

## **The application of Perceptual Control Theory to the film Drop Dead Fred; with focus on the protagonist and the concept of control**

The current essay will attempt to explain the film Drop Dead Fred using Perceptual Control Theory (PCT) (Powers, 1973). PCT proposes that behaviour is the result of a person's efforts to control their perceived environment. Control is said to be achieved through a hierarchy of negative feedback loops which govern a person's desired goals. Conflict can occur between these loops and goals (creating psychological distress), but can be resolved through reorganisation of the higher loops in the hierarchy. The PCT-derived psychotherapy Method of Levels (MoL) helps to facilitate reorganisation, and thus reduce conflict. Drop Dead Fred is a film in which the concepts of control, conflict and reorganisation are integral. The film follows Elizabeth, a woman who has been controlled by her mother in childhood, and by her husband Charles in adulthood. After losing her money, car, job and marriage, Elizabeth is ordered by her mother to return to the family home. To help her cope with her controlling mother and achieve happiness again, Elizabeth's childhood imaginary friend 'Drop Dead Fred' (hereafter Fred) reappears. Following a series of conflicts with Fred, Elizabeth accompanies him into a dreamworld where she is able, with his help, to overcome her fears of her mother and of being alone. No longer in need of Fred, Elizabeth returns to the real world without him, and resolves her conflicts with Charles and her mother to lead a normal, independent life. The current essay will therefore aim to explain Elizabeth's experiences using the principals of PCT. Firstly, sources of external arbitrary control present in Elizabeth's life will be identified; and her subsequent use of countercontrol will be explored. Secondly, areas of conflict, and both the causes and effects of such conflict will be discussed. Finally, this essay will explain, with reference to Drop Dead Fred, how PCT proposes that loss of control can lead to conflict; and that resolving conflict by focussing on higher level goals results in restored control, and reduced distress.

### **Control & Countercontrol**

Firstly therefore, it is necessary to define arbitrary control: Powers (1973) describes it as "the attempt to make behaviour conform to one set of goals without regard to other goals (and control systems) that may already be controlling that behaviour" (p. 259). Powers (1973) proposes that arbitrary control can be implemented by the self, or by others (interpersonal control). He states that controlling another's behaviour without using arbitrary control is impossible, because it would require knowledge of the controlee's entire control system. PCT would therefore conclude that Elizabeth's husband, Charles, and her mother, Polly, are both exerting interpersonal control over Elizabeth.

The film introduces Charles first, who from the onset is shown to directly control Elizabeth's perceptions of him and their relationship. For example, Charles asserts that it was Elizabeth's idea for him to leave her and live with his mistress. When Elizabeth protests "Oh Charles, I don't think I said that", Charles only has to continue "Yes" for Elizabeth to agree "I did". When he accidentally refers to her as 'Annabella', his mistress's name, he states "Isn't it better that I said oh Annabella and I was here with you, than to say oh Lizzie and be somewhere else with Annabella?". In each instance, Charles successfully controls Elizabeth's perceptions of him or some aspect of their relationship. Indeed, Charles even declares at one point "I am in control of Lizzie". This is a clear illustration of what PCT terms interpersonal control - arbitrary control of one person by another: Charles is attempting to make Elizabeth's behaviour conform to his set of goals, without regard to her goals and control systems, which are already controlling her behaviour.

The second and most significant source of interpersonal control in Elizabeth's life is her mother, Polly. Polly controlled Elizabeth throughout her childhood, creating the need for Fred; who provided Elizabeth with a way of regaining control. Polly's ultimate act of control in Elizabeth's childhood was to take Fred away from her, by sealing shut the jack-in-the-box in which he lived. This is metaphorically indicative of the extent of Polly's control over Elizabeth; she is even able to exert control over Elizabeth's own thoughts and imagination. In adulthood, Elizabeth is still controlled by her mother, as proven by the reappearance of Fred. On discovering that Fred has

reappeared, Polly employs a nurse to administer Elizabeth's anti-psychotic medication, and keep her bed-bound. This is another clear demonstration of interpersonal control: Polly is attempting to control Elizabeth's experiences, without regard to Elizabeth's own control systems. Furthermore, Polly again strives to eliminate Fred (this time using medication), reiterating the previous metaphor. Polly also takes control of what Elizabeth views as her main goal - reuniting with Charles. And like Charles, Polly also attempts to control Elizabeth's perceptions of certain situations: referring to Elizabeth's father, Polly proclaims "You made things worse, he left because of you".

For Elizabeth, Fred provides a way to deal with the interpersonal control implemented by her mother; because Fred serves as an agent through which to countercontrol Polly. Countercontrol was first introduced by Skinner (1953), who proposed that a controlee engaged in countercontrol may produce behaviour which is aversive to the controller, including emotional reactions such as anger or frustration. In the context of PCT, Carey and Bourbon (2004) have defined countercontrol as 'action taken by a controlee to systematically produce behavioural effects in a controller' (p. 4). This can be seen in *Drop Dead Fred* only moments after Fred re-enters in Elizabeth's life. Polly forbids Elizabeth from walking on her recently shampooed carpet; so as a way of countering this control, Fred deliberately smears dog feces on the carpet, enraging Polly. Additionally, Carey and Bourbon (2005) suggest that placing further controls on countercontrollers only provides them with more opportunities for countercontrol. This can be observed in a scene showing a five-year old Elizabeth being reprimanded by her mother for her recent misbehaviour with Fred. Polly forbids her from mentioning Fred's name, and shouts "no more Drop Dead Fred, period!". In an attempt to counter this, Fred immediately appears and suggests creating a mud pie using Polly's best china. Once made, Fred and Elizabeth discuss plans to force-feed the mud pie to Polly, then chop her head off, eat her, and finally defecate her onto the dining table. This is obviously a very extreme and violent reaction to the additional control being placed on Elizabeth, but nonetheless demonstrates that countercontrollers may react emotionally, as proposed by Skinner (1953); and that further attempts to control countercontrollers can elicit more countercontrol, as suggested by Carey and Bourbon (2005).

## **Conflict**

Although Elizabeth is able to countercontrol her mother through Fred, there is still part of her that submits to her mother's control. Fred is a way of expressing and achieving her higher order goal of standing up to her mother and becoming independent, but the part of her that is still afraid of her mother attempts to control Fred, and submits to her mother. For example, after Fred has smeared Polly's shampooed carpet in dog feces, he suggests writing "mother sucks" on it. Elizabeth, afraid of her mother's reaction, persuades him otherwise. Additionally, throughout the film Fred consistently refers to Polly as "the megabitch", whereas Elizabeth always addresses her politely and formally as "mother". These examples display Elizabeth's conflicting goals: to defy and be independent from her mother; and to submit to her mother, because she is afraid of her.

Fred also highlights conflict surrounding Elizabeth's relationship with Charles. Although Elizabeth states that reuniting with Charles would be the only way to make her happy, once reunited, Fred asserts "He's the wrong man for you, you're not happy" and "If you're so happy... why am I here?". Fred highlights that Elizabeth's goal of wanting to be in a relationship, and not wanting to be alone, is conflicting with her goal of achieving happiness (although she had seemed to think that they were different levels of the same goal, i.e. That being in a relationship would make her happy). Furthermore, Charles encourages Elizabeth to take the medication that will 'kill' Fred. Elizabeth mentions earlier in the film that when her mother took Fred away from her in childhood, "All the life, and spirit... just went out of me". This suggests then, again metaphorically, that Charles is arbitrarily controlling Elizabeth to such an extent that he is removing the 'life' or 'spirit' from her: he is removing any self-control that she might have.

### **Causes & effects of conflict**

According to PCT, it is exactly such loss of control, resulting from arbitrary control by others, that is proposed to be a main cause of conflict, and thus distress (Powers, 1973). Carey et al. (2007) suggest that conflict and distress are evident when people describe fighting with themselves or feeling split between various options. This is clearly apparent in Elizabeth, who is torn between her different goals, and is literally fighting with herself in her relationship with Fred. PCT would explain this relationship in terms of inner conflict in Elizabeth, between the different control loops that govern her (opposing) higher order goals. Elizabeth says of Fred, "It's like he's my best friend, and yet I'm scared to death of him": Fred represents the goals that Elizabeth wants to achieve, but is afraid to because of how it will impact on her other goals. For example, Fred represents Elizabeth's goal of standing up to her mother, but this conflicts with her goal of maintaining a non-confrontational relationship with her mother. Powers (1973) suggests that such inner conflict is often a result of arbitrary control by others.

Fred also represents the effects of the conflict Elizabeth feels. A paper by Mansell (2005) applying PCT to psychopathology, proposes that during conflict, sensory experience may be modified in order to achieve a higher-order goal. This may result in hallucinations and perceptual distortions which affect behaviour (McNab, 1993; Powers, 1973). Additionally, Powers (1973) suggests that conflict can be temporarily reduced through delusion: a person may disregard rules of logic and allow perceptual systems within their imagination to create a fantasy (Mansell, 2005). This certainly seems to explain Elizabeth, who in adulthood is perfectly aware that the concept of an imaginary friend does not fit with her rules of logic, but disregards this and allows her imagination to recreate Fred. However, PCT argues that although delusion can temporarily reduce conflict, it is only reduced in the mind of the person, and can be challenged by the environment (Mansell, 2005). This is also demonstrated by Elizabeth, whose environment regularly challenges the illusion of Fred.

### **Restoration of control & resolution of conflict**

As discussed, PCT proposes that loss of control causes conflict (Powers, 1973). According to PCT and MoL, for conflict to be reduced, an individual must shift his awareness from symptomatic distress to higher level control systems creating conflict (Higginson & Mansell, 2008). Powers (1998) proposes that once awareness is achieved, reorganisation follows - which reduces conflict and restores control. The dreamworld scene in Drop Dead Fred displays these principals in action: Fred, like an MoL therapist, helps Elizabeth become aware of the conflict surrounding her higher level goals and thus facilitates her reorganisation. Higginson and Mansell (2008) found that following MoL therapy, clients reported a change in 'self', and viewed their previous self through the new perspective of their current self. This is also displayed in the dreamworld scene, when Elizabeth meets her child self.

In conclusion, PCT is able to explain Elizabeth's experiences in terms of control, conflict and reorganisation. Arbitrary control placed on her by others elicited countercontrol, but also caused conflict within her and loss of self-control. Fred facilitated her reorganisation; restoring control and reducing conflict. In this way, Drop Dead Fred demonstrates the efficacy of PCT and MoL principals on maintaining psychological wellbeing, and provides support for the use of such principals in psychotherapy.

## References

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### **For a PCT approach to psychosis, see also:**

- Tai, S. J. (2009). Using Perceptual Control Theory and the Method of Levels to work with people who experience psychosis. *The Cognitive Behavioural Therapist*, 2, 227-242.