Conclusion

There are so much in children's heart and mind, we need to be willing to listen and know how to listen. They always surprise us with their talents, creativity and humor. They bring us life and hope. Let's allow them to teach us with their wonder and dreams. To conclude, let's listen to

What Your Children Might Say

Treat me as a person of short stature who simply has less experience than you. Let me laugh and play, for all too soon I will be your size.

Spend time in my universe, with all its wonders, for I often have trouble understanding the priorities of your world. I, like you, am bored with idle conversation, so talk about meaningful things to me. Speak with me, not at me, and use clear language. Please don't pretend I'm not there when you're talking. Set examples with significant actions, not shallow words. Provide me with a definite "yes" or "no" and stick to it. Tell me why and I might surprise you by minding you. Be honest for I can spot a phony right away. The truth works a lot better than manipulation or guilt trips. Furnish me with guidelines; then I won't be testing the rules. Let me manage important parts of my life as soon as I am able. Grant me privacy and time to myself, but still hug me often. Teach me living skills and encourage my creative side. Nurture the fantasies that are very real to me.

Honor all my feelings, as they are neither right nor wrong. Show me that grief is normal when I lose something. Love me for who I am, not what you want me to be. Recognize my value to you, because I am a beautiful being, even when I make the errors that are called experience. Let me know that you are not God; that you make mistakes too. Seek my opinion; I have wisdom in many matters. Guide me toward my personal spirituality. The golden rule applies to me too.

Anonymous
(quoted in Martens, 1995)

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The Child Rearing Approach in an Era of Change

AC LEUNG
Hong Kong

"We used to obey our parents. But children nowadays talk back to their parents."

"I grew up in whips. I am thankful that they have saved me from going astray. Why do people nowadays condemn the whips and indulge the children?"

The above remarks are often heard to be shared among some local parents. It is difficult for them to accept that children nowadays are different from themselves in the old days. They do not recognize that child rearing practices do change with time and culture. In adopting an approach for child rearing, we have to consider the targets, in terms of the time, space and system they are in. Which approach is appropriate? Why? How does it operate? These questions are addressed in this paper with particular reference to the Hong Kong context.

Who?

Who are the targets of child rearing? They are children and parents. Who are the contemporary children, say in the Hong Kong context? Who are the contemporary local parents? Let us take a look of our children and parents, respectively.

Evolving Children

Children born in this era are no longer like sleeping baby cats, as described in our grandparents' days. From my own personal experience, they are wide awake, anticipating to reunite with their parents, once leaving the mother's body. Gibson (1994) reports that newborns, two to four days of age, can already discriminate between their mother's voice and a stranger's voice. Our babies, have evolved, and are not much different from those studied abroad.

Parent Not the Primary Caring Adult

In many families, both parents are working. Children are left to the care of Filipino maids, grandparents, child-minders, friends or relatives who live separately, or even in another region in Mainland China. For these children, their parents have not functioned as their primary caring adult. The parents' way of living have not provided a framework within which children learn to conduct their lives. Discrepancies in their expectations towards each others' behaving are evident.

Media-culture-kids

Almost every household possesses a television. Through the television, children are exposed to ways of living and perspectives different from their own parents.

For children who grow up with the television as their primary companion, the media culture has become their primary working hypotheses on which they base their judgment as to right and wrong. They are aware of the world outside their home. They can be more resourceful than their parents in certain aspects if the latter just bury themselves in work.

Diverse Sub-culture

Who are the parents? Over 90% of the local population are of Chinese ethnic origin. The majority grow up in Hong Kong, some are new arrivals from Mainland China, some are Vietnam refugees, some are overseas-born. Leung and Lee (1996) have pointed out the existence of a diverse range of sub-cultures among Hong Kong Chinese, in terms of age, gender, education, economic activities.

Lieh-Mak, Lee and Luk (1984) report problems in training parents to be behavioral therapists, and conclude that child rearing practices in Chinese culture are resistant to changes. Another study documented in the same year presents a different picture. Changes in traditional values are evident in an intergenerational study by Ho and Kang (1984). Contemporary fathers are found to become more involved in child-care than their ancestors, putting less emphasis on respect for elders, and more emphasis on the child's expression of opinions, independence, self-mastery, creativity, self-respect, and all-round development. Apparently, the two studies represent different sectors of the local population. One represent the lower socio-economic sector; the other the educated parents, having been exposed to western culture and perspectives.

What? Why? How?

Bearing in mind the kind of children and parents we encounter, what would be the most appropriate child rearing approach in this era? The constructivist approach, that represents "a family of theories sharing the common assertion that humans actively create and construe their personal realities" (Mahoney & Lyddon, 1988), is the promising one. Why? It emphasizes reciprocal social interchanges and the evolutionary nature of human beings; it is open to alternative perspectives, culturally sensitive, holistic and empowering.

Reciprocal Sociality

The constructivist approach advocates a reciprocal social interchange between the parent and the child. According to Kelly, the father of Constructivist psychology, "to the extent that one person construes[1] the construction process of another, he may play a role in a social process involving the other person" (1955/1991). That is to say, the parent construes the construction process

of the child, and the child construes that of the parent. They develop a ROLE relationship[2] with each other.

If a parent develops a ROLE relationship with the child since birth, both the parent and the child would find each other's constructs similar and predictable. They are, thus, more likely to be responsive to each other. Similarity and predictive accuracy among family members have been studied to be highly related to mothers' and adolescents' family satisfaction (Harter, Neimeyer & Alexander, 1989). The maintenance and negotiation of common constructions has been emphasized in sustaining family relationships (Proctor, 1981), as the affective component in effective parenting (Dix, 1991). Non-compliance, on the other hand, has been explained as "a situation in which the child has applied constructions at variance with the constructions that the parent would apply" (Mancuso & Handin, 1980). Discrepancies between the constructions of the parent and that of the child can be minimized through parent-child ROLE relating.

ROLE relationship is involved, warm and empathic. Empathic parenting has been endorsed to elicit cooperative, responsive social behavior in children (Maccoby & Martin, 1983; Eisenberg & Mussen, 1989; Feshbach, 1989; Dix, 1991). Cross-cultural studies by Rohner (1986, 1992) show that children worldwide who perceive themselves to be warmly parented are more likely to be psychologically healthy and to make productive social adjustments.

However, in ROLE relationships, our core constructs are put to the test. It entails a conglomeration of emotions (anxiety, fear, threat, aggressiveness, hostility and guilt) which Leitner (1985) calls "the terrors of cognition". Hence, in developing a ROLE relationship, a parent needs to engage despite the awareness that he may experience terrors (courage[3]), subject his core constructs to the results of experimentation (openness), examine his own construct system and its implications for others (responsibility), allow for the creation of new ways of understanding one another as they evolve (creativity), and validate the child's process over time (commitment).

Leitner (1985) has warned that "When individuals globally avoid ROLE relationships, the resulting deprivation of meaningful interpersonal understandings is often experienced as meaninglessness, emptiness, and guilt". From my clinical experience, psychiatric symptoms and psychopathology are witnessed in adolescents whose family relationships were reported to be harmonious, but upon exploration, found to be superficial instead. Research study by Radziszewska, Richardson, Dent and Flay (1996) is consistent with Leitner's assertion and my clinical observation. Unengaged parenting is found to yield worst outcomes in terms of adolescent depressive symptoms, smoking and academic grades, in comparison with autocratic, authoritative and permissive parenting.

Constructive Alternatism

The constructivists respect both the child and the parent as experts in their own rights. The child is assumed to know better his own experience, whether he feels hot or cold, thirsty, hungry, interested or not. The parent is assumed to be more knowledgeable and resourceful in providing for and guiding the child. The parent, however, cannot assume he knows the child's experience better than the child himself.

The philosophical position "*constructive alternativism*" (Kelly, 1955/1991) implies that "our present interpretations of the universe are subject to revision or replacement". We have the active capacity to represent the environment, and we can construe our experiences creatively.

Take an example of a parent-child interaction, as represented by Proctor's Bowtie (1985). A 3-year-old, on seeing his elder siblings playing ping-pong (table-tennis), would like to play, too. He has not yet developed adequate schema to guide his activity. He cannot catch the ball; he has the ball throwing high up in the air, or outside the ping-pong table. His mother is eager to teach him, to see that he is playing ping-pong the correct way. She then holds his hand to teach him. The child's construct "I know, I like to play with the ping-pong my way" is invalidated. He resists and protests against his mother's coercive intervention. The mother experiences invalidation of her good intention to help, and feels frustrated too. Instead of construing the child's construction, the mother blames the child for not receptive to teaching; and the child blames the mother for obstructing his play. Both end up in frustration and hostility.

The ending would be different if the parent alters his perception, or expectation (construction), alter his own behavior, attitude, skill in managing the child, or emotional manifestation (action). It would also be different if the child alters his own construction or action, or both the parent and the child care to construe, or reconstrue the construction process of another.

Evolving

Let us take a second look of the mother-son ping-pong episode. On seeing her son not knowing how to play ping-pong, the mother believes that he needs guidance. As she has guided her elder children in playing ping-pong before, she anticipates that her guidance would be equally well received by the younger son. She is then invested in her anticipation, by going over to hold her son's hand. However, on encountering her son's hand, she can tell her guidance is not welcomed. Her anticipation is invalidated. She tries to reconstrue the son's construction, and to revise her anticipation. She comes to the understanding that her son just wants to have fun. He is not ready to play ping-pong the proper way yet. She sees him as wanting to explore things in his own way. With such understanding, she no longer uses the same old method, which she has employed previously with her elder children, to relate with her younger son. As she reconstrues and reformulates her hypothesis, she is allowing new elements to enter into her construction system. Her construction system becomes more permeable, and has thus evolved and grown.

Our predictions about the people and events around us become more valid and precise, as we verify them, revise them with "successive approximations" and have them further verified, as illustrated by the experience cycle depicted in Figure 2. Learning and growth do not take place just as years pass by. Learning occurs only when our anticipations fail, and when we revise our constructions. Invalidations are opportunities for growth. Hence, parents and children are invited to reflect on themselves, step back and reconstrue when they encounter invalidations.
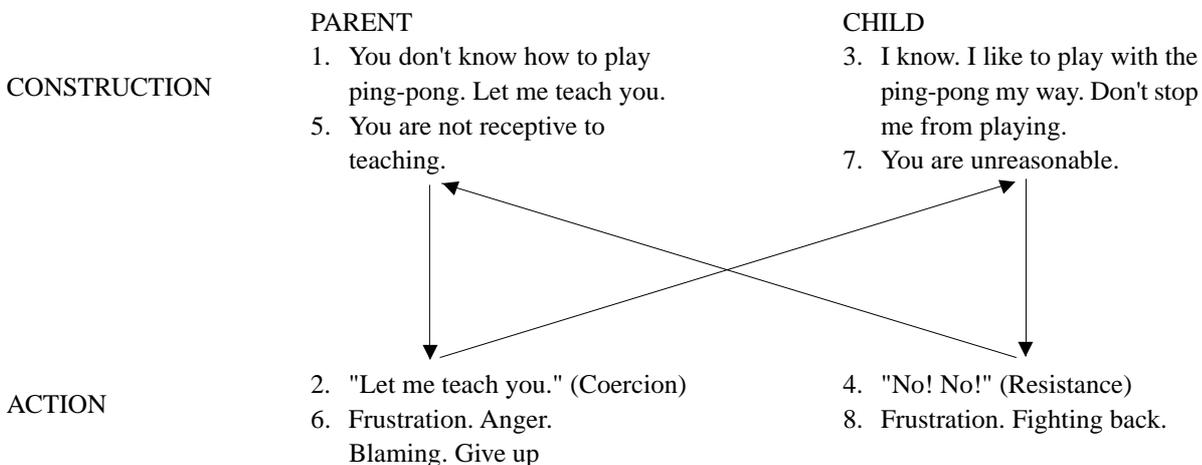
	PARENT	CHILD
CONSTRUCTION	1. You don't know how to play ping-pong. Let me teach you. 5. You are not receptive to teaching.	3. I know. I like to play with the ping-pong my way. Don't stop me from playing. 7. You are unreasonable.
ACTION	2. "Let me teach you." (Coercion) 6. Frustration. Anger. Blaming. Give up	4. "No! No!" (Resistance) 8. Frustration. Fighting back.

Figure 1 A parent-child Interaction Bowtie

1. ANTICIPATION
   of the event

2. INVESTMENT
   in the outcome

5. CONSTRUCTIVE
   REVISION
   of construct system

3. ENCOUNTER
   with the event

4. CONFIRMATION
   or
   DISCONFIRMATION
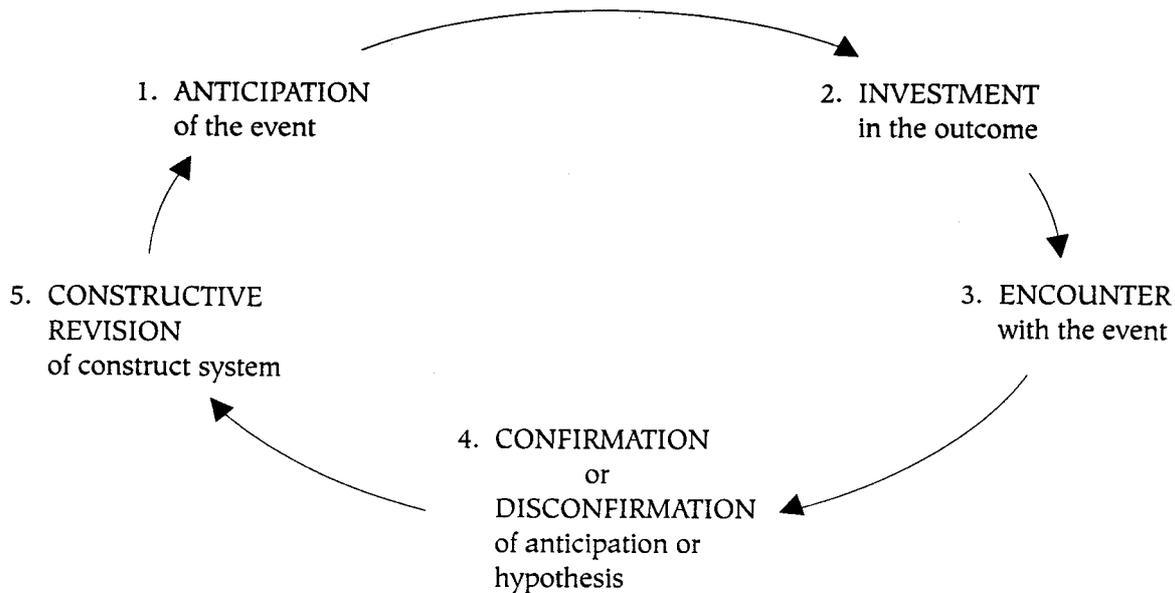   of anticipation or
   hypothesis

Figure 2   The Experience Cycle (Adapted from R.A. Neimeyer, 1985)

Holistic

Constructivists view a person as a whole, taking into account the person's constructs and action. Constructs, as a person's representation of reality, include a person's thoughts as well as feelings. They can be abstract concepts, or preverbal and symbolic. Constructivists do not just aim at correcting thoughts or behavior, but meaning making, helping the person make sense of his experience. What works, and what does not work. Why things get stuck and do not turn out as expected. How to get the person going from where he has got stuck. Shifting between dilation and constriction of perceptual fields, loosening[4] and tightening,[5] are the way to think creatively and problem solve logically.

Empowering

A person is empowered with the choice to extend or define his construct system. He may choose to enhance his predictions by broadening his field of vision, tolerating some day-to-day uncertainties, extending the predictive range of his system, and making more and more of his life's experience meaningful. Or, he may choose to constrict his field of vision, turn his attention toward the clear definition of his system of constructs, try to become more and more certain about fewer and fewer things, or become vaguely aware of more and more things on the surface.

An obedient child chooses to constrict himself so that he can be more certain about his behavioral outcome. A secure child ventures to take risks, to test limits and expand his system. An insecure avoidant child has no confidence in his own predictions. He just relies on others' constructions of reality. His exploratory behavior is hindered; his freedom is limited (Sassaroli & Lorenzini, 1992). A defiant child, does not find the adults helpful in facilitating him make sense of his experiences. Hs persists in his own predictions despite repeated invalidations, thrusting his way through. The freedom of his personal construct system is equally restricted. Children from discordant families, experiencing much stress, are noted to have a tendency to behave and make decisions impulsively. In an anxiety state, they may also choose not to act, by staying in helpness inertia.

An over-protective parent, fostering the child's dependency, chooses to restrict the child's range of behavior so that he can be more predictable. A parent under stress may choose to tighten his constructs by arranging his daily routines according to a set of rules in a rigid manner so as to be in control. He will grumble, nag, or blow up should anything outside his plan happen. His children are kept under rigid control. A stressful parent may also choose to loosen his constructs by tolerating ambiguities, vacillating from constructs to constructs, engaging in incomplete exploratory movements, making diffuse, short-sighted and implusive efforts, and shifting interpretation of an event or a relatioship. Landfield (1980) calls this "chaotic fragmentalism". It makes ROLE relationship difficult, because ROLE relationship involves construing, and construing involves organization (Leitner, 1985). His children, in responding to his equivocations would not find him supportive in their efforts to explore an uncertain world (Mancuso, Jaccard, Amendolia & Radecki, 1994).

The constructivist approach empowers the parent and the child in activating their inquiry process and their awareness of their own choices, instead of encouraging their dependency on authorities for solutions to their problems.

Culturally Sensitive

Constructivists understand a person multi-dimensionally and multi-systematically. A problem is understood through its implications in a wide context. For example, a child fails to learn to read. We need to assess the child's intellectual functioning. We need to explore how the child construe his school experience, in relation to teachers and peers. We need to explore how the child construes his parental expectations, how he construes himself, how he construes learning, and the implications of success and failure.

Mancuso and Hunter (1985) has illustrated that each child has developed his own unique system for processing all kinds of input – input regarding authorities, or reprimand, respectively. That is to say, the effectiveness of a reprimand depends very much on the child's construction. Does he find the reprimand helpful, or useless in guiding his anticipations of the world? Does the reprimand affect how he sees himself? Does it affect his relationship with the reprimander? How does he view authorities? A person's individual meaning is crucial. Every person is understood uniquely, not as a stereotype of the culture, or the subculture to which he belongs. It is the individual's "internalized culture" (Ho, 1995), meaning and implications that constructivists aims at construing and understanding.

Imposing one single child rearing practice on all people with different internalized culture requires some parents to adopt "a radical shift of attitude" (Blowers, 1991), and hence brings about resistance in some. Constructivists emphasize a two-way interactive process in meaning making. Resistance on the part of the parent is understood as the educator, or the therapist's failure to construe, or reconstrue the construction process of the parent concerned.

Conclusion

To conclude, the constructivist approach is a promising theory of choice in an era of change. "It places all in a position of tolerance for the life style of others" (Epting & Leitner, 1992). It draws human relationships closer. It is sensitive to the individual's internalized culture. It is subject to revision and change. It holds out hope for growth and liberation. It empowers both the parent and the child to assume agency of their own lives.

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Notes

[1] The word construe implies perceiving, experiencing and interpreting.

[2] The word ROLE, in Kellian sense, is put in the upper case to differentiate from the ordinary dictionary meaning of role.

[3] Courage, openness, responsibility, creativity and commitment, together with discrimination, flexibility, forgiveness and reverence are the common characteristics found in optimally functioning persons and persons who are able to sustain deep ROLE relationship (Leitner & Pfenninger, 1994).

[4] A loose construct is one which leads to varying predictions but retains its identity (Kelly, 1955/1991a).

[5] A tight construct is one which leads to unvarying predictions (Kelly, 1955/1991a).