31 Personal Constructs

For 5,000 years, humans lived in the past tense: "Yesterday was the same as tomorrow. " For the next 500 years people lived in the present tense: "Today can be whatever we want it to be." But now, for the next 50 years we must start living in the future tense: "Tomorrow's social, economic and political constraints must become today's reality."

" Personal constructs are the categories people use for classifying all of the elements of the world around them. Things are constantly happening around us. We must find ways to interpret them and store them in our mind. A simple analogy is that a file folder is to a file cabinet as a construct is to our mind."

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The concept of "height" is an example of a construct. When you meet someone new you might make a mental note of how tall or short they are. *Your* perception of how tall or short the individual is "personal" because it is your perception of what is a tall or a short person. That means that our perceptions are relative. Someone else might have a very different standard of what is a tall person. Stated in a different way, events owe no allegiance to any particular construct. In short, the reality is external and real; but, the perception is internal and personal.

Just because constructs are relative does not mean that all constructs are equally good. Your personal constructs need to be accurate if they are going to be useful to you. If you decide that a person is honest, and trust them with your possessions, and they steal from you, then your application of that construct was not accurate, and it did not serve you well. Constructs are more or less accurate roadmaps of life, depending on how well you have developed your construct system. Personal constructs are the cognitive, or mental, tools that we have for providing conceptual order to everything around us. They are all that we have for thinking. So, personal constructs provide a way for us to think about how we think.

Personal constructs can have a variety of characteristics. First, they can be shared or private. Many of our personal constructs are widely shared. An illustration would be the example that I gave about height. Although there might be individual differences in how we apply that concept there is a large area of general agreement. On the other hand some constructs are very private. If you see a person as "charming," you probably know what you mean by that, but someone else, seeing the very same individual behaving in exactly the same way, might be considered anything but charming.

Our personal construct system may be more or less differentiated. For example I might view some people as intelligent or stupid, and, I might have another construct that separates people into those who like me and those who do not like me. However, if you asked me to name the people that fit those two constructs, and it turns out that all the people that like me are intelligent and all of the people who do not like me are stupid, then there are not two separate constructs; there is only one. There would not be any differentiation between those two categories of people. Lack of differentiation is generally not very good. By and large it would be useful not to confuse those two categories. After all, someone who does not like you but is very smart can be a dangerous person for you. So, the criterion for evaluating your personal constructs are, how valid and useful are they to accurately capture in your mind external reality.

We all have personal constructs that are relatively trivial, and others that are the core elements of our sense of self. If I ask you, "What is your one most essential characteristic?" What would you say? Someone, for example, might say "I am in good mother." That would tell you a lot about how they organized life in terms of setting priorities about what comes first and what comes second. That would be a core construct. You would not expect them to say: "I always keep an umbrella in my car." That would be an incidental construct for most people.

As a final illustration of the characteristics of a personal construct system is its degree of complexity. Someone living in the South may have one word for snow. But we have learned that Eskimos have seven different words for snow. In contrast, as a child growing up in the North, there were two kinds; one was just plain snow, and then there was snow that was good for making a snowball. Depending on how essential they are, our construct systems can become very complex and highly differentiated, or they can be relatively simple. For better or worse your construct system is the mental tool you have for coping with the events of the world, and with the people around you.

What do constructs do? What good are they?

Constructs served three principal purposes:

➢ They help us remember. They are the storage boxes into which we can file and recover our interpretations about events and people.

➢ They tell us who we are. It is our constructs about ourselves that gives us our sense of self. Our self-concept is simply a collection of the constructs we have about ourselves. They can be the basis of self-confidence or, on the negative side, of false pride.

➢ And, most important, constructs help us to anticipate the future. If I think you are dangerous, I will avoid you. If I think you are interesting I will approach you. If my constructs are useful I will have avoided trouble and found someone interesting. But, if my constructs were inappropriate, I might have needlessly missed the opportunity of a lifetime, without ever knowing what I missed. Our constructs give us the dimensions for making choices and decisions. Sometimes with feedback about whether they were correct or not, and sometimes we are oblivious to errors.

Incidentally, a thoughtful person is someone who thinks about thinking. In practice that means seeking out information that will serve to validate or invalidate how you use your constructs so that they are continually refined to become precision tools. That is what a sharp mind is about.

The tools of change/The seeds of aggression

Constructs are, at one and the same time, the tools of change and the seeds of aggression. How could that be? Consider first the role of constructs in what we consider to be our greatest accomplishments as human beings: I am thinking of creativity, innovation and flexibility.

What is creativity? What do we mean by that? A creative person finds a new way to look at an issue or to solve a problem. That kind of innovation typically requires creating a new construct that is more powerful and more useful than the old way of thinking about the problem. As an example: "I wonder if the organization of the solar system would make more sense if I thought that the earth revolved around the sun." At the time it was a revolutionary thought. In a similar vein, flexibility is the capacity to see an issue from a different perspective, one that will resolve the original impasse. As an example: "I wonder if there is a solution where we would both benefit." Which is why trade is a more creative alternative than war.

There is a very strong parallel between the role of constructs, as the core of human ingenuity, and scientific advancement. A scientific discovery is the creation of a new concept, usually called theoretical propositions or an hypotheses, that provide greater explanatory power then the old theory, and thus are more useful. Interestingly, scientific advancements usually come about through invalidation. Specifically, when a scientist does an experiment she usually has a hypothesis about what the outcome will be. If the results do not support her prediction, then the theory -- or if you will the constructs -- on which they were based is called into question. If the results are reliable then some new theoretical explanation is required. In this way, as a consequence of a failure of existing constructs to correctly anticipate reality, new ways of thinking, which correctly anticipate the results, are created. This is called scientific accomplishment.

The important difference between scientific constructs and personal constructs is the impersonal nature of scientific theory. Most of us do not really have much of an investment in whether light is viewed scientifically as a wave or as a particle. But, in contrast, a personal construct is not just some abstract theory that is invalidated, it is also the person who is invalidated. People do not like to have their core constructs invalidated, and for good reason. Core personal constructs are the basis for one's self-esteem and self-concept. If being a good mother is a person's core construct, and her daughter turns out to be very bad (by the mother's constructs of good and bad), the daughter's behavior is an invalidation of the mother herself. The mother's choice, in its most simplistic form, is either that she has not been a good mother, or that she has a bad daughter. Neither option is a very easy choice.

Because core constructs are so hard to let go of, people often try to force reality, in this case another person, to conform to their preconceived notions of what the person is suppose to be like. In many cases it comes down to an ultimatum: "If you are going to live in this house you will behave in this way." We have all been through those experiences, most likely on the receiving end as a child and on the giving end as an adult. People who have power often find it easier to use their power to make the outside world conform to their expectations, rather than an opportunity to question why it is that their expectations did not match reality. But, what we know, is that creativity, innovation, and flexibility -- like scientific discovery -- are based on the capacity to change how you think when what you think has been shown to be invalid. That is a sharp mind.

Systemic Applications

It is often easier to appreciate this tension between constructs as being both the tools of invention and the seeds of destruction, by looking at impersonal events in the economic, political, and social realm, before applying them to the personal realm.

> "Today, we are both the authors and the recipients of our own future. This is an extraordinary time. The challenge is to thrive on change, and to resist, desperately trying to restore what used to be. Instead of looking for proof that we can continue with what has been comfortable and familiar, we need to look for the evidence that those beliefs and values are suspect, so that we can participate in the adventure of inventing the future."

➢ As a simple economic example, the incapacity of the Swiss to shift from seeing themselves as making watches, rather then time pieces, led to the collapse of an industry unable to make the transition to the digital era. As Thomas Friedman notes, repeatedly, in his book "The World Is Flat," the advent of globalization requires developing new ways to re-think every aspect of doing business in the postmodern world.

➢ Similar to the mother whose daughter would not behave according to her expectations, a general in Vietnam took the aggressive choice to its ultimate limit. Of a village that was rice farmers by day and Viet Cong by night, he said: "Unfortunately we had to destroy the village in order to save it." True to his statement, there was no living person left to dispute the claim that we were there to provide democratic freedom of choice. Unfortunately, the same scenario is being replayed in Iraq – we are destroying it in order to save it. Gwynne Dyer in his book "Future: Tense" argues that the war in Iraq is about imposing a view of an American Empire on an unwilling region of the world. You cannot kill over 100,000 civilians -- all of who are someone's son or daughter -- and expect to be seen as providing freedom.

➢ At a social level, it has been human choices to persist in old ways in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary, rather than to develop new core constructs, that has caused societies to collapse. Jared Diamond in his book describes the collapse of the Norse society in Greenland. Along the way, there were many innovations – in the language of this podcast, new constructs – that could have significantly improved the conditions of the people. "But those innovations could have threatened the power, prestige, and narrow interests of the Chiefs. In the tightly controlled interdependent society of Norse Greenland, the Chiefs were in a position to prevent others from trying out such innovations…. The last right that they obtained for themselves was the privilege of being the last to starve" (p276).

Personal Applications

The really hard part of understanding the key concept of "Personal Constructs" is to apply the lesson to the issue of personal change.

Now, today, there is a double demand. What we know to be true is that at the end of an era every belief and value needs to be re-examined. And now, for the first time, all of us must make changes in our core beliefs during our lifetime. We cannot leave it for the next generation to do later for themselves, as was possible before. The adults and youth of today share their future.

Both must be especially sensitive to those beliefs, the validity of which is challenged by current events. The best guess is that the adults cannot make current events fits the constructs left over from the modern era, but rather must first see the invalidation and then use it as an opportunity to create more useful beliefs and values in cooperation with today's youth. They must be beliefs and values appropriate to the postmodern era. What does this mean?

➢ It means saying that economic globalization has changed the balance of power between corporations and their workers. It means that 70 years worth of progress since the New Deal, of creating a structure for the terms and conditions of employment, are now mostly irrelevant and must be re-done. Something different is required.

➢ It means saying the Iraq war was a mistake. Simply starting with that premise is the first step toward answering the question of what do we now need to do different? "Staying the course" -- destroying the village to save it -- is not the answer.

➢ It means saying that global warming is an urgent environmental danger. Accepting that new belief puts in a totally new context how we will think about every bit of energy that we use, and what actions we will take both personally and collectively.

These are very tall orders. Yet each of us, as a person, has to examine what we believe, and whether current events have invalidated many of our core beliefs and values. Like a good scientist we need to be excited to realize that we have incorrectly anticipated the future. The invalidation of core constructs offers the opportunity to be creative, to be innovative and to claim a viable and sustainable future. To be dogmatic and stubborn is to insist that what was good enough for me in the past, is good enough for all of us in the future. Well, it just ain't so.

Today, we are both the authors and the recipients of our own future. This is an extraordinary time. The challenge is to thrive on change, and to resist, desperately trying to restore what used to be. Instead of looking for proof that we can continue with what has been comfortable and familiar, we need to look for the evidence that those beliefs and values are suspect, so that we can participate in the adventure of inventing the future.

What an exciting time to be alive.