

Peggy Dalton

1932 – 2012

Peggy Dalton (née Butt) made an outstanding contribution to PCP (Personal Construct Psychology) through the accessibility of her writing, her commitment to practice-based teaching and supervision, and her groundbreaking work on the psychological aspects of stammering in partnership with Fay Fransella.

Peggy's early career was in the theatre. She grew up in London and her sister Pat tells of childhood 'concerts' performed on the pavement for friends and passers-by. Peggy's interest in drama and literature was encouraged at grammar school and her academic achievements led to the offer of an exhibition at St Hilda's College Oxford, where she studied English and joined the Oxford University Dramatic Society, playing Imogen in Shakespeare's *Cymbeline* in her final year.

On graduation, Peggy began her career in repertory theatre, travelling around the country performing in a wide variety of classic and contemporary work. Her success led to the prestigious Old Vic Repertory Company (soon to become Laurence Olivier's National Theatre) where she played alongside many of our greatest actors and joined the company's celebrated tour to America in 1958, making her probably the only personal construct psychologist to have played opening nights on Broadway. The leading roles for younger women that season were played by Judi Dench, and in addition to a variety of roles in the ensemble, Peggy became her understudy. She would entertain us years later with the tale of her youthful frustration at Judi's exceptionally robust health, but her time for leading roles did come and a deep understanding of dramatic character permeated her work throughout her life. She also spent some time with the BBC repertory company performing in radio dramas and, to the delight of friends, occasional roles in 'Mrs Dale's Diary', a leading radio soap of the time. European PCP colleagues often commented on her beautiful 'BBC voice'.

Her interest in speech and language, combined with the uncertainty of theatrical life, prompted a career move, and Peggy qualified as a speech & language therapist in 1966. Her interest in fluency and her commitment to working collaboratively with colleagues and clients contributed over time to the creation of the British Stammering Association which continues to thrive, 'run by people who stammer, for people who stammer'. She also offered a drama group at the City Lit in London and it was there that she met her husband, Bill. They married in 1970.

Through speech therapy she met Fay Fransella, and of course Personal Construct Psychology, and she joined the first cohort of diploma students at the newly created Centre for PCP in London. Later, Peggy wrote about the experience of coming out of speech therapy training "expert in the counting of stuttered-syllables-per-minute and able to tell an afferent from an efferent aphasic a mile off", describing a period when the introduction of new equipment was leading to ever more complex and technical assessments (Dalton, 1988). Psychology had been part of the syllabus, but mainly as "rats in mazes and cats in boxes", plus the usual speedy world tour of the great names. "I knew that what I had learned was not enough. I recognised that occasionally a deeper understanding of the person I was working with seemed to enhance communication between us and lead us to be more creative...there was a sense of development from the experience on both sides. These occasions were too rare however and I had no idea what made them special." It was PCP which gave Peggy the clues she was looking for: "It had something to do with being able to subsume the other person's approach to life to such an extent that this knowledge, rather than my training, became the governing factor in what we did together". A paper (Dalton, 2007) written for Fay's 80th birthday celebrations describes Peggy's introduction to PCP at the Centre, and, as well as working together on the psychological

construction of speech and language difficulties, Fay and Peggy collaborated on a practice guide for counsellors: “Personal Construct Counselling in Action” (Fransella & Dalton, 1990).

A fellow student at the Centre, Gavin Dunnett, became Peggy’s great friend and ‘accomplice’, and together they created one of the most accessible and widely-read introductions to PCP: ‘A Psychology for Living’ (Dalton & Dunnett, 2005²). The subtitle – ‘PCP for professionals and clients’ – reflects their shared commitment to collaboration, and their determination to practice according to George Kelly’s model as co-travellers with their clients, rather than experts. Gavin’s early death in 1991 was a great blow, and the writing of a second edition without him was a huge and sometimes lonely task. As a writer, Peggy’s stance was that of a practitioner, illustrating her points with case studies and cameos of her work with clients, including her own experiences and anxieties, and writing in a style of friendly inclusion, validating readers as co-explorers.

In 1983, her husband Bill experienced an illness which led to permanent brain damage and severe memory loss, a shocking and life-changing experience. This was the point at which PCP shifted from being the way Peggy worked to the way that she lived. ‘A Psychology for Living’ includes a short section about how her chosen theory helped her to make sense of Bill’s struggles to construe what was happening and to navigate their radically changed role relationships. She would sometimes say, very sincerely, that ‘PCP saved my life’, and the experience gave her the deepest possible understanding of the challenges of change at core level. Bill continued to play an active role in Peggy’s working world, answering the door and welcoming callers, and there were many of them as Peggy was a Director and Administrator for the PCP Association as well as seeing psychotherapy clients, supervising students, and leading a supervision group. This combination of experiences led in 1994 to the publication of her book ‘Counselling People with Communication Problems’ (Dalton, 1994).

Peggy had herself been living with rheumatoid arthritis for some years, and had made many

necessary changes in daily living. She construed these transitions with her typical mix of curiosity and humour, writing several short pieces for the newsletter of the PCP Association. The need for a wheelchair was a major change. Peggy wrote: “I looked to establishing pleasant if passing relationships with small children and babies. Not on your life. They stare at me coldly, then close their eyes and turn away. Instead I find I am bum-height. I am thinking of a PhD along the lines of ‘Posteriors of the New Millennium: gender, class and ethnicity’.” Sharing her anxieties and reflexive questions was always in the foreground, and that piece of writing entitled ‘Reconstructing the Chiswick High Road’ ends with “The reconstruction of that much-loved thoroughfare is of the second order: I simply look at it from a different and lower angle. It’s the reconstruction of myself, however that has really begun – goodness knows how I’ll end up.” (Dalton, 2006)

Soon after the great sadness of Bill’s death in 2006, Peggy’s rheumatic ‘flare-ups’ increased in frequency and intensity, making teaching and writing more of a challenge. She continued to inspire and astonish her friends and colleagues with her resourcefulness and capacity for taking on unwelcome changes and working with them creatively. Her lifelong interest in drama and literature was still in the foreground as she experimented with creative writing, and prepared her last published paper for *Personal Construct Theory and Practice* (Dalton, 2009). She would still lead a workshop occasionally, and, as her caseload diminished, she built her material around characters from literature using a cast from Dickens, Jane Austen and her beloved Shakespeare to prompt questions about change and reconstruction, family and friendship, love, ageing and death.

Peggy managed the relentless constriction of her activities with considerable flair, combining a determined independence with constant ingenuity, improvising creative alterations to her living space and advertising for and interviewing her own carers. Her lively curiosity and interest in the work and lives of others never diminished, her usual response to the opening ‘how are you?’ being “oh I’ve been better, but tell me, how are

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you, and what's been happening?" Her connection to world events and particularly arts and culture were maintained by her constant connection to BBC Radio 4 and the World Service, and there was little that would not capture her lively interest. A sudden deterioration in her condition led to her final brief hospital admission. She had never fully retired, and her supervision group were awaiting her return from hospital to set new dates. She died on 8th November 2012.

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