

ACTion! News

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IAACT News in Brief

By Colin Dietch, Editor

Chinese Scholars Support Little-Known Theory of Behavior

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A group of Chinese scholars, led by Yan Zexian, president of South China Normal University, came to a conference in Los Angeles at Loyola Marymount University, July 23-27, 2003, to express their support for a little-known theory of human behavior. Sponsored by the Control Systems Group, the conference on Perceptual Control Theory (PCT) brought together a select group of American and foreign experts from the fields of education, counseling and therapy, linguistics, philosophy, public policy, business, art, organizational development, history, sociology, systems analysis, biology, physics, experimental psychology, and statistics. Such an interdisciplinary gathering with a single unifying theme is reminiscent of the Macy Conference, 50 years ago, which brought small groups of scientists from many fields together to discuss the little-known idea called cybernetics.

Theorist William T. Powers originated PCT and defined it in his seminal work, *Behavior: The Control of Perception*, known by its readers as *B:CP* (1973-2003 - Aldine-deGruyter). The first paperback edition of *B:CP* (2003, Benchmark Publications), went to press in summer 2003.

Professor Zhang Hua Xia presented a PCT paper co-authored with Professor Yan Zexian and Associate Professor Fan Dongping. The Chinese translation and publication of *B:CP* is already more than halfway complete. A Chinese edition of *Making Sense of Behavior* (1998, Benchmark Publications), Powers' PCT primer for the general public, is in discussion, and plans are being formed for cooperation between Chinese and American scientists for further developments in the field of PCT.

IT!: Integrating Theory

By Lloyd Klinedinst

In my first column I talked about prerequisites for understanding and appreciating PCT. Now let's get down to basics. Consider that we generally think of "the basics" as being reduced to simplest form, the big AHA! But

what if the “basics” are so challenging in their revolutionary significance that the AHA!s, when they come, are clear in one instance yet elusive in others, leaving us wondering if we understand them at all. The basics are more advanced than we may expect them to be at first.

THE “BASIC” THESIS, what IAACtErS might call the “heart”, of PCT is: “behavior is the control of perception” (*Behavior: The Control of Perception*, 1973, page xi). The entire science of Perceptual Control Theory has developed and is developing today from this central premise.

Moving from this central premise, “behavior is the control of perception,” the ABCs of PCT might be: Action, Behavior, Control. Other letters in the PCT alphabet flock to mind; in succession DEF: Disturbance, Error, Function. And a most important letter P for Perception. We might add the T of PCT: Theory.

In this and the next few columns I intend to tease out some meanings of these terms to form a better understanding of what the heart of PCT means. I use mainly texts from William Powers’ works, especially his *Behavior: The Control of Perception*, 1973 (hereafter abbreviated as *BCP*). I do so to tease you into reading this most central work of PCT. We must be especially mindful of the many varied meanings we have already accumulated in our experience pertaining to the terms that in PCT have very specific and perhaps even different meanings.

ACTION

Many people start talking about PCT by talking about perception. I will start with A: action... and then B: behavior. Why? Because, contrary to a popular PCT expression, “It is (NOT) all perception.” In swinging from the behaviorist errors of focusing primarily on action (i.e., stimulus, response), I do not want to err in the opposite direction, overemphasizing perception to the detriment of each of the other important elements of our behavior. If anything, it’s all about control -- the most inclusive of the PCT terms, because it refers to the control loop, the control system, the living being in his, her, its entirety.

I also want to start with action because it is what we first notice and can see about living beings. [BTW, it doesn’t hurt that Bill Powers himself, in a reader friendlier version of PCT, *Making Sense of Behavior: The Meaning of Control*, 1998, titles his first chapter “Controlling” and begins explaining “action”. Phil Runkel also begins his 2003 book, *People As Living Things: The Psychology of Perceptual Control*, with Part I Control of Perception, Chapter 1: The springs of action.]

Action is Constant. Action is what we see people (living things) doing. In fact, act, do, acting, doing are grammatical forms of the word, action, that more sensitively convey the constant process that living entails. From birth to death we are fascinated by what we see people doing (including the ACTing IAACtErS are doing in ACTing ACTS I, II, and III); and when they and we stop doing (talking, breathing, our heart beating, our brain waving), our control system has stopped; we are dead.

Action is Varying. Another major characteristic about our actions is they vary constantly. I perform a wide range of actions to eat three meals a day, depending on where I am and where the food is. To perform the same action of going to the breakfast table every time I was hungry would not get the job done. But I can also perform the same action and get different results. I say to any number of people, “Believe me.” Just how many times does it work? In short I generally vary my actions continuously to produce and maintain repeatable and enduring results.

Action is Mostly Unconscious. Still another major characteristic. I don’t consciously control my actions. My heart beating, my body temperature maintaining, my breathing, my brain working, my hands holding this paper--all work without my paying deliberate attention. In fact, I might be so bold as to say I am the result of the sum and substance of my actions.

Action is Not What is Controlled. But wait! Is it my actions I am controlling at all? Do I plan and execute any of the countless tasks of each of my days? This column I am writing. I agreed to write a column on integrating the theory of PCT with the enterprise of IAAC and its members. But each letter I key in to the computer, each sentence that results, each column is a constantly varying process of acting verbally - not to mention the innumerable muscles and neuro-electro-chemical activities which I certainly do not control with conscious deliberation. To cut to the chase, I control my perceptions, NOT my actions. And when we examine what they are, I don't even control most of my perceptions. They just are.

A bit of insight into just what this means and implies for our living effectively is developed in the next word I want to examine with you, behavior. A quick peek at the history of psychology suggests the many meanings and emphases that both behavior and the formal discipline which studies it, psychology, have taken throughout time. From its origin, as its etymology indicates, psychology, as a study of the "soul," has emerged through its "behaviorism" phase, into its contemporary displays in various "approaches": behavioral, cognitive, cross-cultural, feminist, humanistic, developmental, psychoanalytic, psychobiological, to name a few. Bill Powers is very clear, right up front; in the first sentence of page 1 he indicates that *BCP* "represents a break with traditional psychologies..." (*BCP*, page 1).

PCT focuses on behavior as the control of perception and PCT's focus is on the causes of behavior, not its external effects. It is a model of how a living organism functions, what makes it work, NOT what we see (and describe in pseudo-models and charts) from the outside, namely, the effects of behavior. On page 17-18, Bill emphasizes the difference between his "model of the brain's internal organization" and other models of the *consequences* of organization, wherein:

One often sees block diagrams of behavioral organization, but a close inspection usually shows that the blocks are not subsystems inside the behaving system, but subdivisions of its externally observable behavior. (*BCP*, p 17.)

There is a sharp (but not necessarily antipathetic) distinction between the theoretical scientific explanations of behavior and the descriptive or metaphorical constructions coming from non-theoretical sciences or humanities.

The long of the previous two paragraphs translates into the short of IT: what you see is NOT what you get! That's the long and short of IT! Action, what we see, is only one component of behavior, what we are really "doing". That's because what we are doing all the time we are behaving, which is always, is controlling our perceptions. Action does not equal to and it is not the same thing as behavior!

Here are two examples:

A man and his wife are speeding down the highway, weaving in and out of traffic. When a policeman stops him to give him a ticket for speeding, careless and reckless driving, he sees clearly that the man's wife is in labor. He then escorts them with as much haste as possible to the hospital. So much for any criticism of a neglectful driver.

Three young students get gold stars for getting a perfect score in a spelling quiz. The first student does so for the teacher's favor; the second for gaining classmates' admiration; the third is just going about her own business, enjoying learning. Same actions, different behaviors!

If PCT defines behavior with scientific precision, we reap all the powerful and effective benefits that come with such scientific rigor. If paying careful attention to the differences between behavior and action yields greater understanding and competency in our interactions with others, then our next issue's topic, perception, will provide even more. (Sorry to delay the C of our ABC review, but I want to talk about the "object" of control before I talk about control.)

Meanwhile, please observe the many instances in your experience when and where you can't tell what a person is doing (i.e., behaving) by seeing what a person is doing (i.e., acting). Send me some interesting examples, some puzzling examples. Let's explore them together to understand in depth the first basic of PCT: behavior is the control of perception.

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Standards and Perceptual Control Theory

By Shelley Roy

Perhaps Stephen Covey said it best: "Begin with the end in mind." Covey was describing one of the seven habits of highly effective people. Educators use the same phrase to describe standards-based learning. Standards are educators' best attempt to describe very clearly what learners will know and be able to do to reach a specified level of competence. Individuals versed in Perceptual Control Theory (PCT) might think of standards as references.

When designing a standards-based lesson, unit, or course, the instructor clearly defines the content standard (what the student should know and be able to do) and then develops the means by which this standard will be measured. Usually by describing assessment tasks which may or may not include paper and pencil tests and a rubric or checklist for scoring. A PCT aficionado might think of this process as clarifying the references and then describing the perceptions which will be accepted as evidence that the references have been matched.

When delivering standards-based lessons, the instructor follows a series of steps: articulate the standard, review the assessment task(s), explore quality, deliver content, reflect, and evaluate. This process of clarifying references, discussing acceptable evidence, and continually monitoring the alignment of the two summarizes PCT. Living systems are constantly engaged in the circular process of seeking to maintain predetermined references.

At IAAC, we are in the process of aligning our training to standards-based learning. Two years ago, we began by articulating for our faculty program competencies (standards) and checklists. Over the last year, we have begun to define standards (competencies) for ACT I, ACT II, and ACT III. This year, at the annual meeting, we began to articulate assessment tasks such as role play, the ability to describe the feedback loops, and the development of rubrics for each of the levels of training.

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The Oasis Within

By Shelley Brierley

The Invitation

One can only invite another to be "The Person They Wish to Be", considering how they wish to perceive themselves and their behaviour at any given moment and in any given situation (from *The Circle of Strength™*, 1989). This is done through questioning, allowing time for reflection in which the individual can compare and consider their thoughts with their actions, values and beliefs.

As administrators, counsellors and teachers, though well meaning, we sometimes assume we know what is best for those we are trying to help. For those that act on our advice, it can mean they are taking yet another step in the Cycle of Co-dependence. In advice giving, we do our clients no favours. The result of such behaviour is that it frequently encourages our students and clients to become more dependent on us as well as others, less sure of their ability to decide for themselves, more un-able to listen to their own wisdom -- their "Oasis Within". Those that refuse or reject advice may be criticised, seen as uncooperative, or overly independent which is commonly defined as either counter-dependent or "too" independent. From the "aregivers" perspective it may seem valid to feel frustrated, perceiving they are being blocked from doing what they do best -- "assisting" It takes a strong, insightful caregiver to recognize that the clients' behaviour of rejecting advice, may in fact be a healthy sign of independence. It takes an even more capable caregiver to cease in advice giving. Independence is a necessary and healthy step en-route to interdependence: the belief that everything is connected to everything else, and together are in dynamic balance (Bertalanffy). When we verbalize our own thinking or choices into our interactions with those we are trying to assist, we often "muddy the waters" confusing the individual more.

So what does the caregiver do if not to give advice? One of the more critical skills of counselling is to listen to what the client is and isn't saying. It is the task of effective caregivers and therapists to; watch, listen and learn the others' perceptions, focus of awareness, values and beliefs, inviting them to consider for themselves, how their behaviours, values and beliefs align. This is an ocean away from many peoples' beliefs about the role of a caregiver, educator or therapist, which is often assumed to be judging our clients'/students' perceptions and choices or leading or directing them down a path of our choosing.

When one human being is truly respectful of another human being, it becomes easier to honour the "wisdom within", ask questions to draw that wisdom to the surface, into view for both the person we are trying to help and for us as helpers. As an educator, therapist and counsellor I assume it is always my job to be the assistant or guide. It is the clients'/students' job to define the destination. It follows then, that to be an effective guide, I need to know where the client is headed, if I am to be of assistance in guiding them toward their destination.

When helpers, counsellors and therapists are respectful in this manner, drawing forth the individuals' realities and perceptions, it is possible to share general information asking the individual how it fits with their understanding of their behaviour, values and beliefs or with their relationships.

The next time you find yourself telling your client or student what to do or pushing suggestions their way, consider; have you taken the time to ask their perceptions, have you considered their reality and demonstrated

your understanding, of the view they are presenting? If not back up, get on your Circle of Strength™, be true to yourself and to your clients' wisdom and ability to use their "inner wisdom", thinking for themselves.

Thus the invitation; the welcoming in, to re-evaluate and re-consider awareness, behaviours, values and beliefs, all the tools each of us need and use on a daily basis to navigate our course in life. It is just that, an invitation! It can only be extended by one who is, first, in leadership of themselves. Extend it graciously and trust the individual and their "wisdom within" to lead. Learn to be a better follower. Follow their awareness!

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Call for Contributions and Suggestions

The new IAACT Newsletter will contain both regular features and special articles submitted by IAACT members. We invite all IAACT members to send us their observations, insights, news, and announcements. Submitted articles should be reasonably brief. Please understand that due to formatting constraints and the editorial process, articles may be edited and/or truncated as necessary. In general, if articles are truncated to appear in the hard copy of the newsletter, they will be reproduced in full in the online version at <http://www.iaact.com>.

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