**Making sense of ‘unprecedented times’: experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic**

This blog is based on an article we wrote that sought to show how the COVID-19 pandemic can be construed in very different ways and the different reasons for these. Subsequently, one of us (DW) has been involved in two multinational projects collecting people’s accounts of their experiences of the pandemic.

Personal construct psychology (PCP, Kelly, 1955) has as its basic “unit” of understanding something called a “personal construct”. Personal constructs are dimensions e.g., *selfish-v-unselfish*, *kind-v-cruel, friendly-v-unfriendly*.People apply their personal constructs (usually at a very low level of awareness) to “construe” (interpret) events. The fundamental tenet of the PCP approach is that different people generally construe the same event in different ways and that it is possible for people to change how they construe events - although change is often far from easy. Another tenet of PCP is that how a person construes an event will determine the predictions they make about, and how they behave towards, it. Events can be any manner of things, e.g., objects, people, or situations.

One of us conducted research in previously war-torn Sierra Leone (Winter et al., 2016), which was also afflicted with the Ebola epidemic. One interviewee, a burial worker, said, “Ebola is worse than the war, because you can run from the guns, but you can’t run from Ebola” (Winter, 2018, p. 331). Such an assertion might surprise those in the West who have access to the most modern medical facilities. This is one example of how people in different parts of the world can construe the same event in quite dissimilar ways.

From a PCP perspective, situations that lie outside the range of a person’s system of personal constructs (like Ebola for the burial worker quoted above) are likely to cause them *anxiety* because they are unable to predict what might happen. For many people, the current pandemic will be extremely anxiety-provoking because it is very difficult to anticipate, e.g., how long the pandemic will go on, the effect on one’s employment or on one’s health.

When people anticipate that an event will be a fundamental challenge to their identity (such as loss of their life or their livelihood), in PCP terms that is referred to as *threat*, while stress is the awareness of potential threat. Threat and stress have therefore been common experiences during the pandemic, as has guilt, in the PCP sense of being dislodged from one’s ‘core role’. That is very different to ‘feeling or being guilty’ in everyday terms. Thus, a doctor may feel guilt in the PCP sense if their core role as a carer and protector of life has been dislodged by circumstances such as the lack of availability of ventilators in the hospital in which they work.

People who become anxious, threatened, or guilty in the senses described above will often adopt strategies (some more helpful than others) to help them cope with the situation. For example, they may constrict their worlds by remaining inside their homes in a sort of self-induced solitary confinement. For many, such constriction is likely to be a negative experience but for some, e.g., the hermit or the monk who has made solitude his way of life, such constriction is unlikely to be problematic. Similarly, even if an enforced ‘lockdown’ is seen as fundamentally unattractive to many people, it may yet have benefits for some. For instance, it may enable them to engage in idealistic “if only” fantasies such as comforting themselves with the knowledge that their team would have won a sports tournament if only it had been possible for the competition to be completed. Yet others may find that although lockdown has had very negative consequences in some ways, it has also enabled them to postpone difficult decisions or, perhaps, to avoid difficult people. For people who have habitually lived in metaphorical chains, the removal of these chains may not be experienced as liberating and indeed could be highly anxiety-provoking, and the same may apply to the lifting of lockdown restrictions for some people. It is by understanding the ways in which people are construing situations that we can best help them to cope with these.

Not surprisingly, in a time of crisis we look to our political leaders to guide us. Again, we see how the ways in which leaders of different countries construe things can be profoundly different. US President Donald Trump and President Bolsonaro of Brazil have taken very different views of the pandemic from, say, Germany’s leader Angela Merkel and President Moon Jae-in of South Korea. These different ways of construing can have very different consequences. The world leader who holds himself or herself up to be invulnerable to COVID –19 only to find himself or herself infected by the virus may have little choice but to become, in PCP terms, *hostile* - by which we mean they distort the evidence by, for instance, disseminating false information about the medical treatments that are available to combat the virus. Psychological mechanisms like hostility can have far-reaching effects not only for the person who is exercising them, but for other people who are caught up in the hostile person’s decisions.

People’s different ways of construing the pandemic, whether they be members of the public or political leaders, have therefore determined how they have reacted to it. As we have noted, it is possible for people to change the way in which they construe events, and that includes how they construe the pandemic. Just as with any other event, it is possible to construe the pandemic “propositionally”. For example, although the pandemic has caused people to have many experiences, it has also given opportunities for more positive experiences, such as appreciating the wonder of nature. The opposite of construing propositionally would be to construe “preemptively” - e.g., to construe the pandemic as a disaster and nothing but a disaster.

And for the future? Perhaps the words of George Kelly, the originator of PCP, might provide a lead. He said that rather than trying to impose the old ‘normal’ on new events we should “continually and adventurously hold all matters open to the possibility of reconstruction” (Kelly, 1977, p. 5). That way, perhaps, the pandemic might become not so much a catastrophe but a pathway to a different - perhaps even better - world.

The full text of our article can be found here: https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10720537.2020.1791291

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