

MY PCP PERSONAL STORY

Franz Epting

University of Florida, Gainesville, FL, USA

In the Summer of 1967, I finished my dissertation on cognitive complexity and persuasibility at The Ohio State University in Columbus, and started out for the University of Florida for my first and as it turned out my only job, retiring after a 36 year tenure. I talked to Dr. Kelly about my dissertation topic and had him sign my copy of the first volume of his book just before he left Ohio State for Brandeis in the Summer of 1965 but did not try to contact him again nor did I hear from him. My next contact was as one of the student pallbearers lifting his coffin from the hearse to the open grave at the Walnut Grove Cemetery in Worthington, a small town just north of Columbus on a cold March 10th in 1967. I later learned, to my great surprise, that he had called, shortly before his death to make sure I had found a job and was pleased about my Florida appointment. One did not really know what to expect from Dr. Kelly; he was the kind of person who did nice things behind your back. (I think often he was more comfortable doing it that way.) For students at Ohio State it was always, of course *Dr. Kelly*. However when he moved to Brandeis, with Maslow being referred to as Abe by the students, *Dr. Kelly* in fact became George!

As excited as I was to arrive in Gainesville, Florida surrounded by a great group of humanistic scholars – Arthur Combs, Ted Landsman, David Suchman and Sidney Jourard in psychology and Charles Morris and Tom Hanna in philosophy – to name but a few, I felt very isolated from my personal construct theory colleagues but was very excited about what a career in personal construct psychology might hold. It also gave me a unique position even among my humanistic colleagues. By the way, for those who might be interested, my life partner Mark Paris and I have spelled out some of the similarities and differences between humanistic psychology and construct theory in a paper that appeared in the *Humanistic Psychologist* earlier this year (Epting & Paris, 2006).

Even though there were various people in per-

sonal construct psychology scattered around the United States, in my mind the most visible group was the British group headed by Don Bannister and I reasoned that the British Journals would be the most receptive to my work. What did I know? I found something called the British Journal of Psychology in the University of Florida library and submitted my first paper there. I was very surprised, when I met Don in 1971 on a trip to Bexley Hospital, that he had never published in that journal and was very impressed that I had just had my article, on an evaluation of elicitation procedures, published there (Epting, Suchman & Nickeson, 1971). After tea that afternoon, Don did something that delighted and surprised me. He took me out back of the buildings to see the hospital's pigs. He seemed most comfortable there; more so than he had been in the meetings in the hospital just a few minutes before. There we got to know each other much better. It may have been that meeting which later led him and Fay Fransella to recommend me to John Wiley & Sons Ltd. to write a book on Personal Construct Counseling and Psychotherapy; in this way my first book was in fact a British publication (Epting, 1984).

It was not really until the 24th Nebraska Symposium on Motivation in October of 1975 in Lincoln, Nebraska that I got to meet more of the British group that included Fay as well as the other international participants. During this meeting Fay had the brilliant insight that we, in fact, were having the First International Congress on Personal Construct Psychology instead of just another Nebraska Symposium on Motivation and took it upon herself to begin organizing the Second International Congress on Personal Construct Psychology which was held in July, 1977 at Christ Church College in Oxford. It was there I got to know the larger British group much better and it was there that my thoughts and feelings about what Personal Construct Psychology means to me began to fuse with what Fay Fransella means to me. The rest, as they say, is history. In

1986 Phil Salmon arranged for me to become a visiting fellow in her college at the University of London, and Fay invited me to become a guest lecturer in the new Centre for Personal Construct Psychology. What a treat it was to get to know the students, faculty and staff at the Centre. All the way along I have sort of followed my nose into lots of interesting areas: fixed role therapy, alternative elicitation procedures, construction of death and dying, mentoring, what it means to be gay and who knows what else. I have come, now as an Emeritus Professor at University of Florida, to my largest project yet; writing a biography of George Kelly. This has turned into a grand detective story and a good excuse to re-read Kelly. I would like to use my remaining time to mention a few things I have come across that might be of interest.

Some time ago Fay gave me a recording of a 1966 meeting she had with Kelly when she visited him in his new Massachusetts home. In the tape Kelly again disavows any attempt to categorize construct theory as a cognitive, behavioral, existential, or even a humanistic theory. [The following is given as an example of Kelly distancing himself from what many have seen as a kindred spirit. At Ohio State Kelly commented, in a graduate seminar where he had students reading literature and philosophy (anything but psychology) on what he thought of Sartre's Being and Nothingness. Kelly said that he started reading it or read a portion of it and that he found a lot of nothingness but not much being (Carpenter, 2006).]

This past Summer, as a part of the first symposium on George Kelly and Personal Construct Psychology presented during a history of psychology conference which occurred at this year's meeting of Cheiron: International Society for the Social Sciences, Mark and I decided to take Kelly seriously and not see him as just being difficult, misguided, or simply obstreperous in his refusal to be categorized and subsumed by the extant psychological labels; but see him instead as putting forth the only thorough-going pragmatic theory of psychology. We entitled the paper *Dewey Between the Lines: George Kelly and the Pragmatist Tradition* (Epting & Paris, 2006b). (I expect Trevor Butt will be particularly pleased with this paper since he has been trying, for some time, to promote a pragmatic view of Kelly.) We see this pragmatic base, anchored in

the philosophy and psychology of John Dewey as the foundation of the entirety of Personal Construct Psychology and as the basis of Kelly's set of exclusions: no concept of self or ego; no conception of psychological dynamics; no notion of developmental stages; no typology of psychological traits; no notion of efficient causation; no conception of psychopathology, as such; no separation of thoughts, feeling and actions; no set of basic needs; and no notion of an 'unconscious' (Epting & Paris, 2006a). In fact Kelly (1963, p. xi, in the introduction to the paperback three chapter version of his two volume work) states that, "It is not only that these terms [the set of exclusions listed above] are abandoned; what is more important, the concepts themselves evaporate. If the reader starts murmuring such words to himself, he can be sure he has lost the scent".

What Kelly did put in place was both a rich description of how constructs are engineered and mathematically configured and, more importantly, the central premise that "constructions are tools we use to move around in or 'use' reality, rather than a means for ascertaining an unmoving 'truth' about reality" (Paris & Epting, 2006a). What I am suggesting here is that we resist 'reading' the theory in traditional terms but instead go on with the business of elaborating this marvelous pragmatic theory either along engineering-technical lines or along content-conceptual lines or both without re-importing more traditional notions. It is so easy for us all to be lured back into psychodynamic, cognitive behavioral or some other theoretical notions as we attempt to expand and further explicate the theory.

This resisting a slide back into traditional terms would also mean following the pragmatist's protest of leaving behind commonly accepted philosophical concerns with respect to the existence of reality; whether it be a concern about whether construct theory is best described as naïve realism, critical realism, radical realism or yet something else. For Kelly, "the open question for man is not whether reality exists or not, but what he can make of it. If he does make something of it he can stop worrying about whether it exists or not" (Kelly, 1969b, p. 25) In my way of thinking, Kelly was well equipped to join the pragmatist's protest coming from a protestant religious background which supported such

free thinking that many proponents claimed to be more protestant than Christian. This is to say they were more invested in the spirit of the protest, as such, rather than in any literal interpretation of scripture.

What may be even more challenging than putting aside those traditional theoretical concepts so near and dear to hearts of traditional psychologists, is the challenge to resist importing efficient causation into the theory because of a mistaken notion that the natural science IV-DV (Independent Variable-Dependent Variable) paradigm requires it. I am afraid many of us have made this mistake in the past; making grid measures appear and behave like trait measures and discovering, in the discussion sections of our research articles, language which describes personal construct terms in mechanistic cause and effect ways. It is as if we have never even read Joseph Rychlak's (1968/1981) excellent critique of this predicament. I urge us all to remember that the only requirement for our using the natural science IV-DV paradigm is to translate our terms into extraspective operations for the method section only. When we come to the discussion section of our papers, we are quite free to translate them back to our original introspective formulations. Being a part of the language of method the IV-DV paradigm is devoid of any notion of causality and only portrays either the presence or absence of a mathematical functional relationship. This leaves us quite free to use our formal and final causation language in discussing our results. The results sections of our papers reside in the language of theory; the same humanistically oriented theory that we used in the introduction of our papers (Epting, 2005).

These are a few of the thoughts I have been having lately about what PCP means to me. I hope you have found some of it interesting and I hope that some it may be of use to you in one way or the other.

REFERENCES

- Carpenter, J. C. (2006). Unpublished interview with Franz Epting
- Epting, F. R. (1984). *Personal construct counseling and psychotherapy*. London and New York: John Wiley & Sons.
- Epting, F. (2005). A brief comment on competing for reality. *Journal of Constructivist Psychology*, 18, 365-366.
- Epting, F. R. & Paris, M. E. (2006a). A constructive understanding of the person: George Kelly and humanistic psychology. *The Humanistic Psychologist*, 34, 21-37.
- Epting F. R. & Paris, M. E. (2006b August). Dewey between the lines: George Kelly and the pragmatist tradition. Paper presented at the 38th annual meeting of Cheiron: International Society for the Social and Behavioral Sciences, Bronxville, New York.
- Epting, F.R., Suchman, D. & Nickeson, C. (1971). An evaluation of elicitation procedures for personal constructs. *British Journal of Psychology*, 62, 513-517.
- Kelly, G. A. (1969). Ontological acceleration. In B. Maher (Ed.), *Clinical psychology and personality: The selected papers of George Kelly* (pp. 7-45). New York: John Wiley & Sons.
- Kelly, G. A. (1963). *A theory of personality: The psychology of personal constructs*. New York: W. W. Norton. (originally published in 1955)
- Rychlak, J. R. (1968/1981). *A philosophy of science for personality theory*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

This article is based on a talk given at the conference on 'PCP: a personal story' organised by the Centre for Personal Construct at the University of Hertfordshire on September 29, 2006.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Franz Epting, Ph. D., is Emeritus Professor in the Department of Psychology at the University of Florida in Gainesville, Florida. He received his Ph.D. from The Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio where, as a graduate student, he had the opportunity to study with George Kelly. His career has focused on the development of Personal Construct Psychology in his teaching, research and professional practice. In 2000 he received a lifetime achievement award from the North American Personal Construct Network (now known as the Constructivist Psychology Network). He is a past president of the division of humanistic psychology of the American Psychological Association and is a past chairperson of the Council of Counseling Psychology Training Programs in the United States. Email: frepting@hotmail.com

Franz Epting

REFERENCE

Epting, F. (2007). My PCP personal story. *Personal Construct Theory & Practice*, 4, 53-56.

My PCP personal story

Retrieved from:
<http://www.pcp-net.org/journal/pctp07/epting07.pdf>

Received: 30 Dec 2006 - Accepted: 5 Jan 2007 - Published: 31 Jan 2007

Franz Epting