
- exploring our own constructs and how they impact on our practice, and
- using time creatively to maximise our application of PCP.

We see PCP as a core theory, with other theories fitting alongside or within it. The course has inspired us to revisit our model of consultation, with Mary Francis, a PCP practitioner, facilitating this process.

Our understanding of PCP has developed and our practice has changed in response to this. Even if we use it in different ways, it has brought us together as a team. It has helped us to recognise the commonality and sociality between us whilst allowing us to maintain our individuality. We recognise that we are on a journey to develop PCP and are looking forward to continuing our exploration.

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