

Dennis Neil Hinkle

1935 – 2014

Dennis (Denny) Hinkle lived a complex and varied life, one could even say several lives. Most of you reading this obituary know about the Hinkle who was a student of George Kelly and the writer of a PhD thesis that was full of interesting, innovative ideas and methodologies (Hinkle, 1965). These creative approaches have had major impacts on many professional practices, whether therapeutic, organizational or research oriented, as well as, ultimately, clients of those professionals.

However his personal life was a very different matter. *Burning Point* (Hinkle, 2000) is an account of his tortuous struggle between conflicting forces: within himself; between himself, cared-for others and the broader social forces of the McCarthy era and beyond. His autobiography presents the devastating impact of conflicted identity development, especially concerning sexuality. More broadly Denny saw it as a 'universal story of the tension between the individual and society, freedom and conformity' (personal communication by email). His autobiography has been a text in over 90 American university courses (Hinkle, 2009), recommended by therapists and influential for numbers of individuals struggling to find direction.

Following the publication of *Burning Point* I made contact with Denny and encouraged him to write more about his time as a student of Kelly for the Australasian Personal Construct Newsletter. That has been reprinted for wider circulation (Hinkle, 2007). He had wanted to publish the last chapter of his thesis called *A brief autobiography of the present research*. An elaborated version about the evolution of the thesis was included in Butler's edited book on reflexivity (Hinkle, 2009). This obituary relies heavily on these sources as well as my email correspondence with Denny over a 12 year period and conversations during the few days I was privileged to stay with him and his partner at their home in Placerville, California in 2011.

Born in 1935, Denny was the eldest child, with a younger sister, Judy. His father held a managerial position in a large company and the family moved frequently around the USA (Texas, Florida, Missouri, Indiana and Ohio during Denny's schooling), making it difficult to maintain relationships. His parents' marriage was not particularly happy. His father was strict and conventional in both his expectations of his wife, as well as his children. Denny's mother had relinquished her creative and lively self to one who adopted the philosophy that "This, too, shall pass", an approach she encouraged her son to live by. His father enforced rigid conformity and encouraged his son in 'male' pursuits, such as shooting.

Growing up in the 1940's and 1950's in conservative communities, many struggled to accommodate their own nature and values with the constraints, often legally enforced, of the McCarthy era in American society. Denny just wanted to fit in, to be liked, to be 'normal'. But, as he began to explore sexuality he discovered that he found relationships with those most like himself exhilarating and affirming. He understood other males easily, felt empathy and oneness with them, more so than his relationships with females. But this conflict between 'normality' and 'perversion' (as it was seen in a culture in which homosexual acts were punishable by imprisonment) meant he lived often in a 'cage of fear' (Hinkle, 2000, p. 138). He didn't want to be miserable, despised by others. He failed at an attempted suicide. The family relocations were opportunities to change his life as he struggled to be what others expected, to be a 'normal' person - "I had to be normal, or I couldn't imagine living" (Hinkle, 2000, p. 147).

Counselling sessions were recommended, as Denny's deep unhappiness was evident to others, even if its origins were kept hidden. Batteries of tests were administered. Denny, a voracious reader, researched the Rorschach Inkblot test

prior to doing it. He decided he would try to indicate his distress and sexual conflicts indirectly, not admitting to anything overtly that would place him in legal jeopardy. Five hours later his counselor was exhausted as Denny poured out his conflicted emotions by allusion and symbolism. His parents were summoned and told of concerns that he might need hospitalization as a paranoid schizophrenic. No one thought to ask Denny himself why he had responded to the Rorschach in the way he had.

Denny failed his studies at Purdue University, and also Miami University, Ohio – he “... simply couldn’t concentrate on academics while ... (he) bobbed helplessly in a surging sea of emotions beyond ... (his) comprehension” (p. 172). But he read widely in philosophy and psychology, with the aim, ultimately, to become a clinical psychologist. He had other interests, having passed the exams for a commercial radio license and an amateur radio operator license aged 15, and had been introduced to diving and camping, activities he continued to enjoy throughout most of his life. Eventually he found a therapist whom he felt he could trust. He told him of his conflicts and the therapist convinced him that this was a normal phase that many males go through. It was just that, for some reason, his sexual development was arrested and he had not moved on to the next, heterosexual stage. To achieve the desired developmental progression he had to try harder, and this Denny did for many years.

In the mid-50’s Denny enlisted for two years in the military. After basic training Denny, with a little help from a \$20 note to the clerk who allocated the placements, was assigned to the medical training corps. He worked at a hospital attached to the Army chemical centre, near Baltimore, where chemical weapons were developed and tested. There he began a relationship with a woman older than himself, but, in 1957 when he was admitted to Ohio State University, Columbus at the end of his military commitment, aged 22, he went alone.

At Columbus Denny met two of the most important people in his life. The first was Joyce, whom he married in September 1959, 90 days after they met. Denny describes her as open,

warm and kindly receptive, with interests in academic pursuits and science. She was the kindest person he had known and all he “looked for in a woman and more” (p. 217). Before they married he told her about his previous sexual history and his belief that he had passed through the homosexual exploratory stage. Joyce was his best friend and their marriage was “better than most” (p. 222).

The second person was George Kelly. At the end of Denny’s undergraduate degree he won a scholarship to complete his postgraduate clinical studies in psychology at Ohio, arguably the best clinical program in the country at that time. Kelly had been appointed as its head in 1946 and became Denny’s ‘spiritual father’ (p. 223), his ‘good father’ (p. 224), his mentor for the 5-year doctorate haul. Kelly advised him to choose a topic about which he was passionate and Denny opted for change. Why do people change? Why don’t people change? He had wrestled with the problems of his own desire to change throughout his life. On reflection he realized that his reluctance to change primarily had to do either with the many things that would happen as a consequence of that change – the implications – or with the consequences that were unimaginable, and hence producing anxiety or worse. This led him to elaborate and formalize a theory of construct implications and to develop a number of techniques to explore the hypotheses that followed (Fransella, 2010).

It was the techniques he was most proud of. The best known is what we now term ‘laddering’ which is a powerful way of structuring conversations and interviews to elucidate latent meaning (see Walker & Crittenden, 2012 for a recent overview). He also developed two forms of grid that explored the inter-relationships between constructs, supplementing the repertory grid approach that focused on relationships between construct and elements. One, the Implications grid, examined the extent to which constructs implied other constructs. The other, a Resistance to change grid, focused on which constructs individuals would be willing to change on more readily and which not (Fransella, Bell & Bannister, 2004 give further details).

Kelly accepted the prestigious Riklis Chair of Behavioral Science at Brandeis university, near Boston in 1965, with Denny receiving a post-doctoral fellowship. Joyce and he moved to Massachusetts and their first son was born. However Kelly's health was not good. He had survived a heart attack in 1959, but by 1966 was again experiencing angina pain. Early in 1967 his gall bladder collapsed and, following an operation, his condition deteriorated and he died.

Later that year the Hinkles moved to Boulder, Colorado, where Denny had gained a faculty position in the clinical psychology program, despite ambivalence about being a university professor. His thesis had attracted the attention of Don Bannister and others in the UK and he was invited to address the British Psychological Society. He told me that he spent an evening with Fay Fransella, who was struggling in the early stages of his doctoral thesis, discussing how she might apply his work to explore the resistance to change of those who stuttered¹.

Denny felt the trip changed his life. His day-long visit to Westminster Abbey was particularly momentous, bringing home the contrast between that spiritual, holy place and the 'spiritual wasteland of my country and self' (Hinkle, 2000, p. 227). He saw himself as 'a man of constant sorrow and I don't know why...dying of separation and loneliness' (p. 227). As he subsequently reflected, he was 'damn good at depressive thinking' (p. 228). Initially he considered this sorrow as a reflection of the social turmoil of the 60's and his deep unease with the pressure to publish research, any research, in academia. The Hinkles moved to Miami University, Ohio, where the pressure to publish was not as great. Before they left their third son was born and Joyce completed her Masters in counseling psychology.

It was 16 years since Denny had had a homosexual relationship, but despite his love for Joyce and the family, he found himself in love with a married man. Eventually they went on a camping trip together and, after a night of passion, he felt

he had become 'real and whole and alive again' (p. 242). The relationship continued until Denny's lover, after seeing a psychiatrist, broke it off. Denny spiraled into deep depression, began drinking heavily and had terrible nightmares. Finally he recognized that he was not grieving for the loss of his relationship, but for himself - 'I am lonely beyond endurance' (p. 250).

Eventually Joyce told him that he would not be happy without loving a man, and that she would rather he be gay than dead. She invited a 26 year old graduate student, Gary Bushweiler, who had been working with her at the Counseling Center, to dinner and they continued to meet socially. With Joyce's blessing, this became a loving, sexual relationship.

The family and Gary moved to California, living together. After some time Joyce and Denny divorced, with two of the children electing to live with Denny and Gary full time and the other child dividing his time between his parents. Joyce re-married and Denny and Gary lived together until Denny's death in January, 2014, marrying when California legalized gay marriage. Denny went into private practice in Santa Clara, California, where he often saw distressed young people whom he felt he could help as he understood what it was like to stand in their shoes. He just had to remember.

Denny and Gary traveled widely, often diving or camping. They built a house in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada mountains, in Placerville, near Sacramento, where they retired. Judy, Denny's sister, lives nearby. They entertained friends and their children and grandchildren, studied university subjects via the internet, read widely, walked and played with their dogs. Denny kept up his amateur radio while Gary returned to playing the piano.

Denny kept in regular correspondence with friends by email. Most weeks he sent me (and others) what I considered to be a present, something to make my life richer, more enjoyable, if only for a moment. Sometimes it was a Buddhist saying, sometimes a beautiful photograph of a wilderness area or an animal, a clever joke or an uplifting political or human rights speech. I have kept his gifts to be enjoyed again and again.

¹ This is at variance with Fransella's (2010) account. She wrote that she couldn't remember when she first met Denny, but that it was after she completed her PhD. However the dates of Denny's trip do not seem to support her version.

Denny had been in ill health for some time. He died as he wanted, in Gary's arms (as they had once promised each other) and with others he loved - Judy, two of his sons and an 'adopted' sister, Bonnie.

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