

(Conference Papers)

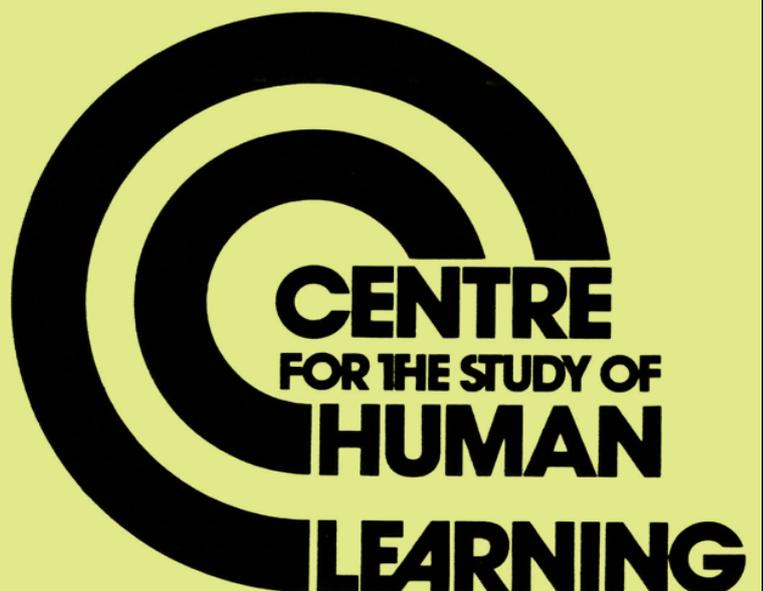
The Exchange Grid: Reality Testing And Identification

Presented at:

British Conference on Personal Construct Psychology

Steven Mendoza
Laurie Thomas (Convener)
Don Bannister (Chairman)

Centre for the Study of Human Learning
(C.S.H.L) Oxford. UK



The Exchange Grid: Reality Testing And Identification

Steven Mendoza

I was a postgraduate with the Centre about seven years ago. I then went into social work and trained in psychotherapy. I have recently had time to return to the Centre and try to resume my work. I now find myself a field of collision for object relations psychology and construct psychology. I find that quite exciting and I am going to try to share with you the process of thinking myself back into an understanding of what I am trying to do. Most of what I have to say will be familiar and I can only hope that it will stimulate you more than it will inform you.

I am going to describe the exchange grid as a procedure I am trying to develop. I shall then discuss why I might bother to do that and what is implied about human learning by what it includes and what it does not. The easiest point of departure is another procedure developed by Laing, Phillipson and Lee. They call it the inter-personal perception method. It consists of a long series of statements such as a spouse might make about their relationship and their partner. Each member of the dyad answers each question three times. Once for themselves. Once as they think the partner would answer and once as they think their partner will say they would answer. If you associate immediately to a T.V. programme called Mr. and Mrs. then I am afraid that would be entirely appropriate. I just hope the inter-personal perception method is not to blame for the quality of the programme.

From the six answers to each question, three measures of inter-personal perception are derived. Agreement shows the extent to which partners answer the same. Understanding shows how much they are aware of when they do and do not agree. Realisation shows how much they realise the extent of their partners understanding. Each measure is derived from the sum of differences of the appropriate pair out of the six answers to one question. There is no need to try to visualise the arithmetic of this now, because the exchange grid is much simpler.

The useful image is of two matrices which overlies one another and the matrix of differences between the two. From my assessment of how you think I would answer, we subtract your actual assessment of how I would answer. That difference is the measure of Realisation.

As soon as I began to play with grids it became irresistible to me to have two people construe the same set of elements. Then they rate the elements on the constructs of their partner. Thus constructs of one person may be related arithmetically to the constructs of another. Furthermore, the differences between one's ratings on a construct and the others can be subtracted. On the I.P.P.M. this measure is called Agreement. I assure you the I.P.P.M. functions as a rationalisation for the exchange grid. I would have done it anyway because it is irresistible and many of you will understand this very well.

Where the I.P.P.M. uses given questions the exchange grid uses elicited constructs. I did try to take it a step nearer to replicating the I.P.P.M. by having subjects guess how their partner would rate. Unfortunately agreement on exchange grids is very high and my subjects found that most constructs admitted only one rating that they could imagine. They found the

guessing task meaningless. So this inter-personal perception aspect of the grid remains to be developed. My concern today is with constructs as dimensions of an objective world. Thus in the exchange grid the only measure used is Agreement and it denotes whether or not the person rating on the construct of the other is correct in their use of it. Your world is as you say it is and I am more or less able to learn to perceive it. In fact constructs are easy to learn, we do it all the time, and agreement in exchange grids is so high that their status as data is questionable.

The grid is no less fascinating to me for being stillborn as an experimental tool. You will all be familiar with the individual grid as a two dimensional matrix capable of analysis into a multi-dimensional vector space which groups constructs - or elements for that matter. The enduring fascination of this procedure is that the grid of ratings can be resolved into a statistical space which is also a semantic space. This possibility of taking meaning which is so verbal, discrete and nominal and expressing it in a numerical, continuous space endures in its capacity to promise an image of mind which transcends the attitudes that hold apart language thought and feeling.

When you elicit an exchange grid you depart one step further into the world of semantic space: A vector space derived from the interactions of different people's constructs is an implicit inter-personal semantic space. I call it implicit because semantic space exists not in the computer but in the mind. So where does inter-personal space have its being? It exists as an enfolded order implicit in the vector statistics. If I could label the new groupings derived from the interactions of constructs of different people then I would have learned new constructs. The implicit inter-personal space would then be my own actual individual meaning.

Surely what we have here is a model of cultural process. People share their ideas and new ideas emerge as a result. People converse, groups discuss, scientific bodies publish their proceedings and we learn. Bronowski called science the greatest work of art of humanity because science is one of the most effective interactions ever to have taken place. Clearly it owes its effectiveness to the pedantic and reified order of its interactions. To the immovable object of institutionalised knowledge and the irresistible force of Kuhnian revolution. Here is some hope that there may be value in procedures as mechanistically operationalised as the games I would like to play with grids.

But there is another side to cultural process as well as the intoxication of dialectical creativity. People talk but do not listen. They hear but will not understand. They understand but deny it and resent it. We feel the anguish of solipsism and the threat of new ideas. We experience society not as sustaining and stimulating but as alienating and immolating. Exchange grids are easy to do and yet we do not learn so easily as that suggests. Academically we have problems with study. Socially we are not sure who we are but we are sure that whatever it is we are, we should not be it.

Without departing from the ideas of Kelly we can begin to explain this by introducing the serpent of anxiety into the garden of the exchange grid. Kelly calls anxiety the realisation that we do not have constructs available for the reality which is going down. Man, the scientist becomes man, the mammal looking for a safe passage through the hostile zones of his environment. My image here is of the SAS man, as hero, dropped into the jungle and learning to survive. I think anxiety must always denote life being at risk because anxiety is serious.

Suddenly learning becomes a much more serious matter. If I open myself to new constructs then I venture into ranges of convenience not covered by my own constructs. Allowing myself to learn means deliberately setting up the conditions Kelly says comprise anxiety. Logic says that I should therefore feel anxious. Experience says that many people do feel anxious in learning situations. Their fear is that they will be revealed as too stupid to learn. Suddenly this rather automatic application of theory begins to make sense.

But exchange grids are easy. And if a construct is hard to understand maybe the partner is not very good at explaining it. The process of learning is broken down to elementary components and revealed to be interactive. Dependant for its success on the abilities of both parties. Perhaps this is a way of showing that learning is easy and ideas are simple. New constructs can be presented in a situation which does not present too much of the anxious threat of events not in the range of convenience.

So far I have suggested that learning is difficult partly because it induces the very conditions that Kelly says comprise anxiety. We have treated of anxiety as derived from our concern for our physical existence. Obviously this is naive. The physical environment sustains, how else could a species exist in the first place? The environment of man is the social one - even the cultural one. We live in worlds of culturally determined meaning. The threats which cause us anxiety are social ones. The catastrophe we fear in the process of anxiety is loss of face, the feeling of moral inadequacy, the shame of dependency. The threat is psychic not physical. I suggest that it can be so intense that it has to be thought of as a threat to our actual existence as experiencing entities.

Here I have to deviate slightly from the ideas of Kelly. He says '...we do not attempt to employ the notion of ego...' but I am going to have to. To construe myself as a construer and thereby know myself reflexively as an experiencing entity is a function which in psychology is called ego. The construct of myself as a construer is at my core. The notion is employed whether the word is or not and whether or not Kelly has been able to construct a psychology which does not use it.

My interest in the word is in the parallel. It draws between Kelly and dynamic psychology. Freud calls ego the reality testing function which mediates between the desire and the act. Immediately we are back on familiar ground. Reality testing has to be the same thing as developing a system of constructs loose enough to adapt and tight enough to predict. When we go beyond Freud we come to developmental theories which again parallel construct psychology which, as far as I know, is reticent on the subject to development.

Recent theorists emphasise the mother-infant bond. Winnicott treats of them as a psychological unit. Balint writes of an 'interpenetrating harmonious mix-up' of the psyches of mother and child. Klein emphasises the role of frustration in the development of ego. So long as the harmonious mix-up is a completely satisfying state primary narcissism persists. Experience is an undifferentiated continuum of sensation. But when hunger, cold and discomfort intervene the infant finds that reality departs from the desired one and ideas of cause, intentionality and agent emerge. In Balint's system where there was only one person in the narcissistic state there are now two. Infantile omnipotence can no longer assume the power of the mother to satisfy because she does not always prevent frustration. If I were to remind you of Klein's ideas about the constructions of infants their melodrama and wild speculation might not be agreeable to all of you. But we are now back in the world of construing. And back here the range of convenience is limited indeed. So here again Kelly's

postulate of anxiety works beautifully with Klein's use of the concept. For where there is frustration there is anxiety. In the case of the infant I am ready to believe that physical survival is an immediate and simple issue. This historical explanation makes me much happier about the role of anxiety in learning. The confusion, and in a life and death situation, of infancy makes me much more confident about the need for elaborately constructed procedures for learning-to-learn. Now the order, compartmentalisation and simplicity of the exchange grid seems to be justifiable. And the principle is a general one applying to all the procedures of construct psychology in the field of adult learning.

My concern to rationalise the exchange grid goes beyond the demonstration that learning can be experienced as a frightening process in which control must be restored. I am also concerned with the ideas that the constructs of another do not simply reveal the void of the unknown which threatens chaos but are themselves invasive.

Kelly postulates guilt as the threat of dislodgement from core constructs. From this I infer that he means to imply that we derive security from confidence in our core in the way that other psychologies treat of identity as essential to security. I would say that we identify with our constructs and from them construct a reification of self as something fixed and, to this way of thinking, therefore real. Here again developmental concepts amplify the emotional impact of the concept. As the infant emerges in anxiety from the unthinking narcissistic continuum of experience he may be said to identify his mother's acts as his own. This is how I articulate for myself the proposal that the infant identifies at first with his mother. As he comes to recognise the limits of his construing he identifies himself as separate and identifies with himself. He defines a boundary between self and not-self in a world of confusion and frustration. And the area inside the boundary is small and inadequate to his needs.

Now I can propose that because the boundary of self had to be created by effort it may be experienced as not only permeable but vulnerable. I discover who I am by discovering how little I can do. Thus for me to interject ideas is to let in what might disrupt the whole system. What threatens to undo the boundaries I have so carefully constructed. In this area your constructs are you and mine are me. I am happy to believe that this applies not exclusively to core constructs but to all the constructs which comprise the world which includes myself.

Socially, we can experience ourselves as under threat from the other. We can feel him trying to take us over, to impose on us his idea of the world. We can experience ourselves as inconsistent and inadequate in our construing. As not having a secure existence to set against the threat of annexation by the ideas of others. I am proposing that we can feel the threat of being literally wiped out by the other - of ceasing to be viable human beings.

Here again I hope to see the exchange grid putting the other in his place: those are his constructs - these are mine. His I assimilate actively and by my own choice and at my own pace. He does not invade me with them. I elicit them from him. And at the same time he assimilates mine. Our individualities are set in a dialectical confrontation and the synthesis is my own. The paranoid threat of take over is contained and controlled by the structure of the interaction. My own existence is equally asserted by it.

The ideas of psychic insecurity and the social threat of immolation seems to me to be both fanciful and very important. I am supported in my belief in it by the work of Harry Guntrip who formulated the ideas of Fairbairn into a theory of schizoid personality. He describes the schizoid in relationship in an in/out oscillation. With the other he fears to be engulfed and

lost, running from her, he fears the loneliness and emptiness of isolation. I think we have all experienced this oscillation to some extent in our relationships and seen it in others. I hope this experience of a partner as both needed and feared will help to make real the idea that the constructs of the other can threaten our existence.

I have tried to discuss anxiety in learning in two ways: one, being the threat of the unknown to the security of identity: the other being the threat of the other to the security of identity. My aim has been to take the idea of man the scientist and present it as an ideal of secure spiritually aspiring adulthood which must be seen as needing to mature out of an essentially difficult developmental process. Difficult in essence because it is difficulty itself which stimulates development.

I have gone to dynamic theories because they are my interest and because I think they are consciously and elegantly folded into Kelly's theory. If I were more knowledgeable of Kelly perhaps I would not have needed to. I see his work not as philosophically opposed to dynamic theory but as practically concerned to achieve a psychology which enhances the individual as an intending agent. My wish is either to find essential dynamic concepts in Kelly or to see construct psychology evolve to include them.

When I refer to the exchange grid as an operational and simplified model of human learning I intend learning in its most universal sense as taken up by the Centre. I am concerned with the common learning functions in education, social life, growing up, industrial training and in my own fields of social work and psychotherapy.

I am concerned with the client as needing to take responsibility for his own learning and with the helping role as needing to include the sociality corollary: to teach you need to construe the constructions of the learner so you know what he needs to know, what languages he can use and what he can teach you.

In psychotherapy I am especially aware of the difficulties I have been into. Of the patient as fearing to acknowledge his own constructs and to review their effectiveness. Most of all, I am aware that the elements in therapy are feelings not objects and that there is the double problem of acknowledging them in experience and structuring them in cognition.

So far as the work of the Centre goes, I have tried to present our approach to learning as being the provision of a safe place to loosen constructs and extend them. My own experience in such safe places I would call play, and my ambition in this work is to substitute play where before was anxiety.

To sum up, I have started with the idea of two construct systems and one element set. I have taken the interactions of the constructs as a model of culture as implicit inter-personal semantic space and show how culture depends on individual realisation of the interactions of ideas. From the aspiring prospects of cultural development I have gone to the difficulties of individual development. I have shown how the revelation of the unknown in learning threatens the security of identity and how the invasion of the other person threatens it too. Throughout I have tried to show the exchange grid as enhancing the sustaining aspects of culture and society and as containing their threatening aspects.