

Constructing Sexuality: A Theory of Stability and Fluidity

James Horley¹ · Jan Clarke²

Published online: 2 June 2016
© Springer Science+Business Media New York 2016

Abstract Theories of human sexuality often rely on bio-evolutionary factors to explain sexual desire and development. Theories that do focus on socio-cultural factors tend to provide limited explanation of individual psychological underpinnings of sexual desire and behaviour. This paper presents an alternative, psychosocial account based on personal construct theory. The role of experience, including the active and constant interpretation of both external and internal events, is afforded a central role. Choice is recognized also as important but only in a channelized or limited manner. Although empirical support is very limited at this point in time, we believe that this theory represents a compelling and testable account of sexual desire and development.

Keywords Sexuality theory · Psychosocial theory · Personal construct theory · Sexual development · Sexual fluidity

Introduction

Theories of human sexuality appear to be rather diverse on the surface but many share basic assumptions. Although early theories (e.g., Ellis 1901/1906, 1910/1913; Freud 1905/1975, 1940/1955; von Krafft-Ebing 1886/1935) relied to a large extent on certain features that have been abandoned by contemporary theorists, such as the analytic unit ‘sexual instinct’, more recent theories (e.g., Bogaert 2012; Buss 1994, 1998; Buss and Schmitt 1993; Freund 1990; LeVay 1993, 2011) are built on a foundation or an implicit assumption of biogenesis similar to their predecessors.

✉ James Horley
jhorley@ualberta.ca

¹ Department of Social Sciences, University of Alberta, Augustana Campus, Camrose, AB T4V 2R3, Canada

² Algoma University, Sault Sainte Marie, ON, Canada

Such theories can be characterized as bio-evolutionary. Even theories touted as social psychological theories can rely heavily on genetics, endocrinology, or other biological factors (e.g., Bem 1996). As Singer (1985) noted, one serious difficulty with bio-evolutionary theories is that they cannot be evaluated directly, and the indirect support for such theories is flimsy at best. There are some theories that do employ socio-cultural constructs to explain sexuality, avoiding biogenesis entirely. Sexual script theory and emerging fusion theory are two examples.

Drawing on symbolic interactionism (see Mead 1934/1977), sexual script theory was introduced and developed by Gagnon and Simon (1973), Simon and Gagnon (2003). Sexual script theory is based on an understanding of meaning as emerging from social interactions with a focus on interactions that come to be understood as sexual. While meaning arises from interaction, it does not necessarily determine future interaction—individuals actively interpret meanings of interactions in light of their own symbolic processes. For sexual script theorists, socially derived sets of conditions or sequences produce common understandings of sexual interactions and, in effect, provide any interaction with its “sexual meaning”. Scripts, transmitted generally through socialization or other social processes, exist at three different levels: a macro or cultural level, an intermediate interpersonal level, and a micro or intrapersonal level. For Simon and Gagnon (1984, 2003), individuals may receive scripts from others but they, as individual agents, are also script writers or re-writers. Over the years, the theory has generated a number of studies of human sexuality, although not all have resulted in support for the original theory. Byers (1996), for example, examined common scripts and sexual coercion and concluded that, while her research largely supports Simon and Gagnon’s formulation, “modification of this theory is needed” (p. 8).

After examining the coming out stories of sexual minorities, and even considering some stories of awareness of heterosexuality, Wilkerson (2007, 2009) argued that sexual identity and sexual orientation are due largely to daily, contextualized decisions based on our interpretation of personal experiences. In Wilkerson’s approach, called emerging fusion theory, sexual desire and sexual identity owe little to genetics and biology but rather emerge from experience. More specifically, emerging fusion points to the constant choices that are involved in the interpretation of necessarily ambiguous experience, where desire and identity are the result of finding meaning within the personal and social encounters an individual has over the entire life course. A sense of self as a sexual being emerges over time after a focus of desire and interpretation of experiences eventually leads to fusion and clarity. According to Wilkerson (2009), we should view sexual orientation, a form of enduring desire, as due to choices made to interpret ambiguous daily experience, although he is careful in describing sexual orientation as only due in part to conscious choice. Although the research support for emerging fusion may be very limited, in part attributable to its recent introduction, the theory is a fascinating developmental account of human sexuality despite a relatively restricted view of psychological variables.

Certainly there are other theories of sexuality. Some theories have a limited scope. Worthington et al. (2002), for example, presented a theory of heterosexual development while Cass (1979) outlined a theory of homosexual development.

Other contributions are more like models because they lack specificity. Far too many of these models of sexuality are simply collections of factors, presented diagrammatically as circles connected by lines that on occasion indicate causal links. Overall, existing theories garner relatively limited empirical support and often fall far short of explaining unique or significant aspects of human sexual desires and behavior.

Important considerations in any adequate theory of sexuality include both variety and fluidity. A striking aspect of human sexual desire and expression is its variety, and sexual fluidity in terms of desire and behaviour, not only in terms of groups across time and place but also individuals across a lifespan, can be more common than any form of consistency (see Baumeister 2000; Diamond 2005, 2008; Katz-Wise 2015; Kinsman 1996). While theories such as sexual scripts and emerging fusion can account for stability and change to some extent, one comprehensive theory that might address this issue, perhaps even subsuming sexual scripts and emerging fusion, is personal construct theory (PCT). We will present this theory rather broadly and briefly. For the sake of brevity, we will restrict our use of terminology; for example, distinctions between sex and gender though significant are unaddressed here (but see Horley and Clarke 2016).

Sexuality and Personal Constructs

The Theory of Personal Constructs

PCT was introduced in two volumes that described a theory of personality rooted in clinical practice (Kelly 1955). George Kelly set out in very formal fashion a fundamental postulate and 11 corollaries. He also described a philosophical perspective at odds with the prevailing intellectual climate in psychology, as well as a methodology that attempted to blend individual-analytic richness with statistical rigor. Various general reviews of the literature relevant to PCT are available (e.g., Bannister and Mair 1968; Bonarius 1965; Walker and Winter 2007), and reviews of PCT work in more specific areas or sub-disciplines of psychology, such as clinical psychology (see Epting 1984; Landfield 1971; Landfield and Epting 1987; Winter 1992) and forensic-clinical psychology (Horley 2005; Houston 1998), also exist. Reviews and analyses of PCT beyond psychology, such as criminology (Scimecca 1977) and philosophy (Holland 1970; Mischel 1964; Warren 1998), are available. There has been a decided emphasis in PCT on abnormal and clinical topics, especially empirical versus theoretical contributions. This is hardly surprising given Kelly's involvement in the establishment of clinical psychology in the United States (see Neimeyer 1985, for a brief history). The contributions of PCT to abnormal and clinical psychology, though noteworthy and considerable (see Epting 1984; Winter 1992), will not be discussed here.

Kelly (1955, 1963, 1970a) presented an explicit constructivist basis for his theory. Constructive alternativism asserts that reality—and, according to Kelly, there is indeed a real world that we all must come to understand to some extent—does not reveal itself to us directly; rather, it is subject to as many alternative ways

of interpreting it as we ourselves can invent. In this way, we can explain the rich diversity of human experience. Moreover, our construction of events is anticipatory. In order to predict our future experience, each individual develops a unique personal construct system and attempts to accommodate it to the unknown, or at least not completely known, structure of reality. This system of constructs, including complex subsystems, is ordered hierarchically insofar as some constructs, superordinate ones, subsume other constructs, subordinate ones. In other words, use of “good”, as one pole of a superordinate construct, implies that the event so-called is also “positive”, “useful”, etc. (i.e., whatever the poles of subsumed constructs are).

Although any particular sequence of events lends itself to a variety of different interpretations, some ways of construing probably will prove more useful for anticipating similar events in the future. As events do not directly reveal their meanings to us, it must be the anticipatory constructions or hypotheses which we impose on them that endow them with whatever significance they may have in relation to our own behaviour. From the perspective of PCT, people have the capacity to represent and to anticipate events, not merely respond to them, and each individual is personally responsible for choosing the specific constructions of events that will inform his or her actions. Kelly (1955) avoided explicitly any distinction between psychological scientists and the subjects of their inquiries. He asserted that all persons are scientists although not scientists of the same calibre. Kelly (1970b) viewed all behaviour as experimental, with our personal experiments providing validation, or not, for current constructs and, thus, serving as the basis of future construction. The real world, which we can know only through our constructions of it, contains patterns that we all try to discern but are all not necessarily able to detect.

All human experience involves interpretation. As Wilkerson (2007) pointed out, everyday events do not come with clear-cut meanings and ambiguity characterizes everything that we encounter. We tend to expend serious energy making sense of our daily transactions. For Kelly (1955), our constructs as bipolar lenses through which the world is considered provide a means of interpretation. ‘Up–down’, ‘friendly–unfriendly’, ‘male–female’, ‘night–day’, ‘good–bad’, ‘tall–short’, and ‘black–white’ are examples of constructs that allow us to consider and to make sense of events or aspects of events. The poles of a construct pair are not necessarily diametric opposites, although some problems with interpretation arise as construct poles become increasingly orthogonal or unrelated. Kelly (1955) argued that direct opposition in construct poles provides optimal interpretative ability. This is not to suggest that we necessarily or should view the world in strict, ‘black versus white’ terms. Indeed, as we age, we likely do come to view events in more complex ways, when ‘black–white’ is differentiated into ‘black–not black’ and ‘white–not white’, permitting us to recognize shades of grey if not many colours (Kelly 1955, 1970a). We would note here, somewhat parenthetically, that ancient thought, both Western (e.g., Greek Law of Opposition) and Eastern (e.g., Taoist view of bipolarity), considered such opposition as important knowledge although generally related to inherent truths concerning the composition of reality or the natural world.

We necessarily employ many thousands or tens of thousands of different constructs in order to construe and to re-construe our experience, whether the

interactions or transactions involve people and objects or the internal biophysical world of our individual bodies. We need to make sense of experience in order to discern patterns or to formulate hypotheses, as any good scientist would, about the nature of things and coming events. Like scientists, we are constantly attempting to describe, to explain, to predict, and to control our life experiences. However many or few personal constructs we may possess, they are not all equal in terms of importance, or at least level of use. Our constructs are arranged, according to Kelly (1955), in a complex hierarchy or, more specifically, within complex hierarchies. Some construct pairs exist at a higher ordinal level with respect to others. A more superordinate construct pair, such as 'good-bad', might be used to understand people's behaviour, perhaps as part of what we might see as a moral system, but by employing such a construct pair we might also be viewing a 'good person' as 'honest', 'hard-working', and 'God-fearing'. In other words, all subordinate constructs are implied or taken for granted when a superordinate construct is applied. Our construct systems, too, are composed of various subsystems, or arrangements of hierarchically ordered constructs that may or may not have any relationship to each other. A lack of relationship, for Kelly (1955), is not a problem; indeed, a certain degree of psychological fragmentation is likely in any healthy person. We are not so aware or concerned with cognitive consistency on a daily basis as some psychologists would argue, and this allows us to conduct affairs that could be seen as involving a certain degree of psychological incompatibility or dissonance (e.g., a deeply committed Christian who is also a deeply committed astrophysicist).

Our personal constructs, in a sense, form the building blocks of human consciousness. They permit us to interpret life experience and to figure out what might happen so should we attempt any particular course of action. Construing another person as 'fascinating' and 'attractive', as opposed to 'boring' and 'plain', would allow a very different set of likely relationships to proceed. Sets of constructs are behind all of the behavioural experiments that we may choose to perform at any time. Should an experiment fail, a construct pair might be discarded entirely, or it may simply be used with a different set of elements, other people or perhaps employed simply with non-human objects. In this way, constructs come and go, yet most of us probably retain a set of relatively consistent constructs because we have found that, over time, they have proved their worth in our personal experiments and we need them, perhaps regularly or just on a rare occasion, in order to understand events. PCT, therefore, is a theory about psychological stability and change—it allows us to explain both personal consistency and inconsistency. Our constructs and construct system are constantly undergoing revision, modulation, based on various experiential cycles presented and discussed by Kelly (1955). We are active and constant construers of our life experiences.

PCT is not simply a theory about cold, rational thought. Kelly (1955) was loath to distinguish between 'affect' and 'cognition', a traditional distinction within psychology, because he did not want to extend a false dichotomy. He certainly did not want his theory known as a cognitive theory, yet he no doubt anticipated correctly that this is how it would be viewed, and indeed it has. Affect within PCT is bound inextricably with construal processes. Although the exact nature of affect has

not been developed in detail within PCT, both Kelly (1955) and McCoy (1977, 1981) have described it as a companion to or a consequence of construal processes. Specific affective experiences have been described by each writer. Kelly (1955), for example, described guilt as a result of dislodgement from core role constructs, or an experience that is the result of acting counter to how a person perceives himself or herself centrally (e.g., behaving cruelly while construing oneself as kind); while McCoy (1977), for example, defined happiness as the awareness of the validation of some core constructs.

The original formulation of PCT is not without problems. A major difficulty with PCT was its lack of consideration of socio-cultural influences on individuals. Jahoda (1988), Burkitt (1996), and others have pointed out that personal construct theorists have not adequately considered the social world. This was a fair and important critique. Some contributors to PCT attempted to address the social using PCT as a foundation in a variety of formulations. Notwithstanding the efforts of Bannister (1979), Duck (1979), Horley (2008), Procter and Parry (1978) and Stringer (1979), the social psychological or even sociological aspects of PCT were not developed or examined fully until recently.

Social power is one factor rarely considered from a PCT perspective. Just as he was unconcerned with social class (Procter and Parry 1978), Kelly (1955) was unconcerned with social power. Rowe (1994), however, did use PCT to view power as “the ability to get other people to accept your definition of reality” (p. 29). Following Rowe, Leitner et al. (1996) described power as “the ability to influence another individual’s construct system” (p. 323). On the surface, these similar views of power may appear adequate from a psychological perspective, but they fail to consider variations of power and power relations (see Brickell 2009; Horley 2008; Horley and Clarke 2016; Ng 1980; Wrong 1979). In order to accommodate a wider view on power and other social factors within PCT, Horley and Clarke (2016) proposed the addition of two new corollaries emphasizing social and cultural influences that impact individuals’ construct systems. The first corollary was the “Source corollary”: Constructs employed by individuals may be a unique creation of the individual or a result of environmental experience but most often the result of social environmental exposure, particularly language-centred social experiences. Balnaves et al. (2000) argued that constructs appear to arise from social sources and, while we would allow for other sources, this position appears correct. The social world, as the locus of much of our everyday activity to say nothing of the source of our views concerning ourselves and others, deserves some explicit recognition within the theory. A second addition to the theory was the “Relational corollary”: To the extent that an individual conducts transactions with other individuals, the course of those transactions will be influenced and directed by physical attributes, social inequalities, and social power and the broader social context in which the transactions occur. We continually gain an understanding of ourselves and discover the social world in which we live through our everyday social interactions. Far from occurring in a vacuum, these social interactions exist in people’s embodied activities that are situated in specific locations within rich and layered social contexts. Often these social interactions are mediated by rules, policies, and texts that we must somehow interpret (Smith 1999). We need to consider constantly how

the ongoing social activities individuals carry out in coordination with others within particular social contexts make explicit the intersections of physical attributes, social inequality, and social power. Physical attributes of social actors (e.g., body size, height, age, skin colour) are very real sources of influence in all interaction. They have a direct bearing on how we are perceived and treated in social interactions; additionally, these characteristics determine how we perceive and treat others. It is only through such amendments to the original work that PCT can become a complete psychosocial theory.

Experience and Choice in Sexuality

A careful consideration of the nature of human experience appears essential to understanding the human condition, especially sexuality. Wilkerson (2007) understood this, and he argued that experience is inherently ambiguous—it demands some form of active interpretation, and sometimes re-interpretation, to be understood and appreciated. Within PCT, experience is afforded a key position as one of the main corollaries of the theory, but it carries a somewhat different meaning than commonly understood. According to Kelly (1955), experience is comprised of “the successive construing of events” (p. 73). In other words, because events or episodes are void of meaning, we take or make meaning from our encounters with the physical and social world via our construct systems; thus, there is no experience without construction. Our interpretation, conducted in a constant and iterative process, is the essence of experience. The process of construal and re-construal allows us to refine and to alter our constructs. This does not necessarily mean that we are becoming ‘smarter’ or better scientists; rather it points to how construct systems vary over time. Experience that is interpreted as primarily sexual, whether pre-pubescent “sexual discovery” or adult sexual encounters involving orgasm, necessarily entails some active construction of the situation involving constructs that relate to one’s self as a sexual being or to the understanding of others as sexual beings. Sexual experiences might have a profound impact on an individual’s self-awareness (e.g., a sudden realization that inflicting pain on others is extremely arousing with a corresponding extreme shift in self-related constructs) or they may have relatively little change (e.g., reinforcing a view that oral sex is a preferred form of sexual contact) but all sexual experience involves some interpretation and construct impact.

Choice, too, has a prominent place within PCT. According to Kelly (1955), a person chooses for himself or herself “that alternative in a dichotomized construct through which he anticipates the greater possibility for extension and definition of his system” (p. 64). One problem with the idea of choice and agency is the question of freedom, or really the question of limits on freedom. These limits on freedom may be placed by lack of awareness and conditioning. Certainly, when he uses the term ‘choice’, Kelly is not suggesting that individuals have access to all pertinent information before choosing a course of action. We are well aware of limitations on cognitive processing and stated versus actual reasons for behaviour (see Nisbett and Wilson 1977). We simply cannot know everything about ourselves and the world around us to state categorically and correctly why we choose one act over another.

Also, once chosen, we must accept the consequences of an act, and these consequences clearly limit future freedom. An individual does appear free, for whatever conscious or less than conscious reasons, to enact and re-enact a wide variety of behaviours, sexual and otherwise.

The fundamental postulate of PCT states that a person's processes are psychologically channelized by the way in which he or she anticipates events (Kelly 1955, 1963, 1970a). In other words, people, as dynamic organisms, attempt to predict the outcome of real events by adopting a set of constructs that are organized into a flexible, modifiable network. A key notion here is channelization, or the manner by which the process of everyday interpretation via constructs allows us to make sense of events, especially in terms of looking to the future, but is limited by the content and choice of particular constructs and their connections to other constructs within the entire network. Channelization can be understood using a river metaphor, where water from the source cuts a path through the landscape depending on the terrain and composition of the soil. Such a metaphor, however, misses one crucial element of our humanity, namely agency. We are always able to choose or to reject a construct depending on our estimate of its ability to lead to more elaborate interpretation and/or more complete self-definition. Our construct choices, however, while evaluated in terms of their immediate elaborative and/or self-definitional outcomes, do not always consider the overall shape or direction or nature of the network of constructs and the behavioural aspects of the system or subsystem. For example, if an individual sees broad-mindedness versus narrow-mindedness as a better way of seeing himself and a particular group of close friends, and one immediate payoff of such a construct is consideration of non-normative sexual involvement, this can combine with prior constructs and their implications to produce a view of him or herself as different from many others, including the group of friends, as perhaps gay or into sadomasochism. In other words, we may choose our constructs but we cannot necessarily choose where our entire system may lead us and, in this way, choice limited to what we may term sexual constructs is not a choice as, say, choosing clothing to wear for the day. A more ephemeral choice, involving a choice of a notion such as broadmindedness, may well have system-wide implications, the immediate results of which are very difficult to determine, and not many of us monitor such choices all that carefully at any time. Thus, while we may describe coming to the realization that we are indeed gay or straight as choice, for example as Wilkerson (2009) suggested, it is not like a simple, singular, everyday choice of one action versus another. It involves, in a sense, a "channelized choice" (i.e., choice based on many interpretations that have been based on prior constructions). This is not to suggest that we are unable to amend our constructs, subsystems, and overall system. Insight and effort may result in wholesale change, but the path is difficult and fraught with anxiety. We may decide 1 day that, for example, being straight is not really what we were led to believe it was and so would like to be queer. Getting to queerness, however, is not at all a clear path psychologically speaking; also, if mistakes are made in displacing or replacing constructs, the result might be disaster in terms of a sense of personal identity. "Best the devil we know than the devil we do not" is likely the policy that guides many self-improvement projects. In this way, changing sexual identity, or orientation or

preference, is not to be taken lightly and is a very complex, long-term project involving serious self-reflection and perhaps significant social support.

The Development of Sexual Identity

Barker (2005) provided a PCT-informed account of polyandrous identity formation and Horley (2000b) discussed how perverse identities might arise. Sexual identity formation appears to be a keystone in providing a coherent and compelling account of sexuality. Many early, rudimentary constructs appear to involve some aspect of what could be termed “sexuality” or at least sensuality. Freud (1905/1975) and others were correct to point to childhood sexuality. Unlike a Freudian account, however, we would suggest that many of us, both young and old, are constantly trying to make sense of ourselves and others around us in terms that can be construed, broadly speaking, to be sexual. First attempts to discover the nature and uses of genitalia through “playing doctor” or other early childhood encounters are not just manifestations of childhood curiosity but can be seen as important developmental aspects of an emerging sense of separateness and selfhood. We are able to understand how we are the same, yet different, from family members and peers. Along with such intentional play or active discovery come unintended outcomes. On occasion, such “playing doctor” scenarios are interrupted by others (e.g., older siblings, parents, non-familial adults) who provide feedback, both positive and negative, that can provide additional meaning for the young experimentalists. As Mead (1934/1977) and the symbolic interactionists have pointed out, we come to see ourselves through the reflected appraisals of others. The appraisals of others can be viewed in terms of constructs, or more specifically as single poles of construct pairs. Repulsion expressed by a word of rebuke from a parent in response to discovering a child sitting naked with a naked playmate is capable of sending a clear message in the form of a potential personal construct to the young child. The nature of message, of course, depends on many factors (e.g., existing self-constructs, thoughts-feelings about parent, thoughts-feelings about the situation) but the message-construct has the capability of becoming internalized and marking the child’s development, for better or ill, for years to come. Everyday experience is made up of many thousands of such “choice points” for all of us, young and old, and it is very difficult to know what will be a significant encounter and what will simply be sloughed off as little cognitive-affective relevance.

Within PCT, the particular labels that we apply to ourselves are known as core constructs, with the particular ways of construing ourselves in a social context as core role constructs (Kelly 1955). Core role constructs take on an importance that non-self-constructs do not share. The ways that we adopt to view ourselves in relation to others, which can be viewed and described in terms of values (Horley 2012), are difficult to change. Violation of core roles, such as acting in a way unbecoming of a “loyal gang member” or a “caring daughter”, produces guilt, and the experience of imminent, comprehensive core change in general will result in threat and, likely, resistance (Kelly 1955; Winter 1992). Core constructs, and core role constructs in particular, are not readily altered. Older siblings likely play an important role in the acquisition of constructs, especially sexual constructs, early in

life. Some research (e.g., Blanchard and Bogaert 1996) has demonstrated a relationship between birth order and being or becoming gay, with younger males in families with multiple older brothers showing an increased likelihood of homosexuality. Much of the interpretation (see Blanchard and Bogaert 1996; LeVay 2011) seems to centre on biological factors, such as increased estrogen in the amniotic fluid of later-born males, rather than social factors, but a social explanation appears far more parsimonious. Rather than having to posit and to defend an understanding that estrogen in utero equals effeminate or gay male behaviour after birth, the idea that later-born males, especially young and impressionable ones, look to older siblings for feedback and a sense of self. If older brothers, as they often appear to do, use disparaging terms that include “queer”, “weirdo”, or “sissy”, however innocently, sensitive younger brothers can accept and internalize such constructs rather easily (Iuduci and Verdecchia 2015).

Both Giles (2006) and Wilkerson (2007) have argued against simplistic socially-constructed versus biologically created sexual desire. Giles and Wilkerson have presented viable alternatives to both social constructionist and essentialist accounts of desire from an existential position. For Giles (2006), a phenomenological explanation of desire explains sexual desire “as having its origin in the nature of the awareness of our gendered human condition” (p. 225). While we could quibble over the use of gendered here, certainly awareness of sexual body parts and sex-related biochemical effects do appear to shape in a very fundamental manner our sexual interests and desires. From an early age, but throughout life, we interpret the utility of body parts, especially prominent ones like genitalia, as well as internal sensations like energy that results from biochemical agents such as testosterone. The development of sexual desire, or even a lack of sexual desire, appears dependent on the particular and changing constructions of what or who is exciting, pleasant, etc. for us at any point in time. Although we would not suggest that there is any single outcome of our constructions of body parts and sensations, such as Giles’ (2006) view that gender always leads to a sense of incompleteness and a desire for experience of another gender, there are dominant social themes and directions, such as heteronormativity, that direct constructions in one direction over other possibilities. The sense of self as desirous of others or certain activities leads to a sexual self-identity.

An emerging sense of self as a sexual being seems to depend on many experiential factors; indeed, even a sense of self as not being sexual seems dependent on a large number of factors and active choices (Horley and Clarke 2016). The primary consideration, in general, is the present formation of an individual’s construct system—in other words, the characteristics of current constructs are vital to acceptance or rejection of new, potential constructs—and especially the sexual subsystem should it exist. PCT has relatively little to say about the nature of development except that it is characterized by construct differentiation (Kelly 1955). Differentiation points to not only increasing numbers of constructs but increasing complexity in terms of organization. We can, typically early in life, realize that we can recognize or understand colours or shades of grey, not just visually but in the broadest sense, by not viewing the world as black versus white but as black versus not black and white versus not white. As differentiation occurs,

and it may not occur for everyone—PCT has largely ignored issues such as developmental delays, but see Lewin's (1935) understanding of differentiation within the "feeble-minded"—we tend to see events, things, ourselves, and other people in more nuanced manners. This can produce more complex and more "mature" sense of our sexual selfhood. It is entirely possible that, at least for some children, they have a well-developed and understood sense of their own sexual desires by a very early age (see Wilkerson 2009). While such desires are open to reconstrual, and for most of us they will be re-evaluated and altered at times throughout our lives (Kinsman 1996), they may well be relatively set long before puberty occurs. Hence, it is quite possible that a child might "know" that he is gay at a very early age (LeVay 1993, 2011), or even that she is straight (although, given heteronormativity, it is less likely that such a realization will be remembered), without obligatory biogenesis. Childhood "crushes" may simply be intense feelings of love or "really liking" another individual in a non-sexual manner, but a crush can certainly be construed as revealing an early same or opposite-sex sexual attraction long before puberty.

Halperin's (2010) entertaining and insightful book on "how to be gay" points to one social mechanism whereby everyone can cement a sexual orientation. Gay culture no doubt exists, just as straight culture exists, and the socialization processes by which one learns to be gay or straight are similar, although what are being learned are not specific behaviours per se but rather constructs that permit a wide range of behavioural expressions that will be recognized or interpreted as gay or straight by others, at least those socialized or astute to recognize the key expressions or behaviours. While Halperin mistakes gay culture in the United States for universal gay culture—given the spread of American culture worldwide these days, he may well be right soon—he argues convincingly for the cultural transmission of "gayness" via particular experiences and "lessons". We would add, however, that being gay or having and enacting gay desires are founded on possessing constructs or values that support such desires and, while these constructs that may include "likes camp-doesn't like camp", there is no necessary set of "required constructs" that will invariably lead someone to becoming gay or straight.

Self-Validation and Sexual Identity Formation

Human sexuality appears to revolve around personal identity and the validation of personal constructs related to sexuality for an individual. This is not to suggest that sexual behaviour is necessarily selfish or self-centred; instead, sex, whether autoerotic or involving one or more partners, ultimately concerns an affirmation of an individual actor's construction of the sexual event. This may be the affirmation of selflessness, insofar as someone views a particular sexual encounter as a demonstration of his or her own selfless giving. It is true that we may benefit collectively from sexual encounters for any number of reasons, but the sexual act is essentially an individual one based on the views and the interests/desires/concerns of individual actors. This mechanism has been referred to as self-validation, and it helps to account for the variation in human sexual desires, or none, as well as idiosyncratic sexual behaviors (Horley 2008). Why would any individual choose the

actions repellent to the majority? Why a person would act in a manner that appeared to be self-injurious and injurious to others? The answer, ultimately, is an individual one in that it depends on his/her own experience and past efforts to construe personal experience and related to self-perceived construct extension and definition. Physical injury or humiliation can be self-confirming and hence very positive. Being physically injured and/or humiliated during what one construes as a sexual act can confirm one's identity as a sexual masochist. The pain, in effect, is pleasure for that individual. In the same way, a normative painful or negative label like 'molester' or 'rapist' can, when reinforced by the experience of sexually assaulting individuals, or even being told that one is such a creature, provides a reassurance in terms of self-identity. Gaining self-knowledge or self-validation (i.e., the validation of core role construction) is inherently satisfying even if the constructs validated are interpreted by others as negative, unpleasant, criminal, or threatening.

A theory of sexuality based on PCT not only addresses both stability and change but provides a coherent explanation of areas of sexuality that often confound theorists and the lay public alike. Masochism—indeed, BDSM (bondage, discipline, sadism, masochism)—is a preference that befuddles many observers (Baumeister 1997). The pleasure in BDSM, whether dominator or dominated, is the result of self-validation insofar as an individual's views himself or herself as flawed, unworthy, domineering, liberated, a cutting-edge sexual adventurer, etc. are supported and extended by feedback within a sexual encounter. The resultant self-knowledge or affirmation of current self-understanding is inherently pleasant or satisfying. Pain, including inflicting pain, is indeed pleasurable if it provides self-validation or increased knowledge of one's identity, a "true self" or a "real me" in a limited and constructed sense. Rather than an escape from the self, as Baumeister (1997) has argued, masochism and sadism represent quite the opposite—they represent a confirmation and potentially an extension of the self (for details, see Horley and Clarke 2016).

Asexuality, too, represents a puzzle (Bogaert 2012). Despite its apparent frequency, at least in certain cultures (see Bogaert 2004), it is viewed typically as pathology such as "low libido". While there are many experiences that may give rise to an identity that does not have a sexual aspect, generally if we can construct a personal identity or self that contains a sexual aspect we can eliminate or not include a sexual aspect, however difficult that may be in certain hypersexualized environments (Horley and Clarke 2016).

Very anomalous and illegal sexual behavior seems to be accounted for well by PCT that also provides a number of unique and potentially effective therapeutic interventions (Horley 2008). Individuals who commit sexual assault against adults and/or children not only confound but repulse many observers. Again, consideration of the experiential trajectory of those who commit a wide variety of sexual offenses can reveal the development of a sexual identity, although one that can be described as deviant or abnormal (see Horley 2000a, b, 2008). Chin-Keung (1988), Horley (1988), Horley and Quinsey (1994), Horley et al. (1997), and other researchers (e.g., Howells 1979) have examined the nature of construct systems of child sexual abusers and, to select but one example, have reported that child molesters, at least ones who select female victims, employ constructs related to dominance and

submission. This research raises a broader point concerning the shared or common constructs of groups with common desires and, while it is very likely that there are constructs in common among various groups, such work has yet to be conducted.

The present theory of sexuality also has important implications for the treatment of sexual offenders (Horley and Clarke 2016). Constructs, however difficult some might be to alter, are certainly more amenable to change than, say, maladaptive personality traits, so appropriate, efficacious treatments could result in important change in offensive sexual behavior. Preliminary work along such lines has begun. Houston (1998), for example, has reported some research on sex offender treatment group evaluations using PCT methodology, as well as describing various PCT-inspired treatments of sex offenders, while Horley (2008) has described various individual and group-based techniques consistent with PCT that have been pioneered with sexual offenders. The work to date is very preliminary but does appear to hold hope for future clinical successes.

We can envision a number of further arenas where this theory can play a unique and pivotal role. Even sexual ethics, a potentially problematic area for a number of specific and general issues (see Downing 2004), can be approached from a PCT perspective and avoid the pitfalls of other theories or positions (Horley 2012; Horley and Clarke 2016; Raskin 1995). In short, such a theory can explain a wide range of sexual desires and acts, or simply the absence of desire and action, although any explanation may not be as succinct or general as some might prefer because it does come down to an actor's experiential history.

The Way Forward

As an area of inquiry within the human sciences, contemporary studies in sexuality are beset by a number of difficulties. Conceptual clarity, or at least consistency, is certainly lacking, as Kauth (2005) and others have noted. Institutional, community, and personal politics remain among major obstacles to progress in the field. Another difficulty is the lack of a broad and useful theory to unify and to move thought and research forward, recognizing of course that theory is to some extent political. Johnson (2015) argued recently that the best way to proceed theoretically, and methodologically for that matter, is via psychosocial avenues, and we would concur whole-heartedly. Existing theories that can be viewed as psychosocial, such as sexual scripts and emerging fusion, appear to possess a number of advantages (e.g., internal consistency, breadth, parsimony, empirical support for sexual scripts) yet they seem thin with respect to psychology. Our PCT-based theory may err in the opposite direction, but there is nothing stopping anyone from adding more social considerations to PCT (Horley and Clarke 2016). If the overlap between existentialism and PCT is acknowledged (see Holland 1970; Horley and Clarke 2016), emerging fusion theory and this theory can certainly be seen as very consonant. Sexual scripts theory, too, reflects some of Kelly's (1955) concerns with acting, scripts, and personal meaning despite a lack of concern with the social originally.

Our formulation—it might be referred to as sexual identity construction theory since this is its primary concern—requires empirical support. In order to examine the developmental aspects of the theory, sequential studies involving children and youth may be the research design of choice, although such research may be a long time coming given the current position taken on research ethics in many jurisdictions that seems driven by risk management. In the meantime, cross-sectional or even brief longitudinal studies of individuals' or identifiable groups' constructs, and changes in constructs, could provide useful data. PCT can and should be recognized as providing a coherent basis of the formation of identities and desires, or lack of desires, as well as stability and change in sexual identity and desires. The theory can explain how sexual desires can involve opposite sex or same sex individuals, objects, certain kinds of activities or scenes, or even lack of desire. From a personal construct perspective, there are multiple sexualities and, at the same time, none at all.

References

- Balnaves, M., Caputi, P., & Oades, L. (2000). A theory of social action: Why personal construct theory needs a super-pattern corollary. *Journal of Constructivist Psychology, 13*, 117–134.
- Bannister, D., & Mair, J. M. M. (1968). *The evaluation of personal constructs*. London: Academic.
- Bannister, D. (1979). Personal construct theory and politics. In P. Stringer & D. Bannister (Eds.), *Constructs of sociality and individuality* (pp. 21–34). London: Academic.
- Barker, M. (2005). This is my partner, and this is my... partner's partner: Constructing a polyamorous identity in a monogamous world. *Journal of Constructivist Psychology, 18*, 75–88.
- Baumeister, R. F. (1997). The enigmatic appeal of sexual masochism: Why people desire pain, bondage, and humiliation in sex. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology, 16*, 133–150.
- Baumeister, R. F. (2000). Gender differences in erotic plasticity: The female sex drive as socially flexible and responsive. *Psychological Bulletin, 126*, 347–374.
- Bem, D. J. (1996). Exotic becomes erotic: A developmental theory of sexual orientation. *Psychological Review, 103*, 320–335.
- Blanchard, R., & Bogaert, A. F. (1996). Homosexuality in men and number of older brothers. *American Journal of Psychiatry, 153*, 27–31.
- Bogaert, A. F. (2004). Asexuality: Prevalence and associated factors in a national probability sample. *The Journal of Sex Research, 41*, 279–287.
- Bogaert, A. F. (2012). *Understanding asexuality*. Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Bonarius, J. C. J. (1965). Research in the personal construct theory of George A. Kelly. In B. Maher (Ed.), *Progress in experimental personality research* (Vol. 2, pp. 1–46). New York: Academic.
- Brickell, C. (2009). Sexualities and dimensions of power. *Sexuality and Culture, 13*, 57–74.
- Burkitt, I. (1996). Social and personal constructs: A division left unresolved. *Theory and Psychology, 6*, 71–77.
- Buss, D. M. (1994). *The evolution of desire: Strategies of human mating*. New York: BasicBooks.
- Buss, D. M. (1998). Sexual strategies theory: Historical origins and current status. *The Journal of Sex Research, 35*, 19–31.
- Buss, D. M., & Schmitt, D. P. (1993). Sexual strategies theory: An evolutionary perspective on human mating. *Psychological Review, 100*, 204–232.
- Byers, E. S. (1996). How well does the traditional sexual script explain sexual coercion? *Journal of Psychology & Human Sexuality, 8*, 7–25.
- Cass, V. C. (1979). Homosexuality identity formation. *Journal of Homosexuality, 4*, 219–235.
- Chin-Keung, L. (1988). PCT interpretation of sexual involvement with children. In F. Fransella & L. Thomas (Eds.), *Experimenting with personal construct psychology* (pp. 273–286). London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

- Diamond, L. M. (2005). A new view of lesbian subtypes: Stable versus fluid identity trajectories over an 8-year period. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 29, 119–128.
- Diamond, L. M. (2008). Female bisexuality from adolescence to adulthood: Results from a 10-year longitudinal study. *Developmental Psychology*, 44, 5–14.
- Downing, L. (2004). On the limits of sexual ethics: The phenomenology of autassassinophilia. *Sexuality and Culture*, 8, 3–17.
- Duck, S. W. (1979). The personal and the interpersonal in construct theory: Social and individual aspects of relationships. In P. Stringer & D. Bannister (Eds.), *Constructs of sociality and individuality* (pp. 279–298). London: Academic.
- Ellis, H. (1906). *Studies in the psychology of sex: Volume II: Sexual inversion*. Philadelphia: F. A. Davis Company (Original work published 1901).
- Ellis, H. (1913). *Studies in the psychology of sex: Volume VI: Sex in relation to society*. Philadelphia: F. A. Davis Company (Original work published 1910).
- Epting, F. R. (1984). *Personal construct counseling and psychotherapy*. New York: John Wiley & Sons.
- Freud, S. (1955). *An outline of psychoanalysis*. London: Hogarth Press (Original work published 1940).
- Freud, S. (1975). *Three essays on the theory of sexuality*. New York: Basic Books (Original work published 1905).
- Freund, K. (1990). Courtship disorder. In W. L. Marshall, D. R. Laws, & H. E. Barbaree (Eds.), *Handbook of sexual assault* (pp. 195–208). New York: Plenum.
- Gagnon, J. H., & Simon, W. (1973). *Sexual conduct: The social sources of human sexuality*. Chicago: Aldine.
- Giles, J. (2006). Social constructionism and sexual desire. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, 13, 225–238.
- Halperin, D. M. (2010). *How to be gay*. Cambridge: Belknap Press.
- Holland, R. (1970). George Kelly: Constructive innocent and reluctant existentialist. In D. Bannister (Ed.), *Perspectives in personal construct theory* (pp. 111–132). London: Academic.
- Horley, J. (1988). Cognitions of child sexual abusers. *The Journal of Sex Research*, 25, 542–545.
- Horley, J. (2000a). Cognitions supportive of child molestation. *Aggression and Violent Behavior: A Review Journal*, 5, 551–564.
- Horley, J. (2000b). *Constructing an abnormal sexual identity: A personal construct account of perversion*. Paper presented at “Understanding the social world: Constructions and identity”, Huddersfield, UK, September.
- Horley, J. (2005). Issues in forensic psychotherapy. In D. Winter & L. Viney (Eds.), *Advances in personal construct psychotherapy* (pp. 250–260). London: Whurr Publishers.
- Horley, J. (2008). *Sexual offenders: Personal construct theory and deviant sexual behaviour*. Hove: Routledge.
- Horley, J. (2012). Personal construct theory and human values. *Journal of Human Values*, 18, 161–171.
- Horley, J., & Clarke, J. (2016). *Experience, meaning, and identity in sexuality: A psychosocial theory of sexual stability and change*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Horley, J., & Quinsey, V. L. (1994). Assessing the cognitions of child molesters: Use of the semantic differential with incarcerated offenders. *The Journal of Sex Research*, 31, 187–195.
- Horley, J., Quinsey, V. L., & Jones, S. (1997). Incarcerated child molesters’ perceptions of themselves and others. *Sexual Abuse: A Journal of Research and Treatment*, 9, 43–55.
- Houston, J. (1998). *Making sense with offenders: Personal constructs, therapy, and change*. Chichester: John Wiley & Sons.
- Howells, K. (1979). Some meanings of children for pedophiles. In M. Cook & G. Wilson (Eds.), *Love and attraction* (pp. 519–526). Oxford: Pergamon.
- Iuduci, A., & Verdecchia, M. (2015). Homophobic labeling in the process of identity construction. *Sexuality and Culture*, 19, 737–758.
- Jahoda, M. (1988). The range of convenience of personal construct psychology: An outsider’s view. In F. Fransella & L. Thomas (Eds.), *Experimenting with personal construct psychology* (pp. 1–14). London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Johnson, K. (2015). *Sexuality: A psychosocial manifesto*. Oxford: Polity Press.
- Katz-Wise, S. L. (2015). Sexual fluidity in young adult women and men: Associations with sexual orientation and sexual identity development. *Psychology and Sexuality*, 6, 189–208.
- Kauth, M. R. (2005). Revealing assumptions: Explicating sexual orientation and promoting conceptual integrity. *Journal of Bisexuality*, 5, 81–105.
- Kelly, G. A. (1955). *The psychology of personal constructs* (Vol. 2). New York: Norton.

- Kelly, G. A. (1963). *A theory of personality*. New York: Norton.
- Kelly, G. A. (1970a). A brief introduction to personal construct theory. In D. Bannister (Ed.), *Perspectives in personal construct theory* (pp. 1–29). London: Academic Press.
- Kelly, G. A. (1970b). Behavior is an experiment. In D. Bannister (Ed.), *Perspectives in personal construct theory* (pp. 255–269). London: Academic Press.
- Kinsman, G. (1996). *Regulation of desire* (2nd ed.). Toronto: Black Rose Books.
- Landfield, A. W. (1971). *Personal construct systems in psychotherapy*. Chicago: Rand McNally.
- Landfield, A. W., & Epting, F. R. (1987). *Personal construct psychology: Clinical and personality assessment*. New York: Human Sciences Press.
- Leitner, L. M., Begley, E. A., & Faidley, A. J. (1996). Sociality, commonality, individuality, and mutuality: A personal construct approach to non-dominant groups. In D. Kalekin-Fishman & B. Walker (Eds.), *The construction of group realities: Culture, society, and personal construct theory* (pp. 323–340). Malabar: Krieger Publishing.
- LeVay, S. (1993). *The sexual brain*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- LeVay, S. (2011). *Gay, straight, and the reason why: The science of sexual orientation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lewin, K. (1935). *A dynamic theory of personality: Selected papers of Kurt Lewin*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- McCoy, M. M. (1977). A reconstruction of emotion. In D. Bannister (Ed.), *New perspectives in personal construct theory* (pp. 93–124). London: Academic.
- McCoy, M. M. (1981). Positive and negative emotion: A personal construct theory interpretation. In H. Bonarius, R. Holland, & S. Rosenberg (Eds.), *Personal construct psychology: Recent advances in theory and practice* (pp. 95–104). London: Macmillan.
- Mead, G. H. (1977). Self. In A. Strauss (Ed.), *George Herbert Mead: On social psychology* (pp. 199–246). Chicago: University of Chicago Press (Original work published 1934).
- Mischel, T. (1964). Personal constructs, rules, and the logic of clinical activity. *Psychological Review*, 71, 180–192.
- Neimeyer, R. A. (1985). *The development of personal construct psychology*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Ng, S. H. (1980). *The social psychology of power*. London: Academic.
- Nisbett, R. E., & Wilson, T. D. (1977). Telling more than we can know: Verbal reports on mental processes. *Psychological Review*, 84, 231–259.
- Procter, H., & Parry, G. (1978). Constraint and freedom: The social origin of personal constructs. In F. Fransella (Ed.), *Personal construct psychology 1977* (pp. 157–170). London: Academic Press.
- Raskin, J. D. (1995). On ethics in personal construct theory. *The Humanistic Psychologist*, 23, 97–113.
- Rowe, D. (1994). *Wanting everything: The art of happiness*. London: Harper Collins.
- Scimecca, J. A. (1977). Labeling theory and personal construct theory: Toward the measurement of individual variation. *The Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology*, 68, 652–659.
- Simon, W., & Gagnon, J. H. (1984). Sexual scripts. *Society*, 22, 53–60.
- Simon, W., & Gagnon, J. H. (2003). Sexual scripts: Origins, influences, and changes. *Qualitative Sociology*, 26, 491–497.
- Singer, B. (1985). A comparison of evolutionary and environmental theories of erotic response. Part I: Structural features. *Journal of Sex Research*, 21, 229–257.
- Smith, D. E. (1999). *Writing the social: Critique, theory and investigation*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Stringer, P. (1979). Individuals, roles, and persons. In P. Stringer & D. Bannister (Eds.), *Constructs of sociality and individuality* (pp. 91–114). London: Academic.
- von Krafft-Ebing, R. (1935). *Psychopathia sexualis: A medico-forensic study* (12th ed.). New York: Physicians and Surgeons Book Company. (Original work published 1886).
- Walker, B. M., & Winter, D. A. (2007). The elaboration of personal construct psychology. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 58, 453–477.
- Warren, W. (1998). *Philosophical dimensions of personal construct psychology*. London: Routledge.
- Wilkerson, W. S. (2007). *Ambiguity and sexuality: A theory of sexual identity*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Wilkerson, W. S. (2009). Is it a choice? Sexual orientation as interpretation. *Journal of Social Philosophy*, 40, 97–116.
- Winter, D. A. (1992). *Personal construct psychology in clinical practice: Theory, research and applications*. London: Routledge.

-
- Worthington, R. L., Savoy, H. B., Dillon, F. R., & Vernaglia, E. R. (2002). Heterosexual identity development: A multidimensional model of individual and social identity. *The Counseling Psychologist, 30*, 496–531.
- Wrong, D. (1979). *Power: Its forms, bases, and uses*. New York: Harper and Row.