

# Regnancy: a shadow over personal construing<sup>1</sup>

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In 1975 I decided not to take the conventional route out of business school into consultancy or high finance, and instead set up my very own research project on management decision-making. I had remained unconvinced by the solutions to business problems put forward by the business school and wanted to explore the ways in which managers themselves gave structure to what I saw as essentially unstructured problems.

I chose to use personal construct psychology as my reference discipline for this work because I was attracted by Kelly's explanations – he has such a personal way of approaching the person. Also because, looking back on it, it gave me a way of bringing forth into language my sense of *what was really going on*; and of course because, in 1975, I needed a way of holding my academic boundaries. What better than to use a relatively unknown psychology!

To cut a long story short, I now find myself a freelance consultant, helping friends in business to bring about changes in the ways in which they exercise power.

From quite early on, I took PCP seriously. Mindful of these academic boundaries, I began to write serious sounding papers in support of what I thought I was doing. The high point of this phase was a paper entitled: "Supporting Reflective Learning: Towards a Reflexive Theory of Form" – high because I now find myself unable to understand what I wrote. This was the paper which formed the roots of the chapter on the Choice Corollary which I wrote in the Mancuso and Adams-Webber book (1982) – another piece of writing I can't understand! (Incidentally, to have written a paper which it is difficult to understand is a great achievement as long as people think they *ought* to be able to understand it - it creates demand for your explanations. The trick is to get people to take you seriously: Jack Adams-Webber still doesn't understand the paper, but he is sure that there is something of value in it!) Anyway, the point I am getting to is that the suggestion that I write the chapter came out of a conversation with Jack Adams-Webber and Jim Mancuso at the Netherlands Congress in 1979; and it is the conversation which I am getting to.

At that time I was puzzling over the nature of the horizon to my conversations with managers and what the manager's relationship was to that horizon - or to put it another way, I was puzzled about what I could and could not talk about with managers. I had come up with the view that propositional constructs were the person's construction of self-as-context-to the process of construing, and had just finished giving a presentation.

In conversation after my presentation, Jack and Jim's response to my idea was to take it seriously - seriously enough to ask me to write the chapter - but also to suggest that to redefine 'propositional' was unnecessary since it was what Kelly had meant by propositional anyway. At the time, I took it from them because I felt that they were in a better position to know than I was. Looking back on it, however, it was

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an interesting move. Kelly's explanation remained intact in its essential coherence, and I had been persuaded to contribute to the weight of textual presence the Kellian movement had in the world.

## So what?

The incident is interesting because I remember it – it is significant for me. Something of what I was meaning got lost in that move. Somehow I had struck the wrong balance between 'personal' and 'scientist'. It provides me with a way, therefore, of introducing something of the smell of this word 'regnancy' for me. Two things strike me:

- 1 I bought into an assumption about the coherence of the Kellian thought-form which left me fitting in rather than striking out.
- 2 The voice with which me-the-scientist had been speaking had not been my own.

In being a personal scientist, these are continuous struggles for me: *to construct explanation for myself*; and *to speak with true voice*.

I will come back to these struggles at the end, but to begin at the end, let me say something of where I want to end up: I am very struck by the fact that the Kellian movement is not more embedded in 'mainstream' academia. Even Bob Neimeyer in his historical analysis concludes that the intellectual and methodological concerns of the Kellian movement map more onto a 1950s social context than the Now. Yet on the surface we look like any other body, with our papers and our practices, with personal construct psychology functioning as a dependable source of academic reference. What is it then that we are doing with PCP?

I think my answer to this question is that for each of us in our different ways, the Kellian movement is a site of resistance - a source of authority for us which we invoke in subverting others' explanations of ourselves. The question that answer raises, however, is whether in invoking the Kellian movement in support of our resistance, we strike the wrong balance between 'personal' and 'scientist'.

## Working in organisations

Let me talk about what happens in businesses - how the balance gets struck, and what this leads to.

I think of a business as a tangle of conversations which have formed into a knot. As a consultant, it is very difficult to get a word in edgeways, let alone be listened to, and even if you do get some proposals worked out for changing things - usually proposals which have been around for years, having been put forward by employees - someone else usually pulls at the wrong moment so that the knot re-forms, resulting in an even more tangled knot. As an employee or as a consultant, after years of trying to 'change things for the better', it is very difficult not to become very sceptical, and begin to believe that the people at the top of the management hierarchy don't want things to change, even though they continue to say things to that effect. As my friends have found, it is no surprise that most people seem to prefer to leave the knot alone and live with it in the face of all that history, income and a pension to look forward to - to remain employees.

Developing this metaphor a little further, the knot can be thought of as the particular way in which the conversations come together - they are the history which the business is to those who are in its employ. The knot in this sense is the explanation which governs who can make choices when, where and how about what

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kinds of things. Don't get me wrong. Such knots are very practical, for once established they coordinate the consensuality of large numbers of people. But problems can arise if they outlive their usefulness. It was in investigating this possibility that I became involved with the PCP Centre's work in British Airways.

I did some work with Fay Fransella in British Airways in 1984. We were doing research designed to give voice to British Airways staff attitudes to management. We were sampling 1,000 staff out of a population of 16,000 spread across nineteen different sub-groupings, and in addition to working directly with each of those nineteen sub-groups' management, we wrote an overarching summary. The following fragment is an extract from it:

Staff's views of the requirements of their work 'on the ground' appear to differ therefore from those imposed on them by management. How do we account for this incongruence as a research result? We conclude that the attitudes of Staff describe a *mythology*. This mythology about the nature of their work is rooted in history and is not challenged directly by their work experience. Management therefore are experienced as interfering with this myth. (October 1984)

For those of you who are unfamiliar with British Airways, this is an organisation which flies people all over the world, and has a reputation for maintaining very high engineering standards. It is about to be privatised and has been (and still is) going through enormous changes to make it attractive to the private sector, among other things by making it more profitable.

The mythology which we were referring to was no mythology to those who held it - it was their description of what was for them dependable about British Airways, the knot as they saw it. To destroy it would be to destroy their employment. What was the mythology? It was that British Airways staff felt they had a natural and direct access to what was best for British Airways, which was rooted in years of experience of working with aeroplanes; an access which management's actions interfered with, cut across or otherwise revealed a mistrust of. The senior management, however, had different views of the way in which they wanted things to be - the kind of knot which they wanted to be formed - and our research was part of a whole series of moves which they were making to bring this reconstruction of the knot about. The interesting question, however, is whose knot is British Airways, whose knot is it to become by what means, and who cares?

The keepers of the knot are very powerful, because others treat them as *knowing*. In British Airways' case it was the engineers who were the keepers. They knew what made the business work. The engineers' explanations were regnant. Senior management were seeking to cut their regnant knot!

Power can never be taken - only conceded. We concede power to the other when we obey the other. When we obey as employees we concede power to our managers. The British Airways employees had to be persuaded to concede power to different explanations. The name senior management gave to this process was privatisation. How was this change to take place? How were the employees to be persuaded to replace one form of explanation with another? Whose interests were to be served?

And anyway, what has this got to do with us and Kelly?

## Going back a bit further

Well, the answers to all these questions have to do with the nature of our dependency needs and the ways in which they are served by the Kellian movement. When we recognise truth in Kelly's explanations we concede power to Kelly. The Boss is he through whom 'what it is necessary to do' is given voice. Equally, the Scientist is he through whom Truth speaks. Let me digress again to talk about being *strategic*, in order to approach this dependency issue from another place.

I was originally drawn to personal construct psychology through an interest in the ways in which managers were decisive - particularly on issues which were seen as strategic. When I started to explore management decision-making, I developed my own use of the repertory grid technique into a reflective analysis. What I was doing was stripping away more and more of the PCP instrumentation and explanation to the point at which I and a manager could engage in no more and no less than a conversation: a conversation about some marks on a piece of paper through which he was re-presenting his experience to himself. In retrospect I was challenging more and more of a regnant PCP: PCP was dropping below the horizon of our conversation. The following comment by a manager on the experience of analysis conveys some of the flavour of what I was doing:

to discover, by internal examination, what my real emotional response is to those activities and people, and (hardest of all) to express these responses in a way which sheds new light on the expression 'full and frank discussions'! (December 1979)

I was exploring with the managers I was working with, the nature of their dependency needs in relation to their respective knots. I was incidentally also self-employed and trying to make ends meet means: I had the means in the form of micro-NIPPER, a technique for supporting reflective analysis, and the managers had the ends. I was working in support of managers who were trying to change things. To cut a long story short, the managers who I had been conversing with had discovered in our conversations a way of explaining to their own satisfaction 'where they were coming from', or what kind of knot they were not - whatever, these managers were bringing a more personal authority to their decisiveness, being what I like to call self-employed employees. The snag was that others were not always as satisfied as they were, particularly when it came to acting out their explanation. The same manager as quoted above put it as follows:

The main problem in describing our work is one of labels. What happened was not a 'course', nor was it psychoanalysis. I suppose, if I have to attach a label to it, it was a process of increasing awareness of the emotional culture in which I operate; that culture being one of the most important limiting factors to my performance as an individual and, more important, as a member of a number of groups of people . . . when I get the new team together in Birmingham, you can expect a call. There will be a lot to do! In the meantime, I believe that Basil and I can get together to work out a plan for introducing this kind of controlled culture change. . . . The first problem is a label one. If you have no label, how do the uninitiated know what you're talking about? (December 1979)

The result was a situation in which the manager felt he had to either leave, shut up or put up - find ways of taking others along too. I found myself trying to be helpful to some of those who put up; in this manager's case, he never called. The self-employed employees with whom I did work over the next few years became

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involved in challenging current explanations. That was how I got back into consultancy.

## **Make it beautiful**

Strategic decisions are represented as such in retrospect because they become associated with discontinuities in the way things have been - discontinuities in the knot. When I started I was hoping that I would come up with the philosopher's stone of strategy, the ability to turn a plain and ordinary discontinuity into a strategic discontinuity. Eventually I found a simpler solution: 'strategic' is a quality of the manager's relationship to his own dependency needs. Thus for himself all discontinuities are strategic.

So where does this leave us with all those questions about how to change things? The answer of course is that you can't change things -only your relationship to things. The really difficult bit is realising that there are 'things' there in the first place. Regnancy casts a shadow in which it is difficult to see.

For me, what I take from Kelly's notion of being a *personal* scientist is the quality of *resistance*: resisting others' explanations presented as Science. This strategic relationship to Science comes alive for me when restated as a relationship to Employment: *the self-employed employee*.

Scientific explanation is explanation which holds itself forward as the essence of Truth. Business explanation is explanation which holds itself forward as the essence of Work. We are all employees. Some of us are self-employed employees. We all stand in the shadow of the regnancy of others, particularly the regnancy of employment.

Once seen, a regnant knot simply becomes someone else's explanation, and why make someone else's explanation do when you could have one of your own?! So . . . the struggle for true voice is the struggle for critical relationship. From there explanations can be constructed. All that then remains is that your constructions be beautiful.

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