

## RE-VISITING GEORGE KELLY: SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM, SOCIAL ECOLOGY, AND SOCIAL JUSTICE – ALL UNFINISHED PROJECTS<sup>1</sup>

John Shotter

Department of Communication, University of New Hampshire, USA

*A long time ago, in late 1968, Don Bannister invited me to contribute a chapter to his Perspectives in Personal Construct Theory (Bannister, 1970). Central to the whole chapter was George Kelly's emphasis on the first-time creativity of our own living encounters with events around us – "It is by his actions that man learns what his capabilities are..." (Kelly, 1969a, p.33). As I see it now, we can find in George Kelly's early ideas much of what later appeared under the umbrella of what came to be called 'social constructionism.' However, in that 1970 paper, I was simply claiming that "Kelly did not sufficiently work through the powerful implications in his own position, even though the comments littered about his writings were obviously informed by an intuitive appreciation of them" (Shotter, 1970, p.235). Here, I would like to return to that paper to claim that this is still the case – that there are still undeveloped themes in Kelly's work to do with his emphasis on the consequential nature of our actions in the social sphere that need our attention. Attention to these themes can help us to understand inadequacies in current versions of social constructionism, and also why, currently, we find it so difficult to provide persuasive arguments in favour of social justice and against social injustice.*

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When I began to study psychology in 1959 (unbelievably more than 40 years ago), I slowly began to realize that I didn't like it very much. But I stuck at it – learning theory, operant conditioning, statistical decision theory, psychophysics, computer simulation, transformational-generative grammar – until around 1969–70, I couldn't bear it any longer. And I began to feel a great deal of anxiety and depression about whether I could ever become a 'proper' psychologist or not. But, as David Smail (1984) has put it, very perceptively I think:

*"Far from being a mechanical fault, a 'symptom', a 'dysfunction' or an indication of 'maladjustment', the experience of anxiety constitutes an assertion of the real nature of our subjective engagement with the world.*

*To fall prey to anxiety is, at least partially, to fall out of self-deception, since the phenomenon of anxiety is an insistence that the subject's experience be taken seriously, that the person's actual predicament cannot and will not be ignored" (p.82).*

And that doubly is exactly how I felt: First, that not only did psychology not take people's own personal, lived experience seriously, but secondly, that I could not continue any longer in the self-deception that it did. Indeed, there are a large number of important distinctions – especially a whole realm of judgments, central to the conduct of our everyday life affairs, to do with assigning and attributing responsibility – that it flagrantly and arrogantly ignored: a set of ethico-political or humanistic concerns which

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Broadbent (1970), for instance, dismissed in his William James lectures in Harvard in 1970 as “the last kicks of a dying culture.”

But what to do? I set out in a ‘Gestetnered’ paper my ‘objections’, my 95 ‘Lutheran’ theses. But then what? More was needed than just to nail them to a convenient door. Well luckily, no ideology so completely dominates a social order, or an academic disciplinary order, that it does not give rise within itself to intimations also of a counter order, to hints of possibilities for other, quite different ways of being. And for me at that time two people came to stand out like beacons for their humanity and heart, and untiring energy (it always needs energy), in trying to devise different ways in which to be a psychologist. One was Rom Harré, and the other was Don Bannister. I sent my ‘objections’ to them both, and they both responded in ways which justify the myths that we have now constructed around them. Don Bannister not only invited me – a complete beginner with no track record at all – to contribute toward the volume on *Perspectives in Personal Construct Theory* he was editing at that time (Shotter, 1970), but also later on to help think about forming an association to mediate between academic psychologists and psychotherapeutic practitioners – so that both could learn from each other – the association that became the PPA, the *Psychology and Psychotherapy Association*.

Now the difference between myself and Don Bannister, is that he put his actions where his mouth was, whereas I hung back, and like Browning’s *Grammarian*, decided not to live “until I knew how to live.” Don Bannister put the implications of his critique into practice in many different ways. Not least, although still prepared to pay lip-service to the idea that ‘science’ required one to set out one’s theories as a set of quasi-mathematical or geometrical propositions (with corollaries, etc.), he also began to tell stories – about scientists, for instance, who gradually come to realize in the course of their investigations of a certain green slime, that its aim in life is to investigate them! – his way of telling us what *reflexivity* actually means in practice. Or, as Miller Mair (1988) put it in a magnificent paper he gave at a symposium in Leeds in 1986 in Don Bannister’s honour, he also...

“... demanded that we take this bastion of the psychiatric world-view and open it up to

*a different reading, telling a tale of tactics in living rather than of dumb necessity.”*

In other words, like all the rest of us in an uncertain and precarious world, schizophrenic people, while undeniably suffering from a disturbed physiology of some kind or other, can still nonetheless be seen as trying to make the best sense they can of their disturbed circumstances.

Now, as I said, Don Bannister invited me to contribute a chapter to his *Perspectives in Personal Construct Theory* (Bannister, 1970). I called my chapter (in those unenlightened sexist times): ‘Men (plural, social), the man-makers (singular, individual): George Kelly and the Psychology of Personal Constructs.’ In it, I attempted to interweave Kelly with Vygotsky and Wittgenstein to overcome, what seemed to me, to be Kelly’s undue emphasis on the individual person. It can be seen as an early excursion into what later Ken Gergen (1985) called ‘social constructionism.’

## WHY CONSTRUCTS?

Kelly (always very alive to the commitments, the logical grammars, implicit in our language) used the term *construct* in wanting to get away from the term *concept*. For as he saw it:

*“Concepts have long been known as units of logic and are treated as if they existed independently of any particular person’s psychological processes. But when we use the notion of ‘construct’ we have nothing of this sort in mind; we are talking about a psychological process in a living person. Such a construct has, for us, no existence independent of the person whose thinking it characterizes” (p.87).*

He used the term *construct* because it is

*“easier for us to envision construct [than concept] as something devised by man for his own lively purposes” ...[and] a construct is more easily perceived as a structural member of a system erected by man, and, therefore, as having dimensionality or two-endedness” (p.10)*

– in other words, a construct works to create *relational dimensions* between aspects of, or ‘parts played’ by, regions within the structure of a living whole.

Indeed, *this* is the very special meaning of the word ‘construction’ for Kelly: For as he sees it, the process of construction involved is not a process of adding piece to added piece, but

*“when it arises as a human act and thereby becomes a subject of psychological inquiry, [it] serves... to differentiate objects as well as to associate them”* (1969a, p.9)

– categorizing distinct entities in terms of their shared properties serves no human purpose, in Kelly’s view, unless one can also differentiate those entities from a whole swath of others with which they might easily be confused<sup>2</sup>. But note, Kelly (1969a) cautions,

*“... we have not claimed that a person’s act is set off by all that it is not. To say that would invoke a host of irrelevancies. But it is brought into relevant perspective by our structured awareness of what it might have been”* (p.12)

– we must project “the behaviour of man against a background of his unrealized potentials” (pp.13-14). William James (1956) has a very nice phrase for this state of affairs in his discussion of an indeterministic world:

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2 Saussure (1959/1911), in setting out the basic principles of what later was to be called ‘structuralism,’ described the linguistic value of words thus: “*Instead of pre-existing ideas then, we find in all the foregoing examples values emanating from the system. When they are said to correspond to concepts [i.e. signify concepts], it is understood that the concepts are purely differential and defined not by their positive content but negatively by their relations with other terms of the system. Their most precise character is in being what the others are not*” (p.117)... “*Everything that has been said up to this point boils down to this: in language there are only differences. Even more important: a difference generally implies positive terms between which the difference is set up; but in language there are only differences without positive terms*”.

*“Actualities,”* [he says,] “*seem to float in a sea of possibilities from out of which they are chosen; and, somewhere, indeterminism says, such possibilities exist, and form a part of truth*” (p.151).

## LIVING AND NON-LIVING, MECHANICAL PROCESSES, PARTS AND WHOLE

In other words, while mechanical, non-living systems are constructed piece-by-piece from previously, separately existing parts, which retain their character unchanged irrespective of whether they are parts of the system or not, whole persons, as living systems, are certainly not so constructed. On the contrary, they *grow*. In so doing, they transform themselves from simple but whole individuals into richly structured ones in such a way that their ‘parts’ at anyone moment in time owe, not just their character but their very existence, both to each other, *and* to their relations with the ‘parts’ of the system at some earlier point in time – their *history* is just as important as their *logic* in their growth. But more than that, there is always more to come of living systems because as well as existing in space they realize themselves through time. Thus, while a mechanical system existing as a purely spatial system, can be contemplated at a given moment as *complete*, i.e., all its parts can be seen *at once*, simultaneously, a temporal reality cannot. It is by its very nature always *incomplete*, and its ‘parts’ – which are not of course, physically or existentially distinct parts at all, but only *construed* as ‘parts’ of the system (to use Kelly’s term) by an outsider to the system – are largely successive or sequential, i.e., ‘nonsimultaneous’.

If we take an undifferentiated mass of stuff, a particular totality, a dynamically unfolding whole, and begin to make differentiations within it of one kind, we can begin to produce a system of constructs. Unlike the attempt to characterize a concept by listing the features meant to be common to all the things to which the concept is applied, constructs are formed by considering not just things we think similar to one another, but also others which contrast with them. Kelly (1969c) remarks:

*“Probably you are all familiar with the*

methods used by Vygotsky to investigate concept formation... I have digressed widely from what Vygotsky had in mind, though we shall be nonetheless indebted to him for es-

ablishing a useful methodological point of departure" (p.106).

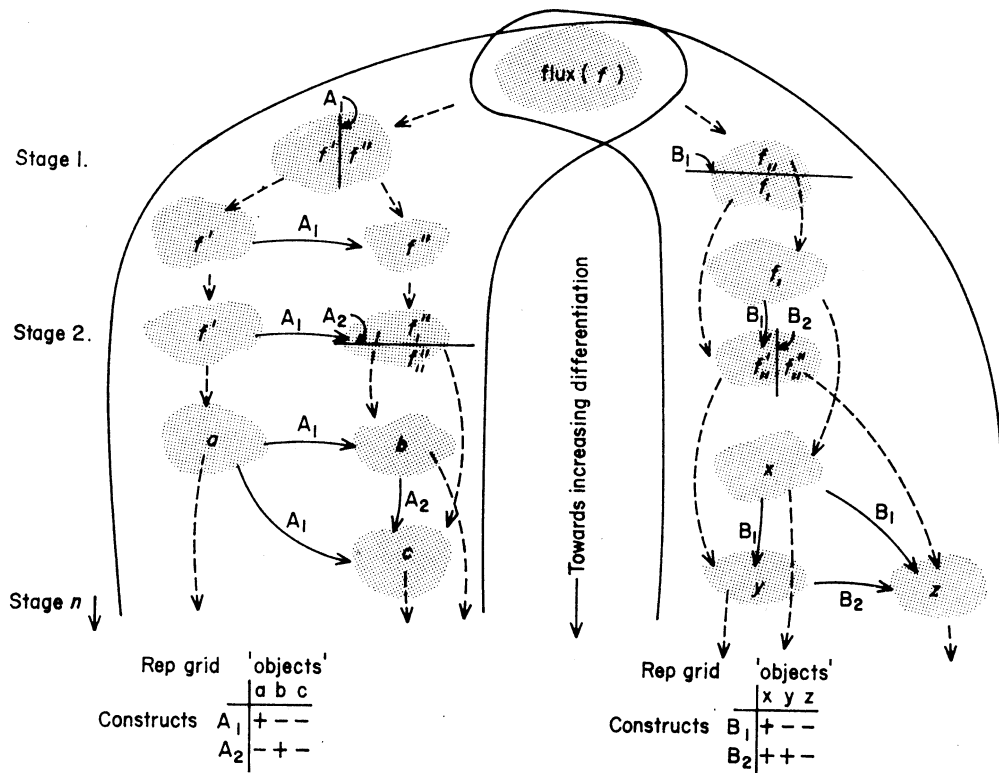


Fig. 1.

Figure 1 (from Shotter, 1970)

For example, in Fig.1. think of f (flux) as some as yet unanalyzed speech noise: At stage 1, we may analyze it as a physicist, in terms of high or low pitch, high or low intensity, or short or long duration (the A limb). Or, as a phonetician, in terms, say, of voiced or unvoiced phonemes, stops or fricatives, apical or labial, etc. (the B limb). After having noticed each difference we must also remember the relations between the regions distinguished still hold. And totality of the flux may be differentiated further, or in relation to quite different features, as exigencies demand. Constructs have, as Kelly says, a range of convenience.

The process serves to structure the dynamically

unfolding whole into a set of interrelated parts, the character of each part being known in terms of its relations to all the others in the system – for they are still all parts of f, but now they are ‘characterized’ parts. Unlike the attempt to characterize things in isolation from one another by abstracting common features, the parts here are reciprocally determined, all in relation to one another. Each has its significance in the context provided by the rest; one unit cannot be changed without changing the character of the whole. And, while perceptually distinguishable, the parts cannot be physically isolated from one another without destroying the set of relations constituting the whole – in other words, all the parts

are ‘participant parts’ that only have their being within a whole.

“The data you [produce in such a process],” [says Kelly (1969c),] “may be placed in a simple array with the names of [entities] arranged in a horizontal row and below them a corresponding row of symbols – pluses and minuses – indicating in each instance whether you regard each [entity as more or less like other entities in the system]” (p.107)<sup>3</sup>.

Construing or differentiating a dynamic totality into a system of interrelated ‘participant parts’ by use of a construct system, thus, does two things:

(1) it identifies each ‘participant part’ just as much in terms of characteristics it does not have in common with others as those it does – things are known both in terms of what they do and what they don’t do – hence,

(2) such ‘participant parts’ are defined not by what they are in themselves, but by the part they play, their role or function, in relation to all the roles, etc., played by all the other ‘participant parts’ constituting the whole.

Thus we have here then the kind of system discussed by Dewey (1896) as an organic structure, in which the parts are known in terms of their *value* or *function*, i.e., by what they are *doing* in the system rather than by any formal qualities they may have when considered in isolation from one another. Such a functional form of order as this is of quite a different kind to mechanical forms of order, consisting of objective parts.

In other words, whereas mechanisms are assembled piece by piece from different parts, each with its own already fixed properties, that are all *externally related* to each other, living wholes are made up of *internally related* ‘participant parts’. That is, instead of being structured into wholes by being all joined together by *third* entities (such as glue, nails, etc.) into unified structures, the ‘parts’ of a living whole do not already have a fixed character, nor are they fixed in place by ‘glue’ or ‘nails’; they have

their character dynamically, in terms of their (continually changing) relations to the other aspects of the whole around them. Their relations to their surroundings are of such a kind that they can be *re-construed* in many different ways, in terms of many different construct systems (but certainly not just as one pleases, in an ‘anything goes’ relativistic fashion).

Much follows, then, from the differences between non-living, mechanical systems and living systems – and not anywhere near enough has been made of these differences. Indeed, I shall return to this issue of the ‘anything goes’ rearrangements possible among sets of *externally related* parts in mechanical systems, and the impossibility of such rearrangements among the *internally related* ‘parts’ of living systems in a moment – in relating some comments of Kelly’s (1969b) about the pitfalls the subject-predicate structure of Indo-European languages make us prone to, and Wittgenstein’s (1953) insistence on the importance of his *grammatical investigations* in drawing our attention to “what is possible *before* all new discoveries and inventions” (1953, no.126), i.e., what is *really* possible in human affairs, not just a Utopian or Totalitarian dream. But for the moment, let me focus on this difference: As Stuart Sutherland (1970) put it at the time I wrote my article, for mechanically structured systems,

“the principles used in explaining the behaviour of the whole system can be inferred from a knowledge of the laws governing the component parts of the system together with a knowledge of how these parts are organized” (p.98)

– whereas, just to consider a living system as made up of fixed component parts (whose separate laws of behaviour can in fact be listed), is to ignore all the relations that makes a system a *living* system. Thus, to repeat, for Kelly (1969b),

“a construct has... no existence independent of the person whose thinking it characterizes” (p.87).

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<sup>3</sup> This, of course, is just the arrangement adopted for the setting out of the relations between the ‘distinctive features’ that characterizes the phonetic structure of a language (Jakobson, Fant, & Halle, 1951).

## THE AMORAL AND UNDEMOCRATIC TENDENCIES IN THE MECHANIST APPROACH

But as many at this congress know only too well, the mechanistic scheme I outlined above – in which a set of atomized, Lego-land components, *with no intrinsic, 'living' relations to each other*, are arranged and re-arranged in accord with supposedly 'rational' principles of profit or efficiency – is, I'm sorry to say, a scheme for the generalized understanding, the measurement, and the administration or control of human affairs, that is still very much with us. Hence our current entrapment in spreadsheet education, in the McDonaldization of health-care, in Global homogenization, in the bone-brained 'rational-choice theory' approaches of governments to foreign relations, in a situation in which (as Frank Winslow Taylor (1947) put it back in 1911 to a Congressional Committee on work-study techniques): "In the past the man has been first; in the future the [rational-system] system must be first" (p.7) – something that Kelly (and Don Bannister) abhorred.

Indeed, just let me note before proceeding further, that Don Bannister (1970) was well aware of psychology as a moral and political enterprise:

*"If you say, as a physicist, that your purpose as a scientist is the prediction and control of physical phenomena, you have not thereby posed – in most people's view – a moral issue. If you say, as a psychologist, that your purpose as a scientist is the prediction and control of human behaviour, then you have thereby posed a moral issue. Psychology, practiced as a public endeavor, is a politically significant act"* (p.48).

And littered around in Kelly's writings too, we can find comments illustrative of his concerns with the undemocratic tendencies inherent in psychology when considered as a science like physics. For instance, he comments on

*"a fallacy in the outlook of most psychologists... [that] they deny to other men the penchant for behaviorally implemented inquiry they find so crucial to their own endeavors"* (1969a, p.15).

Or, on what he sees as a fallacy in objective thinking, that:

*"We disclaim responsibility for our propositions and try to make the objects we talk about hang themselves on the horns of the dilemmas we invent for dealing with them... The speaker disclaims all responsibility for the dilemma he has [as a therapist] imposed on [his client]"* (1969b p.70).

Indeed, Kelly (1955) is quite hot on psychologists not taking responsibility for their assertions and hiding behind the wall of their scientific expertise:

*"No wonder so many of us would like to become scientists and be content to win prizes without having to take the awful responsibility for people (Kelly, 1955)"* (my p.248).

## A PSYCHOLOGY OF HUMAN CONCERN: FROM ACADEMIC RESPECTABILITY TO HELPING CHANGE DAILY PRACTICES

Both George Kelly and Don Bannister, then, were concerned with creating a psychology of *human concern*, a psychology that dealt with issues that matter – not to professional academics with their own internal issues of 'market share' and the professional standing of their discipline among their peers to worry about – but to ordinary people trying to cope with their lives. Indeed, I think they would like to have seen psychology do more than this. I think they wanted it to contribute to, what seems to me, to be the great and still unresolved struggle of our time: that of ordinary people to gain control over their own lives and to get out from under schemes imposed on them externally by powerful elites, thus to build a genuinely participatory culture. For the promise of democracy remains unrealized as long as most of us are uninvolved in the making of our own culture.

In pursuit of these aims, then, let me continue in my re-examination of Kelly's writings: For in my 1970 paper, I was simply claiming that

*"Kelly did not sufficiently work through the powerful implications in his own position,*

*even though the comments littered about his writings were obviously informed by an intuitive appreciation of them” (Shotter, 1970, p.235).*

But I now feel that there are still undeveloped themes in Kelly’s work – particularly those to do with his emphasis on *the consequential nature of our actions in the social sphere* – that need our attention, particularly those to do with what later appeared under the umbrella of ‘social constructionism.’ Indeed, I think we can find in those early ideas many tendencies that – if they had been followed – would have led social constructionism (or at least some of its more linguistically oriented versions) away from some of the difficulties it has got itself into.

Now, Nightingale and Cromby (1999) have criticized many version of social constructionism for their failure to take *embodiment, materiality, and power* seriously. They thus recommend, to quote from the Conclusion section of their book, that,

*“emphasis be moved away from abstract epistemological considerations of discursive knowledge and re-centered around an analysis of the processes that underpin these knowledging activities” (p.222).*

I can almost agree with that, and I will in a moment say what, in terms of Kelly’s and Bannister’s whole approach, I think it entails. But it does not entail, I think, what they go on to claim follows from this concern, that,

*“in other words, constructionists must focus on the development of a ‘realist’ ontology of the generative processes of the life world as opposed to an epistemological relativism regarding the necessarily contestable outcomes of such processes” (p.222).*

While Ken Gergen, and David Nightingale and John Cromby, can spend their time, if they so wish, on internecine wars in academe, I think we must of necessity fry other fish. Our concerns must be, I think, not to do with metatheoretical contests over ontologies or epistemologies, or other debates over theoretical and conceptual abstractions. Our concern must be, I think, with *helping people to change*

*their everyday practices* – something that must be done, I think, in a way very different from how we have tried to do it in the past. Conducting academic debates about the theories we aim to put into practice is, as Kelly was well aware, not how actual social change comes about. It is *not* a matter of putting theories into practice, but of inserting or intertwining new reflective and critical practices into our already existing daily practices.

## BEHAVIOUR IS AN EXPERIMENT

Central to Kelly’s whole approach is the idea of *behaviour is an experiment*, “the scientist inquires by confronting himself with events of his own creation” (Kelly, 1970, p.269). But for Kelly, this is not just the academic scientist, but the everyday scientist in us all. Indeed, Kelly’s point is that

*“the men the psychologist seeks to understand are resorting to experimentation as much as he is. When a man does that he does not behave as he did last year,... nor does he treat his circumstances in the familiar ways that have been ‘reinforced’. He tries something different, just as a reasonably inventive psychologist does. He even does it without a Ph.D. or a state licence to innovate. Psychologists having observed only his past behaviour, may undertake to tell him what he can or cannot do. But he, recalcitrant chap that he is, will go ahead and try something anyway. When he succeeds he will turn to the psychologist and tell him what he can do – or what both of them can do!” (p.30)*

– this was the circumstance, of course, that Ken Gergen (1973) describes in his famous paper ‘Social psychology as history.’ Scientific psychologists, in being concerned always with actualities, see everything as if in a rear-view mirror. While actual people live, as Kelly (1969b) puts it, “*in anticipation!*” (p.88), where by this he means that a person lives,

*“not simply by what he anticipates – whether good or bad, etc... – but where he believes his choices will place him in respect to the remaining turns in the road” (p.88).*

Change in people's lives is not, then, for Kelly, something that is achieved by putting laws, rules, or regulations into actions, whether newly discovered or not. It is something that occurs, or that can sometimes occur, creatively and uniquely, for a first-time, in actual living encounters. Don Bannister and Fay Fransella (1971, p.82) use an example of Kelly's in their book, *Inquiring Man*. It is the example of Larry, a little boy who has difficulty in safely transcending the boundaries he has imposed on his own behaviour, which makes it next to impossible for him to relate to others in his imaginative play. But his teacher, a Mrs Upton, "intrigues" him in a conversation about pygmies using darts dipped in poison for hunting and defence. Later, Larry approaches Mrs Upton and jabs her in the leg with a stick. She plays 'dead'. Another child, Sally, approaches and starts to cry. Mrs Upton then notices Larry curled up on the floor beside her. "I wonder what you are doing," said Mrs Upton to Larry, the previously inveterate non-joiner. "I'm just lying here feeling sorry for you, Mrs Upton," he said.

What we have in Kelly's work – that makes it the work of a practitioner and not an academic; that accounts, perhaps, for its difficulty in gaining academic acceptance; that makes it quite different from theories proposed by academics – is its central focus, not on ideas, but on activities and practices.

## OUT OF THE HEAD AND INTO LIVING PRACTICES

For a start, unlike many other psychologists, Kelly (1969b) is uninterested in a 'theory of motives' for explaining why people act. Mainstream psychology seemed to see people

*"as something static in their nature state, [as] something upon which motion, life, and action have to be superimposed"* (p.80),

stimulated into motion by springs of action hidden within. Instead, Kelly (1969b) took it

*"for granted that movement was an essential property of his [man's] being, not something that had to be accounted for separately. We would be talking about a form of movement – man – not something that had to be moti-*

*vated"* (p.80).

He thus became

*"as skeptical of motive as direction-finding devices as... of them as action-producing forces. Over and over again, it appeared that our clients were making their choices, not in terms of the alternative we saw open to them, but in terms of the alternative they saw open to them"* (p.84).

*"If this is the picture of man as the psychologist envisions him – man, a form of movement; man, always quick enough, as long as he is alive, to stay astride the darting present – then we cannot expect to explain him either entirely in terms of the past or entirely in terms of the future. We can explain him psychologically, as a link between the two. Let us therefore formulate our basic postulate... in the light of this conjunctive vision of man. We can say it this way: A person's processes are psychologically channelized by the ways in which he anticipates events"* (p.86).

But for Kelly (1969a), anticipation also is *not an inner, hidden, mental state*. As we have seen, it is something that one lives, indeed, that one lives 'in'! If behaviour is seen as inquiry, behaviour *is* what behaviour asks:

*"Behavior is not the answer to the psychologist's question; it is the question. And, just as all questions are anticipatory, behaviour is anticipatory too"* (p.21).

Choosing, the making of a choice, is also *not an inner process*. Choosing occurs in action when, by realizing one possibility among a range of others – and one's actions are always being realized within a "sea of possibilities" – other possibilities are excluded. But, Kelly (1969a) continues,

*"the tricky part of all this.. is that replies seldom end up being acceptable conclusions. At best they are grounds for further inquiries"* (p.22),

each one of our actions is both a response to a pre-



vious action (of self or other), and the motive or instigation to yet further activity (on the part of self or other). For each new action creates a new range of possible next actions, and so on.

But even more than this, once we have moved into the realm of embodied, responsive-expressive activity, as Kelly (1969a) notes,

*“the very process of posing questions about himself with deeds rather than words transforms the questioner, even before he is aware of any rewarding answers”* (p.8).

This means, I take it, that, as G.H Mead (1934) put it, that

*“the mechanism of meaning is present in the social act before the emergence of consciousness or awareness of meaning occurs. The act or adjustive response of the second organism gives to the gesture of the first organism the meaning it has”* (pp 77-78)

– thus meaning is ‘out there’ too in people’s interactive behaviour, and not hidden inside their heads in the form of inner mental representations, as cognitivists will have it. Indeed, as Kelly (1969b) says at one point, after having discussed the practical uselessness of a whole swath of classical psychotherapeutic concepts,

*“for some time now we have [also] been quite happy to chuck all [the] notions of intellect, will, and emotion, and, so far, we cannot say we have experienced any serious loss”* (p.88).

In other words, all this emphasis by Kelly on behaviour as itself inquiring and anticipatory, reorients us – as Nightingale and Cromby (1999) recommend – away from a focus on mysterious events occurring inside the heads of individuals, and toward a focus on events occurring *out in their actual behaviour*, toward an analysis of the living processes, not that ‘underpin’ but *within which* these knowledging activities are ‘rooted.’ We need to study the actual processes of behavioural encounter from out of which ‘knowledging’ activities grow, emerge, or develop. And to do this, we need to focus on events occurring *between* people – on meetings, encoun-

ters, etc. – not on events occurring *within* them.

### **TIME AND TEMPORALLY UNFOLDING PROCESSES – UNIQUE, FIRST-TIME EVENTS**

Turning then toward such an analysis, what seems to me to be to be completely under-emphasized in commentary on Kelly’s work, is his focus on time, on events, on the sequential unfolding of behaviour, and of the importance in its unfolding of once occurring, or first-time, unique events.

He sets out his focus on unique first-time events as follows:

*“There are first-time occurrences in the history of mankind... A psychology that pins its anticipations on the repetition of events it calls ‘stimuli’ ...will find its accurate predictions confined to the trivialities of man’s least imaginative moments and to the automatisms of persons given in despair. It seems to me that most of what we know as ‘modern psychology’ is a monotonous tale told by men left behind by the quickening tempo of human undertakings”* (p.31).

*“It is by his actions that man learns what his capabilities are, and what he achieves is the most tangible psychological measure of his behaviour. It is a mistake to always assume that behaviour must be the psychologists’s dependent variable. For man, it is the independent variable”* (p.33).

As Wittgenstein (1953) notes, on having said that the meaning of our words is to be found in their use, that we must “let the use of words teach you their meaning” (p.220).

In other words, while we can study an already completed, dead structure from a distance, seeking to understand the pattern of past events that caused it to come into existence, we can enter into a relationship with a living form and, in making ourselves open to its movements, find ourselves spontaneously responding to it. Thus, instead of seeking to understand a dead form in terms of an objective, explanatory theory, we can come to understand a living form in quite a different way, to understand it in terms of its meaning for us. It is only from within

our involvements, our engaged meetings with other living things, that this kind of meaningful, responsive understanding becomes available to us (Shotter, 1993). This makes these two different kinds of understanding – one of an input-output, cause-and-effect, representational kind, the other of a responsive, conversational – very different indeed from each other.

One central difference between them is the privileging of space in the first, and time in the second. To return the classic explanatory scheme I attributed to Sutherland earlier – the idea of explaining a whole system's behaviour from a knowledge of the behaviour of its parts, plus knowledge of their organization – entails us being able to 'picture' its structure, if we are to anticipate, i.e., predict, its behaviour. And 'to get the picture', means that we can represent to ourselves all that belongs to it, and all that stands together in it, as a systematic whole. Hence, says Heidegger (1977), when we talk of a world picture in this sense, a *Weltanschauung*, "when understood essentially, does not mean a picture of the world, but the world conceived and grasped as a picture" (p.129), i.e., as a configuration of essentially independent entities that can be rearranged into new configurations.

But, as we have already seen, a living whole cannot be represented in this way, as just a rearrangeable spatial configuration, for among its other characteristics, it is always on the way to being other than what it already is. Rather than space, time is its primary dimension. If people, as a form of movement, live "astride the darting present," and we cannot expect to explain their behaviour

*"entirely in terms of the past or entirely in terms of the future,"* [then, says Kelly (1969b),] *"the terms of our whys should extend themselves in time rather than in space; they should be events rather than things; they should be mileposts rather than destinations"*(p.86).

In other words, instead of fixed and self-contained, *visible* objects, we must deal with developed, and still developing, events of an *invisible* kind (like music) that can be known to us, not from afar as third person outside *observers*, but as only as involved insiders able to *sense* them *from within* our involvement in such events.

## SOCIAL ECOLOGY: THE KIND OF WORLD WITHIN WHICH WE LIVE

We have, however, a terrible tendency to confuse these two forms of understanding, to confuse representational understandings in terms of an explanatory theory with the responsive understanding of the meanings of people's expressive, bodily behaviour. This comes about, suggests Kelly (1969b), due to

*"the subject-predicate form of our Indo-European languages [misleading] us to confound objects with what is said about them"* (p68).

But Kelly also sees us as falling victim in our everyday thought and talk to another philosophical tendency implicit in our language,

*"the highly questionable law of the excluded middle, a law accepted for the past twenty-four hundred years, though now under sporadic attack"* (p.69).

This (mis-) leads us into a

*"common pitfall of so-called objective thinking, the tendency to reify our constructs and to treat them as if they were not constructs at all, but actually all the things that they were originally only intended to construe"* (p.85).

Wittgenstein (1953, 1965) too has explored these questions. Often we ask ourselves such questions as: "What is the mind?", "What is the meaning of a word?" and so on, and then begin to search for a sign's representation as if it were another object *co-existing* along-side the sign, also seen as an object. Here, suggests Wittgenstein (1965):

*"We are up against one of the greatest sources of philosophical bewilderment: a substantive makes us look for a thing that corresponds to it"* (p.1)

– for there is power at work even in our question-asking that we are not always aware of.

How, then, shall we think about language in a Kellyan world?

“Western thinking, which has pretty much overrun the world recently,” [Kelly (1969b) correctly remarks,] “takes the very practical view that a word is beholden to the object it is used to describe. The object determines it. This is a moderate improvement over the so-called magical way of thinking which has it that the object is beholden to the word” (p.73).

“If, however, we build our sciences on a recognition of the psychological nature of thought,” [suggests Kelly (1969b),] “we take a third position – the word is beholden to the person who utters it, or, more properly speaking, to the construction system, that complex of personal constructs of which it is a part” (p.74).

This already, I think, goes some way beyond the debates surrounding the politics of representations in social constructionism. It is not enough, it seems to me, to overcome the power of the claim that it is the world that determines our representations of it, by simply reversing the direction of influence, to claim now that it is our representations that can determine the world. For it is not just our representations that are at issue, but our anticipations as expressed in our behaviour. But

“it is not enough,” [says Kelly (1969a),] “to argue that an enlightened psychology projects the behaviour of man against a background of his unrealized potentials. It must do more than that. And it does. It incorporates behaviour as the instrument of its own exploration” (pp.13-14).

So, although two scientists might not differ at all in doing calculations, making predictions, and in providing explanations when working with scientific formulae, differences could still occur between them in the connections and relations they sense as existing within the phenomena of their inquiries. But these would only show up, notes Hanson (1958) in the different directions their new inquiries would take, “in ‘frontier’ thinking – where the direction of new inquiry has regularly to be redetermined” (p.118).

What, then, must be the kind of world we live in,

what must our life’s circumstances be, if they are to afford (to use a Gibsonian term) us a number of different *construals* by different construct systems? And how should we go about our inquiries within it? Do we, as Nightingale and Cromby (1999) suggest, need to work out “a ‘realist’ ontology of the generative processes of the life world” (p.222) ahead of time, and have it on hand prior to all our inquiries into our circumstances if we are to conduct them appropriately? Or should we, as Kelly did with all the already existing classical psychotherapeutic concepts, make no attempt to pre-define its character, but simply go ahead and let people themselves – the people we as psychologists would like to understand better – reveal their ways of making sense to us? Crazy though it may seem to say this, this is exactly how I think we should proceed. For in fact, the world of our everyday lives is not as unknown and mysterious to us as it may at first light seem – after all, we all live in it and take actions in it everyday without being continually mistaken, disoriented, or totally confused. Elsewhere (Shotter, 1991), I have set out how Wittgenstein’s (1953) philosophical methods can reveal its (local) nature to us to an extent sufficient for all our practical needs. So I do not agree with Nightingale and Cromby (1999) that we need a “‘realist’ ontology.” All a person needs, Kelly (1969a) notes, is to

“assume a reality without having to believe that his life is run by it. He can assume that he, with other men, is a part of that reality, and may act accordingly” (p.25).

Indeed, for our practical purposes – if we can get out from under the “regimes of truth” (Foucault, 1970) imposed on us by our academic colleagues – all we need assume about the ‘reality’ around us, is that it is a vague, complex, multi-dimensional, intertwined mixture of indefinitely many different kinds of influences. It is thus next to impossible to give it any fixed or finalized characterization: it has neither a fully orderly nor a fully disorderly structure, neither a completely stable nor an easily changed organization, neither a fully subjective nor fully objective character. It is also non-locatable - for it is ‘spread out’ among all those participating in it. It is neither ‘inside’ people, but nor are they ‘outside’ them; it is located in that space where inside and outside are one. Nor is there a separate before and

after (Bergson) within it, neither an agent nor an effect, but only a meaningful whole which cannot be divided into separable parts. Indeed, it is precisely its lack of any pre-determined order, and thus its openness to being specified or determined by those involved in it, in practice - while usually remaining quite unaware of having done so - that is its central defining feature.

Kelly (1969b) captures this complexity and openness thus in listing these three features of people:

*“(1) man, from a psychological viewpoint, makes himself a bridge between past and future in a manner that is unique among creatures, (2) that, again from a psychological viewpoint, his processes are channelized by the personal constructs he erects in order to perform this function, and finally, (3) that he organizes his constructs into a personal system that is no more conscious than it is unconscious and no more intellectual than it is emotional” (p.88).*

If, as Kelly suggests, we are to understand a person's behaviour “against a background of his unrealized potentials,” then that background has, I now want to suggest, an *ecological* structure to it. In other words, it exists as a realm of

*“evolving, dynamic system of ordered activities, all existing (when active) only in mutual relation to one another - not just in spite of one another, but also because of one another, i.e. owing their character and their existence to their differences,”*

as I put it in 1984 (Shotter, 1984, p.217).

*“But,” [I then continued,] “the conflicting tendencies produced by living processes, operating just as much off as for one another, would be prone to disrupt each other unless assigned their own regions or moments of expression, and the boundaries between them maintained (M. Douglas, 1966). Within such bounded regions and moments, there can be social orders, but it is a society's ecology which provides the more large-scale context for their operation” (p.217).*

## **SOCIAL JUSTICE: AN ALTERNATIVE TO THE WORLD ‘AS A PICTURE’**

It is, perhaps, a strange way to set out a ‘realist’ ontology, to say that the nature of our reality is vague and open to characterization by those of us within it, but not just as we please, but only in terms of the social constructions it will *afford* or *permit* us to operate effectively in relation to *all* the considerations participants might bring to their fashioning. This leads me on to the final comments I wanted to make about social justice, about socialism even, and why those of us who feel we live in an interdependent, participatory relation with everything surrounding us, we found it so difficult recently to argue against those who feel the rights and freedoms of the individual person are paramount and all that matters is the placing of everything within a costs-benefits hierarchy.

As Kelly ruefully noted long ago, Western, objective forms of thought have “pretty much overrun the world recently.” Objective talk, “the age of the world picture” (Heidegger, 1977), for the moment, still prevails, indeed, it seems to me to have, in Habermas's (1987) words, “colonized the life-world.” It has helped us become, in Descartes's (1968) words, “masters and possessors of Nature” (p.78). But in our human affairs, it has been disastrous. There are countless ways in which a critique of it might be mounted, but let me just point to one crucial feature of our social live together that it excludes: It excludes our spontaneous responsiveness to events occurring around us, and in so doing, it excludes not only our creativity, but also the opportunity to express our inner lives to each other. Now, as Kelly noted, because these kinds of events take place in time and have to do with possibilities and not actualities, they cannot make any appearance in a solely spatialized world, “conceived and grasped as a picture.” And this, I think, is why we have such a hard time in the current climate of ‘rational choice theory,’ of saying anything of any relevance to social justice, and why socialism – as some of us GOFS (or *Good Old Fashioned Socialists*) conceive it – is an impossible project at the moment. For everything of importance in the sphere of personal meaning is *invisible*.

Is there an alternative to all of this? I think that there is. As I said above, it involves ceasing our metatheoretical debates in academe about ontologies

and epistemologies, and turning directly to activities to do with *changing people's practices*. Does Kelly (1969b) provide us with any clues as to how to go about this? Yes, I think he does. In a discussion of psychotherapy, he suggests:

*“Instead of assuming, on the one hand, that the therapist is obliged to bring the client's thinking into line, or, on the other, that the client will mysteriously bring his own thinking into line once he has been given the proper setting, we can take the stand that client and therapist are conjoining in an exploratory venture. The therapist assumes neither the position of judge nor that of sympathetic bystander. He is sincere about this; he is willing to learn along with his client. He is the client's fellow researcher who first seeks to understand, then to examine, and finally to assist the client in subjecting alternatives to experimental test and revision”* (p.82).

Let me repeat that last phrase, the therapist becomes “the client's fellow researcher,” because that seems to me to be the essence of the democratic move. This is the move – the putting of a critical and reflecting practices into our practices – in which we treat others “without rank” (Bakhtin, 1986), as wholly on a par with ourselves. And, to return to what Miller Mair said about Don Bannister's retelling of schizophrenic behaviour – as “a tale of tactics in living rather than of dumb necessity” – it is to turn to seeing (at least some aspects of) psychotic behaviour as a person's own creative attempt to make the best sense they can of a chaotic circumstance, rather than it being due to inner, hidden circumstances awaiting discovery by an expert.

### THE DEMOTION OF THE EXPERT TO A CO-PARTICIPANT

This ‘demotion’ of the expert from their position of authority in our society is, I think, something that both Don Bannister and George Kelly revelled in. For, what we have in the collaborative enterprises they favoured, is not the attempt by an expert researcher to establish a prior body of theoretical laws or principles, which it is then the task of ordinary people to ‘apply’ (if that is in fact at all possi-

ble, which I doubt). Instead, the relevant research is participatory, conducted by those involved in the circumstance that needs the refinement and elaboration the research can offer. This switch in the ‘positioning’ of the so-called expert – from trying to gain a representative understanding of those others, to being an expressive- responsive participant in with them – is crucial.

In our modern scientific society, in which we long for some orientation as to what to do for the best in our lives, for some sources from which we can draw some wisdom upon which we can rely, the expert has been invested with an exaggerated authority. We expect our experts to provide us with substitutes for past moral and political orientations, orientations that were drawn from authorities we – quite rightly in my opinion – repudiated. From where, instead, might we draw that authority? Well, we can find it in the local ‘public spheres’ we construct between ourselves in all our meetings, in all our “behavioral encounters,” as Kelly would call them. But to elaborate on how this is to be implemented would take yet more time than I have – indeed, my time is now up.

So, here we are, 30 years on, still talking about Don Bannister and George Kelly (born 1905), and still exploring the meaning for us now of what they said all that time ago. This, I think, is what it is in practice to celebrate a person's life and their work. And I felt honoured to have been asked to participate in the conference in which I gave this paper to do this.

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John Shotter is Emeritus Professor of Communication in the Department of Communication, University of New Hampshire and is now a tutor on the Professional Doctorate program at the KCC Foundation in London. His long term interest has been, and still is, in the social conditions conducive to people having a voice in determining the conditions of their own lives, in the development of participatory democracies and civil societies. He is the author of *Social Accountability and Selfhood* (Blackwell, 1984), *Cultural Politics of Everyday Life: Social Constructionism, Rhetoric, and Knowing of the Third Kind* (Open University, 1993), and *Conversational Realities: the Construction of Life through Language* (Sage, 1993). He has a new book in press: *Getting It: Witness-Thinking and the Dialogical... In Practice* (Hampton Press).

E-Mail: [jds@hypatia.unh.edu](mailto:jds@hypatia.unh.edu)

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*John Shotter*

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