



TREVOR BUTT

UNDERSTANDING  
PEOPLE



# Understanding People

Also by Trevor Butt

*Invitation to Personal Construct Psychology* (with Vivien Burr) 1992

# Understanding People

TREVOR BUTT

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# Preface

*Understanding People* seems at first glance a rather pretentious title for a book. When my friends in the clinical world have asked me what the title was to be, a common reaction has been something like ‘well, if I give you a couple of names, perhaps you’ll let me know what makes them tick’. So first of all, I should say what I mean by understanding. I have spent most of my professional life involved in personal construct theory (PCT) and naturally think in terms of dichotomous constructs. To know what something means you have to see what its contrast is. Understanding versus explaining is a construct that Dilthey (1988) used in the nineteenth century, arguing that the social sciences should not be concerned with causal explanations. Instead they should concentrate on understanding people in the same way that one understands a text. When we read something, we get an appreciation of what it means by moving between part and whole, looking at a word and seeing how it fits into a sentence. So, for example, we only know what ‘train’ means when we see that it is used as a verb rather than a noun. Similarly, the meaning of a sentence only becomes clear when we can place it in a larger context. When someone says of a partner, ‘Yes, I’ve got him well-trained’, we know that the meaning is somewhat ironic. At the same time, the meaning of the whole relies on the parts and a sentence only has meaning by virtue of the words that constitute it. But psychology is the social science most enamoured with the natural sciences and has usually sought meaning by looking for causal explanations at a more molecular level. The psychology of personality has largely been a project engaged in trying to find the causes of individuals’ behaviour, either inside them or in the environment.

Now, causal explanations might have a place in psychology, and one could argue that the explanation versus understanding construct is too crude to capture what personality theorists have been up to. So perhaps explanation is a particular type of understanding and not a simple contrast to it. Nonetheless, I maintain that it is a useful distinction, one that draws our attention to what is frequently missing in



the science of personality – an understanding that does not rely solely on an ability to tell us what kick-starts the person into action. In my view, understanding people requires two things: their account of their reasons and how the world appears to them as well as an appreciation of the social context in which they are embedded. By moving our focus from one to the other and back again, we can begin to make sense of what people do, feel and think. This corresponds roughly to what Ricoeur (1970) describes as a ‘hermeneutics of belief’ or empathy and a ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’. An interpretation based on empathy has to be balanced with one that takes into account things that the person might not, or even cannot, know. The psychologist has to start with how things appear to people, but must not stop there. It may be that unconscious forces or the discursive field within which one moves are not apparent to actors themselves. People might not be in a position to know exactly why they think, feel and act as they do. Interestingly, while personality theorists have been largely looking ‘inside’ people for answers, a very different approach to the person has been evolving in social psychology. Social constructionism (Burr, 1995) can be thought of as a family of approaches that emphasise the role of social forces, particularly language, in the production of individual action. Kenneth Gergen (2001), the originator of this approach, has made some bold moves towards transcending the agency versus structure issue. This is the debate about whether human action is the product of the individual agent or social forces that determine them (see Walsh, 1998). Determinism might play no part in Gergen’s thinking but my contention is that, in the UK at least, variants of social constructionism represent a pendulum swing away from individual agency and towards an over-estimation of the forces of social structure. Causal explanations beckon not from within the person, but from ideologies and discourse that move people in ways of which they are not aware.

So how are we to conceptualise the person? My answer to this question is based on a mixture of the pragmatism of both George Kelly and George Mead and the existential phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Interestingly, Berger and Luckmann (1967), on whose work social constructionism has built, drew on both pragmatism and existential phenomenology. Their work conceptualised the individual as a social construction, but nevertheless a centre for agency and choice once constructed. For contemporary social constructionism, it is therefore flawed in that it preserves a mythical sense of personal agency. But I want to return to this conception and

elaborate the interpretive, interactionist, agentic constructionism that is inherent and sometimes explicit in pragmatism and existential phenomenology. As you read this last sentence, you might think I've swallowed a psychological dictionary. And this has been my main problem in writing: what do I call the position that I am advocating? I could make up yet another new term or phrase, but I think that both social psychology and personality theory are already overfull with old wine in new bottles. So I have decided to stick to an older vocabulary – that of existential phenomenology. I have chosen this because it seems to me to be an overarching theoretical position that can subsume the pragmatism of Kelly (1955) and Mead (1934), both of whose work considerably extends existentialist thinking. I see myself still as a construct theorist, but my view of PCT is not orthodox or accepted uncritically within the PCT world. I see it as a species of existential phenomenology, albeit one that does not use the somewhat mystifying vocabulary of this approach (see Holland, 1977; Butt, 1998). Pragmatism was an American philosophical movement that developed in parallel with existentialism and phenomenology in Europe. (Interested students should read Menand's (2002) fascinating and compulsively readable history of pragmatism.) In many ways the two approaches complement each other, although their emphases are often different (Rosenthal and Bourgeois, 1991). So in this book, I have chosen to sail under the flag of existential phenomenology, sometimes mentioning pragmatism and interactionism as signposts to help the reader. One cost of this strategy is that I do use that terminology that Keen (1975) says English speakers find odd and even irritating. Phrases like 'being-in-the-world' have been translated directly from German, where the compound nouns have been rendered into somewhat clumsy English equivalents. But 'being-in-the-world' is a concept that I want to promote. The thesis of this book is that understanding people means recognising that we are both all alike and at the same time all different. Psychology has often ignored how we are all beings in the same world, a commonality of situation and culture that enables us to communicate with each other at all. And structural sociology has often forgotten that the way we experience the world is very different, and in this sense we are beings in different worlds. Such concepts are therefore central to this book, as we struggle to make sense of both ourselves and others.

Another problem with calling my position existential phenomenology is that most theorists in this field would dislike my bringing the

work of Mead and Kelly under the existential phenomenological umbrella. The closer you get to theories and approaches, the more apparent are the differences between them. But I have chosen to emphasise the similarities between existential phenomenology and pragmatism. This is because, in my view, they share enough common ground that marks them out as different from other approaches to personality. So, they both stress the importance of individual perspectives and first-person accounts in understanding people. Yet both recognise the complex relationship between the person and the social world. In the other personality theories reviewed in subsequent chapters, there is an implicit assumption that the person precedes society. By this I mean that they view the person as a social atom and society as an amalgam of the individuals that make it up. They do not take seriously the proposition that society acts back on the individuals in it and, in an important sense, we are each the product of our society.

It will make most sense to read this work in the order that it is presented. I have tried to write it as a coherent story, taking the reader through from one chapter to the next. If you decide to read it differently, I have cross-referenced wherever possible, so that you can see in which chapters various points are elaborated. To avoid any clumsiness in the use of pronouns, I have used he and she in alternate chapters. In Part I, I briefly review different personality approaches. A theme that emerges is that traditional approaches to personality are rooted in two problematic dualisms: one that separates mind from body and one that separates the individual from society. This leads to an explanatory enterprise that seeks causes of behaviour. I then review social constructionism, arguing that it breaks the dualist mould in a helpful way, yet drifts into a psychology in which the person evaporates entirely. I have called Part I *From Personality to Social Psychology* to underline the importance of the social constructionist critique in the understanding of people. This externalising moment sets the scene for Part II. Here I outline the alternative that I am proposing, tracing its roots and then showing how the issues and puzzles of personality look very different from its perspective. Here I call on phenomenology not only as a theoretical base, but also as a method, trying to engage the reader in imaginative variations and thought experiments (Ihde, 1986) to argue my points. I conclude by contending that the science of personality is both a practical and moral enterprise. Not only is understanding necessary in helping people to change and accept themselves, but it is something to which

we *ought* to aim. The psychology of personality has to give up trying to be clever and explain people's behaviour. Yes, its job is to have a practical impact, but also to develop a vocabulary for moral reflection. In a world where tolerance is in short supply, the social scientist should interpret and speak for the marginalised, the foreign and the distressed.

One problem in trying to review so many different approaches in such a short space is that there is an ever-present danger of making straw men out of the opposition. Having said that understanding involves seeing things from the other's point of view, I felt bound to canvass the views of proponents of other positions as well as those of my own. I therefore submitted drafts of chapters to and discussed the ideas with friends who are psychoanalysts, social constructionists and therapists of different types. So I am indebted to Phil Salmon, Vic Sedlak, Ken Gergen, Peter Ashworth, Annika Gilljam and Angela Douglas for their very helpful comments. I would also like to acknowledge the strong support I have received from my friends and colleagues in the Centre for Constructions and Identity at the University of Huddersfield. This comprises sociologists and psychologists, a mixture of people and approaches without whom I could never have developed the view I elaborate here – in particular, Darren Langdridge, who tirelessly read and commented on various chapters; but also Viv Burr, Graham Gibbs, Dallas Cliff, Rudy van Kemenade, Jeff Hearn, Donna Gornall and Gary Fry all in different ways offered support throughout the project. All my contacts at Palgrave Macmillan, Frances Arnold, Andrew McAleer, Magenta Lampson, and Maggie Lythgoe have been a source of strong encouragement, and my partner June has been patient and understanding as I became more obsessed and absorbed with this project. I'm very grateful to Geoff Adams, who came to my aid in offering to construct the index just when I was running out of steam. Finally, I would like to thank the School of Human and Health Sciences Research Committee at the University of Huddersfield that made the whole thing practical by giving me sabbatical leave.

I won't say this work has been easy. Time and again I have remembered the wisdom of the late Douglas Adams: 'I can tell anyone how to write. You just sit in front of your Mac until blood comes out of your forehead.' But it has been enjoyable and, in retrospect, this has made it seem easier than it was. Since psychologists are fond of quantification, I could end this preface by saying that if you enjoy reading this book just half as much as I have enjoyed writing it, then I've

enjoyed it twice as much as you. But I hope not. I hope you do enjoy it, and that it interests you enough to encourage you to find out more about the work of those theorists who in my view offer the best route to understanding people.

Trevor Butt  
Huddersfield  
November 2002

# PART I

## From Personality to Social Psychology

# The Dimensions of Personality

Personality is perhaps the area in psychology that people connect with most easily. Most of academic psychology is concerned with processes – perception, cognition, development and learning. But the study of personality promises to put all these together to help us to understand individuals. We are fascinated with the behaviour of others and long to know why they act as they do. And we are frequently a puzzle to ourselves and want to know what ‘makes us tick’. Why are people so different in what terrifies, excites and absorbs them? Why can’t I keep to my diet, exercise regularly and generally keep all those new year’s resolutions that embody such good intentions? And why do I find myself repeating patterns and mistakes in relationships that I know I should avoid? These are just the sort of questions that bring people to the study of psychology in the first place. And yet the psychology of personality frequently disappoints. Students find there are no simple answers. This is a pre-paradigmatic science in which there is no emergent consensus among academics, no agreement even about what units of analysis to focus on and how to approach them. We finish a course on personality and are still none the wiser about why I’m so anxious with people and she’s not, how it is that some people can be so optimistic when I can’t and what I have to do to exercise some self-control and restraint.

Now it may be that there are no simple answers and solutions – this certainly seems to be the case. But it is the contention of this book that in the project of understanding people, personality theorists have confused causes and reasons as well as prediction and understanding. Furthermore, the science of personality has largely and mistakenly confined its attention to what goes on ‘inside’ the person instead of examining the social context in which personal action

arises. It is based on an assumption of Cartesian dualism: that we can separate mind from body and search for cognitions, constructs, traits and schemas 'inside' us to find the causes of behaviour. This is confounded by the assumption of another dualism of person–world, in which society is seen as external to the person and influencing in some way the interior life of individuals. In this chapter, I will first examine some of the issues that are addressed by personality theories, before returning to these problematic dichotomies and dualisms.

Personality is of course notoriously difficult to define. Any definition is tendentious, leading to the acceptance of some approaches rather than others. Harré (1976: 1) distinguishes between 'personality', 'character' and 'self'. 'Personality', with its derivation from the Greek *persona*, refers properly to our appearance to others, whereas things appear differently to actors themselves, providing us with a perspective of the 'self'. Underlying both perceptions is the actor's 'character', a source of behaviour, emotions and beliefs. Modern personality theorists tend to roll these three facets of the person together, emphasising some at the expense of others. Some concentrate on an objective study of behaviour while others stress the position of the self. The term 'character', with its pre-scientific flavour, has been excised altogether. However, a search for internal motives, whether this is in terms of source traits, cognitions or personal constructs, is very much at the heart of the personality project. Pervin and John (2001: 4) establish this working definition: 'Personality represents those characteristics of the person that account for consistent patterns of feeling, thinking and behaving.' They stress that 'as scientists we develop theories to help us observe and explain these regularities', and that we have to look inside the person for qualities that determine them. All reviewers of personality theories note a variety of related issues with which personality theories are concerned. While each text on personality differs slightly in what it sees as the main issues that a theory of personality should address, we can discern a set of issues that most would recognise as comprising the core of the project. I will briefly outline these below.

## **Issues in personality**

### *The causes of behaviour*

Following the model of the natural sciences, psychologists have sought laws that might govern behaviour. Indeed the concept 'behaviour' is



one that belongs in the world of efficient causality. Aristotle had distinguished between different types of causality, but only efficient causes, where effects can be traced to direct environmental antecedents, were accepted in the post-Watsonian world of psychology. 'Behaviour' thus denotes something very different from 'action'. Behaviour is something a person is not in control of, whereas action is something that carries the intention of an intentional agent. We might ask agents the reasons for their actions, but not their behaviour, which is under the control of environmental stimuli and for which the agent cannot be held responsible in any simple way. But of course it is because everybody does not react in the exactly same manner to the same situation that the study of 'individual differences' had a place in a scientific psychology. Everybody brings to each situation a past that in some way influences what they do, whether we understand this in terms of pre-oedipal longings or a reinforcement history. Differences in biological temperament may also have their effect. And so theories of personality have wrestled with the relative effects of 'internal' and 'external' causality, nature and nurture, past and present in the production of behaviour. Of course it is rare to find a theorist who does not recognise the complexity of personality. Instead, there is an acknowledgement of an interaction in causality, and argument centres on the relative importance of the poles in these dichotomies. Nevertheless, this concession takes place in the context of a belief in efficient causality; to this extent nothing has changed and there has been no development of the basis of argument. In principle, it is assumed that if the scientist had full knowledge of all the relevant facts concerning history and biology, as well as a fine-grained description of the present environment, she could accurately predict a given person's behaviour in a given situation. Further research is always called for in order to establish factors controlling the regularities in behaviour. The issue of causality is particularly salient in two areas: the person's situation and her history.

### *The situation-specificity of behaviour*

One particular dilemma for personality theories is the relative importance of the situation in governing what a person does. The concept of personality requires constancy of behaviour over time and in different situations. Yet clearly, situational context exercises some degree of control over us. On the one hand, we feel that we can recognise the signature of a person in any situation; what is

particularly characteristic of her. Imagine that you are writing a reference for a friend. You naturally draw on traits to provide this. You might say that she is honest, hard-working and gets on well with others. This recognises what trait theorists propose; that people do vary in terms of traits, and when you label someone 'extraverted', you recognise a scale of introversion–extraversion along which people are ranged and are testifying that they are towards one end of the scale. You are also acknowledging a consistency that transcends situation. You are saying, in effect, 'I have found her extraverted, and I expect you will too'. But on the other hand, we have to concede that situations have a more or less strong effect in apparently determining behaviour. We do not need a personality inventory to explain behaviour at a red traffic light or understand why people take notes in lectures. Of course, occasionally, people will ignore a red light or talk throughout a lecture and then we might demand an explanation from them. But this only underlines those rules that structure social life, and that it is only when such rules are broken that we question how people act. The disturbing results of Milgram's famous obedience study (1963) remind us that the rules of the situation can all too easily produce behaviour that people would certainly regard as not characteristic of them. As I have already noted, we would not find any personality theorists who would deny both a consistency and a specificity in behaviour, and the literature talks of interaction effects between situation and person variables. It is the relative strength of these that is contended, against a background of an acceptance of some sort of causality.

### *The influence of the past*

Theories of human development differ in how much weight they give to experiences in childhood in the formation of personality. It is sometimes assumed that psychoanalysis has a patent on the role of early experience. This is no doubt because, before Freud's publications in the late nineteenth century, it seems to have been assumed that children could be routinely abused (at least physically) without this having any effect in later life (Miller, 1985). Sadly, it has taken a century for this Freudian 'discovery' to work its way through, if only partially, into social life. However, it must be recognised that no personality theorist would deny some influence of the past, although there are disputes as to whether, for example, early experience always has more impact than recent events. The work on psychological trauma,

and the widespread acceptance of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), testifies to an acknowledgement that events in the world cannot be ignored. But just how we understand this influence is very important. Should we assume that some events, like sexual abuse in childhood, have an inevitable and predictable effect on the sufferer, or should we consider all impact as being mediated by some sense-making construction system that processes information and thus bestows meaning on it? As in the case of the effect of the situation, it is generally accepted that both event and construction matter, and an interaction effect between the two is proposed. But our understanding of the past and the status of our experience is not just a matter of academic debate. The practice of any psychological therapy depends on some theory of personality, some assumptions about the nature of humankind that guide the therapist's work – which aspects of personality is it realistic to attempt to change, and which must we accept and strive to come to terms with? A theory of personality should be able to tell us what it is realistic for us to expect; what we can reasonably aim at.

#### *The relationship between cognition, behaviour and affect*

This brings us to the problematic relationship between what we think, feel and do. Watson and others founded the first university department of experimental psychology in Chicago in 1914, breaking all ties with philosophy and sociology. In the wake of the behaviourism that he proclaimed, all talk of the causal effects of thought and affect were banished from the new scientific psychology. Erwin (1978) labelled Watson a 'metaphysical behaviourist'; one who simply did not accept the existence of thought. Subsequent behaviourists did not necessarily subscribe to this doctrine, and for a more interesting behaviourism we might turn to the radical and methodological behaviourism of Skinner (1974). Skinner claimed that mental events might be considered to exist – people talk a lot about their thoughts and feelings – but this was simply not of interest to a science of behaviour. This is because they are the product and never the cause of behaviour. Suppose someone insults us and we retaliate in some way. This is not because of feelings of anger and thoughts of revenge. It is the insult and the result of past reinforcing consequences that occasion our behaviour. The thoughts and feelings have the status of coefficients: they too occur as a result of the insult but, on their own, cause nothing.

Skinner would have disliked being called a ‘personality theorist’, insisting that there is nothing inside us like traits or complexes that have any value to psychology. Yet we can see that he was interested in the same questions with which the study of personality is concerned: the constancy of behaviour, the effect of the past and the relationship between thought, feeling and behaviour. For Skinner, ‘personality change’ meant behaviour change, and to change behaviour one had to build behaviour by modifying reinforcement contingencies. Until the mid-1970s, when the hegemony of behaviourism in academic psychology was displaced by the rise of cognitivism, both personality theory and social psychology had something of a parallel existence in the academy. The advent of a strong cognitive psychology revitalised the ‘common-sense’ view that thoughts and emotions did indeed cause behaviour. The encouragement of personal change now required an attack on all three fronts. Clinical psychologists, most of whom practised behaviour therapy, now embraced a cognitive-behavioural approach that was underwritten by cognitive social learning theory. The cognitive therapy developed by Beck (1976) and Ellis’s rational emotive therapy (Ellis, 1975) were seen as being based on an information-processing approach and enthusiastically adopted by orthodox clinicians. Personal construct theory (Kelly, 1955) was interpreted as a psychology of personal cognitions (Ashworth, 2000). The characteristics of the person that account for consistent patterns of feeling, thinking and behaving were now seen as being essentially cognitive. Styles of thought, internalised dialogues, were held to produce emotional and behavioural responses. However, the primacy of affect was championed by Zajonc (1980), and a residual behaviourism argued for the primacy of behaviour. Once more, an interaction effect is proposed, with the balance of power in favour of a cognitive approach.

### *The sense of self*

The concept of ‘self’ is a fuzzy and ill-defined one, used to refer to a number of related ideas. As one would expect, behaviourism had no use whatsoever for the concept. It was seen as the successor to the soul and the mind, an explanatory fiction that appeared to account for behaviour but in fact explained nothing at all. For Skinner (1974), the problem with a self was that the person was treated as a responsible agent and consequently the *real* causes of behaviour in the environment were ignored. In contrast, humanists like Rogers

(1951) attributed agency to the person. For them, people were self-directed agents, capable of transforming their lives and improving their circumstances. Furthermore, Rogers proposed that neurosis should be conceptualised as a failure of self-actualisation; a refusal to 'be oneself' in the face of social pressure.

Contemporary personality theorists do not align themselves along this dimension of behaviourism versus humanism. They neither endorse Skinner's rejection of dualism, nor Rogers' central position of the self in personality theory. Nonetheless, it is claimed that some reference to self-processes is essential to explaining personality. Pervin and John (2001) argue that some notion of self is necessary to explain, firstly, the integrity and unity of behaviour and, secondly, the observation that how we feel about ourselves influences how we process and act on information. The cognitive approaches to personality propose the existence of self-schemata and self-regulation systems that perform these functions. However illusory it may be, we have a sense of self and experience ourselves as having an integrity that transcends time and place. Concepts like 'self-esteem', 'self-efficacy' and indeed the 'self-concept' have been devised to denote self as a process within individuals and explain these phenomena. But if we conceptualise people as reflexive, self-regulating creatures, the status of 'behaviour' becomes problematic. Cognitive theories find themselves poised uneasily between seeing what we do as behaviour that is determined and purposeful action. And however they may wish to avoid it, they risk a return to dualism as well as a mentalistic psychology that methodological behaviourism fought so hard to avoid.

### *The influence of the unconscious*

If the problems of conscious action are difficult to deal with, then the issue of unconscious feelings, cognitions and motivation presents even more of a challenge to theories of personality. We certainly cannot assume that all action is the result of conscious thought and deliberation. We are frequently puzzled by what we do, often regretting it and wishing we could exercise more self-control. If this is a feature of everyday life, it is most pronounced in so-called 'neurotic' behaviour. Now the concept of 'neurosis' is imported from a medical discourse that many psychologists find unacceptable. Nevertheless, psychoanalytic, humanistic and behaviourist theories all recognise a similar type of problem, even though they define it in quite different terms. Kovel (1976), a psychoanalyst, speaks of 'a lack of inner freedom',