Miller Mair – The caring radical

1937 –2011

Miller Mair was one of the five or so important psychologists in the UK who promoted PCP when I first came to it in the late sixties, the others being Don Bannister, Fay Fransella, Phillida Salmon and Tom Ravenette. My first real awareness of Miller's work was reading the excellent series of papers in the British Journal of Medical Psychology in 1970, based on a symposium he had organised in London two years earlier, papers which should be more accessible today than they are.

In 1968, Don and Miller's book, the *Evaluation of Personal Constructs* had appeared. It was for many years the standard textbook on Repertory Grid methodology, and I think responsible for the approach gaining credence not just within psychology but beyond to other disciplines and stimulating a large amount of research over the next couple of decades in many fields of human affairs. But Miller was already applying his radical eye within PCP itself and was becoming impatient with the concentration on technology and methodology that grid research could generate, as opposed to understanding the client's personal experiences, struggles and predicament. The grid became for him like "a great, simple-minded giant, unable to string two words together – you ended with only statistical rather than linguistic connections" (Mair, 2003).

Of his many contributions, three papers stand out to me as particularly important and lasting developments. When I was training in Nottingham with David Smail, David invited his close friend Miller to come and speak and Miller read to us his paper "Metaphors for Living", which he went on to present at the Nebraska Symposium on Motivation in 1975. It was spellbinding. Miller's scholarship really came to the fore. He had spent a year studying in the Netherlands and the breadth of his reading and knowledge was impressive. As well as discussing metaphor in comprehensive detail, he was developing a radical critique of the discipline of psychology itself and the narrow view of science that it was adher-

ing to. Instead he argued for a multi- or trans-disciplinary study in which the fields of philosophy, literature, religion, poetry and the arts would all become part of the psychologist's concern and knowledge. Re-reading this paper in preparing for this article made me realise just how important it was for my own development.

At one point he compares how he feels about constructs with that of metaphor (see figure 1). But Miller weaves his findings from the metaphor literature together with PCP producing a much enriched perspective on construing and the nature of man. I cannot recommend highly enough this paper. It should still be studied today though written over 35 years ago.

Construct	Metaphor
Linear	Aura of Association
Directional	Flowing, Colourful
Geometric axis	Sinuous, Sensuous
Hard	Surprising
Straight	Ambiguous
Angular	Inviting
Intellectual	Warm, Rich
Digital	Protean

Figure 1: *Miller's description of construct and metaphor (1976, p 264)*

The following year, Miller presented his paper, "The Community of Self". This idea is itself a major working metaphor. That we can personify the different construings or positions that we take up elaborates Constructive Alternativism and is to Miller preferable to the rather abstract notion of the 'construct system'. In this view, constructs and viewpoints become alive, capable of talking to each other, arguing and collaborating. At a theoretical level this view presages the dialogical and positional approaches that have since become so popular but it is also a practical therapeutic tool that is often very useful. It en-

courages the client to consider the various 'selves' or positions that they can take up, enriching their understanding and ability to communicate and transcend their dilemmas. His contribution is important in de-pathologising the idea that we have several 'voices' or people in our heads, as it were, and that these figures can have conversations with each other in resolving difficulties and decisions. Shortly, we will look at a lovely example of the application of this metaphor which Miller applied to himself as he struggled to deal with a difficult situation.

A decade later, Miller opened the first two issues of the *International Journal of Personal Construct Psychology* with two articles about "Psychology as Story-telling". This is Miller at his radical and challenging best. Not only again did he anticipate in great detail another approach subsequently to gain popularity – Narrative Therapy – but offers further thoughts on how to reconfigure the very discipline of psychology itself. We cannot understand a person's experiences and difficulties without putting them in the context of the person's story. To use a useful distinction offered by the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1916) our construing is not just *synchronic* – an understanding of how a situation hangs together at a single point in time, but *diachronic* – how events are seen as forming a pattern over periods of time, the distinction between a snapshot and a movie. This sounds very abstract but is immediately useful. I remember so many times sitting in psychiatric case conferences, hearing details about a person's mental state, behaviour and symptoms and the medication that would immediately be suggested to address these. I would ask, "What has been happening in this person's life and how are they anticipating events unfolding in the future?" Of course we would then begin to hear a story that put an entirely different perspective on the difficulties that had been described.

But Miller goes further than this. He says that we live and inhabit our stories and stories live and inhabit us. Miller is here elaborating a discursive and social constructionist dimension whilst maintaining a position compatible with PCP and its emphasis on the experiencing and acting person. We inhabit the great stories of our culture. Before Foucault was made popular in the narrative tradition, Miller spoke about how we are shaped by discourses; every telling is a political act, a fight for survival or more insidiously a subjugating and limiting force. Psychology carries a powerful and disempowering master myth. In the scientific psychology which we have been offered, we have been trained out of telling stories. Psychology he says needs restructuring, to be made into a discipline of discourse rather than as a natural or social science.

He saw it as important that psychologists should be trained to tell stories. Miller put this into practice in his own department getting the therapists to tell the story of their personal encounter with their clients.

A radically new and much broader psychological discipline is being articulated. In this way, as he says in the chapter in the *International Handbook of PCP* (Mair, 2003), psychology will be put back in touch with its deep roots in philosophy, religion, art and literature. He talks here of how he *hated* so much of what he was taught by his psychology tutors, even more strongly than Don Bannister had done. "My hatred was aesthetic. It was to do with beauty. I found almost everything in scientific psychology to be ugly, hard edged, uncomfortable, unconvincing".

Miller himself shared a moving example applied to himself the last time I heard him speak at the Belgrade Conference of the *European Personal Construct Association (EPCA)* last year in 2010 and reproduced in the recent volume, *PCP in an Accelerating World* (Stojnov, Džinović, Pavlović, & Frances, 2011). He described how he had to appear as an external interviewer in what would be a tense and competitive atmosphere in order to fill a senior post in a psychological therapies department and make a recommendation that would have profound implications for the future of the service. To help himself in this situation he considered the various competing selves in his own repertory.

I have taken the liberty of entering text from Miller's story into what I call a *Qualitative Grid* (Procter, 2002, Procter & Procter, 2008) which allows both the structure and the narrative sequence both to be portrayed (see figure 2).

20

He describes the several voices in his mind, the anxious one, the rebellious teenager, the reformer, Mr Fair-minded and Mr Let's-get-this-done-with.

We will go through the grid row by row from 1 to 4.

1. *Anxious was insecure, uneasy, nervous. He was feeling inadequate to the task that was facing us, even a bit overawed... He was tight and closed.*

   The Rebel Teenager was immediately there to be heard, loud and clear. He wanted to bash the establishment bastard. 'Make him squirm or let him feel he is being successful and then dump him!' was his vigorous advice.

   The Reformer wanted to help towards enabling fairer and more open ways to live in and develop psychotherapy. His words of advice were 'Be faithful to your values'.

   Mr Fair Minded wanted to see and value the strengths of each candidate... he also wanted to attend to the needs of the world and of the discipline of psychotherapy in a broader way than was often done.

   Mr Let's Get This Done With said 'Let it go, make the best choice you can and then leave those involved to get on with it. You've done what you can, but they (the 'establishment') will always win in the end, so let it be' (from Mair, 2011, p16)

Next, he gives us his reaction to each of these characters. The figures in the cells show the order in which Miller tells the story.

2. *I was shocked by the forceful presence, the outspoken honesty, of The Rebel Teenager. I couldn't help but laugh at his 'no nonsense' approach.*

   I was grateful to Mr Fair Minded, for the balance which he brought and the sense of being so trustworthy.

   The Reformer reminded me, in this public and politically charged situation, of the importance of being true to your values and *aspirations if you possibly can.*

   Mr Let's Get This Done With voiced a familiar, already defeated, position of the underdog but I valued the fact that he stated that so clearly.

   Anxious had so obviously been present, feeling that he was being left with the whole responsibility in his lap, as the others initially remained in the shadows, mostly out of reach. (op cit, pp 16 – 17)

He briefly recapitulates:

3. *I got a strong sense of the powerful energy of The Rebel Teenager, the quiet passion of The Reformer, the safe pair of hands of Mr Fair Minded, and the worldly practicality of Mr Let's Get This Done With. All these energies seemed useful and had their relevance.*

He decides to "appoint" Mr Fair-minded as chair of his team of selves:

4. *I immediately asked Mr Fair Minded to be the Chairperson of my 'team' for this occasion. I asked him to draw on the vigorous anger of the Teenage Rebel, if that was needed, and on the vision of the Reformer too. I wanted us all to recognise that it was, as Mr Let's Get This Done With was saying, a job to be done. We would do it as well as we could and then let it go. Anxious, by now much relieved, was also a valuable member of the team since he is always so sensitively open to the undercurrents and hidden threats in situations like this. He could also be helpful to Mr Fair Minded.* (op cit p 17)

Miller concludes by recounting how much this contributed to the panel making a knife-edge decision, by him not just making a logical or intellectual contribution but by combining head and heart. He said that it seemed to help the whole interview panel to make a wider, more balanced and unanimous choice.

		MILLER'S SELVES				
		Anxious	**Rebel Teenager**	**Reformer**	**Mr Fair-minded**	**Mr Let's get this done with**
EPISODES	**Miller's description**	Insecure nervous overawed tight and closed	Loud and Clear 'Make establishment candidate squirm'	Fair and Open 'Be faithful to your values	'See each one's strengths' 'Think of the needs of the world and of psychotherapy'	'Make best choice you can' 'Leave them to decide, establishment always wins'
	Miller's reaction to each	5 feels the whole responsibility, others in the shadows	1 Shocked by his forceful presence Had to laugh at his no-nonsense approach	3 Reminded me to be true to my values and aspirations	2 Grateful for the balance he brought Trustworthy	4 Defeated, Underdog, but glad he speaks so clearly
	Miller re-caps		1 Powerful Energy	2 Quiet Passion	3 Safe pair of hands	4 Worldly Practicality
	Asked Mr Fair-minded to be Chair and to:	5 Much relieved: 'Note his sensitive openness to undercurrents and threats: Helpful to you'	2 'Draw on his vigorous anger'	3 'Draw on his vision'	1 'Be chairperson to my team	4 'We'll all do as well as we can and then let go'

Figure 2: *Qualitative Grid: The Community of Miller's Selves as Job Interviewer*

I think this is very profound and also touching in giving us a window into Miller's own world and experience and the richness of the construing he generates. I got the feeling, as I reflect on this wonderful account, that we are glimpsing an additional Kellian, or perhaps I should say, Mairian cycle of construing, as he musters the selves, they interact, converse and fall into a fresh con-

22

figuration and coherence, empowering Miller to move into the unknown situation with calm and renewed authority, control and passion.

Miller's body lay in state in the temple at Samye Ling, the first Tibetan Community founded in the West and where he and his wife Ingrid had first met 20 years previously. This was a great honour, especially when, as far as I know, Miller was never attached to any particular religious order himself. But the Tibetan Buddhist tradition of bringing to mind and establishing personifications of various qualities such as Compassion, Wisdom, Cutting through Obscuration and Equanimity would fit in well with Miller's psychology, not to mention his personal qualities as a man.

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Harry Procter, Taunton, Somerset (UK)

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Correspondence address:
harryprocter20@gmail.com

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