

ABOUT CONSTRUCT PSYCHOLOGY

Cintra Whitehead

Ocala, Florida, USA

Readers who are familiar with George Kelly's theory of personality and the theory's development since Kelly's untimely death may wish to skip over this article, but readers who are unfamiliar with the theory will find this article useful in understanding those that follow.

THE HISTORY OF THE THEORY

When George Kelly's *The Psychology of Personal Constructs* was published by W. W. Norton in 1955 there were twenty or more personality theories already in existence. Beginning with Freud's psychoanalytic theory, the assortment included the theories of Jung, Adler, Murray, Allport, and various organismic, factor, and stimulus-response theories, as well as the third force positions of Rogers and Maslow. These theories presented graduate students in psychology a bewildering array of possibilities for trying to understand human behavior. Indeed the array was so daunting that most of those who were interested in the use of psychological theories in literary and art criticism chose to limit themselves to an acquaintanceship with the ideas of Freud and Jung.

Kelly's theory which was considerably different from all the others – and like Adler's Individual Psychology formed an antithesis to Freud's psychoanalytic theory – soon began to capture the interest of readers and quickly found its way into college personality theory textbooks. However, the death of George Kelly in 1967 shortly after his move to Brandeis University from The Ohio State University where he had constructed the theory deprived the developing group of supporters of its leader and probably delayed the growth of the theory into interdisciplinary applications in such fields as literary and art criticism, education, and business. Fortunately, a small group of psychologists, many of whom had been George Kelly's graduate students, was able to maintain an identity, and from the work of this group has risen a most respect-

able body of experimentation, teaching, and theoretical development which has both remained loyal to Kelly's theory and served to expand it. The history of the group and its work has been well documented in *The Development of Personal Construct Psychology* by Robert A. Neimeyer (1985). It is important to note here the wide international distribution of researchers, clinicians, and scholars in the field. In addition to those working in the United States there are strong contingents of construct theorists in Great Britain, Australia, Canada, and significant groups in Israel, The Netherlands, and in other locations about the world.

To serve this international community of researchers, clinicians, and scholars the *International Journal of Personal Construct Psychology* began publication in 1988 under the editorship of Robert A. Neimeyer and Greg J. Neimeyer. This journal continues to offer a forum for the reporting of empirical research and theoretical discussion¹.

In addition, the *North American Personal Construct Network* (NAPCN) offers an organizational focus for construct psychologists². Even with the tragic loss of George A. Kelly at such an early age, his theory has not only continued to command attention but has begun to find applications outside the college classroom and the therapy room, in primary and secondary education, in business and – with the publication of this journal *Constructive Criticism* – in literary

¹ From 1994 on: *Journal of Constructivist Psychology*, <http://www.constructivistpsych.org/jcp> (Eds.)

² From 2004 on: *Constructivist Psychology Network* (CPN), <http://www.constructivistpsych.org/> (Eds.)

and art criticism and theory.

And now that the reader knows a bit about the present day status of construct psychology and its followers, it is time to turn to a brief introduction to the content of Kelly's theory.

THE THEORY

The most elegantly presented as well as possibly the most complex of all modern personality theories, Kelly's basic theory is concisely stated in the fifty-eight pages which make up the second chapter of *The Psychology of Personal Constructs* (1955). The theory is there set forth in a fundamental postulate and eleven corollaries followed by a descriptive elaboration contained in seventy-eight pages in the third chapter. The first chapter of forty-five pages is devoted to a clear statement of the philosophical position called 'constructive alternativism' which underlies the psychological theory. Only Alfred Adler of the personality theorists who went before Kelly has realized the importance of stating philosophical assumptions as Kelly has.

The supreme clarity and eloquent economy of Kelly's presentation is impressive to anyone who has had to read through the many volumes of Freud's collected works, or Adler's, or even many of the later theorists' works in order to extract the main theoretical ideas and the underlying assumptions from the jungle of thoughts.

Kelly did not see humans as beings who respond passively to the universe but rather as individuals who actively construe reality and construct relationships to that reality. He believed the principle orientation in time was to the future, especially in the individual's need to predict and to some extent control what would happen in the future. In spite of the orientation toward the future, however, Kelly saw that the events of the past are immensely important because the way the person predicts is by construing past experiences and abstracting from them constructs on which to base predictions for the future. To the extent that the person construes reality accurately and abstracts recurrent themes meaningfully, he/she will be able to anticipate events relatively accurately (*Construction Corollary*). Like the scientist, then, everyday ordinary

people observe phenomena, construct meanings, and form hypotheses on which they base predictions which can be validated or invalidated.

The act of construing, however, is not necessarily a verbal nor an intellectual process according to Kelly. Some preverbal and nonverbal constructs lie in the realm of physiology; others fall into a range of nonverbalized constructs which may at some point be verbalized. These nonverbal and preverbal constructs together with submerged and suspended constructs form the Kellyan view of what some have called *the unconscious*. Kelly rejected the idea of the repressed unconscious in favor of the idea of a developing ability to articulate earlier preverbal constructs and to finally put into words what the person previously had no words to say. Kelly also rejected the customary three-fold division of the psyche into *cognition*, *emotion*, and *conation* and insisted that emotion and cognition were inseparable, a continuum, inextricably bound to the will or volition (conation), choosing alternatives and anticipating events. In addition, Kelly dismissed the notion of motivation from his theory, believing that movement is simply an intrinsic characteristic of life and that it is the choice of alternatives that is important, not the movement or so-called motivation (the why of movement) itself. One moves because one is alive.

When the individual fails to construe reality accurately and thus fails to predict and control, he/she will experience the anxiety which in other systems of thought have been called neuroses. These disorders of construction, as Kelly calls them, are subject to reconstruing which can free the individual from the anxiety.

Constructs – verbal, preverbal or nonverbal – are bipolar. These dichotomous constructs do not represent simple dictionary antonyms but quite unique opposites constructed by the individual (*Dichotomy Corollary*). These bipolar constructs are formed from a minimum context of three things and express at one end of the construct the way two of the three things are alike and at the other end the way these two are different from the third. In our everyday speech we are often unaware of the three-fold context until we are reminded that since no two things are identical it is unproductive to talk about similarities unless we remember the differences as well.

Constructs and the abstractions we base upon them allow us to predict and to some extent control events, and permit us to make choices which will lead to the possibility of extending and elaborating our construct systems. We do not, then, according to Kelly, opt for perfect predictability – that would lead to stagnation and boredom – but tend to make choices which will lead us to enrichment of our construct systems and our lives (*Choice Corollary*).

Construct systems can change in many ways according to Kelly. Constructs are more or less permeable and malleable and what we usually call learning takes place through altering our constructs (*Experience Corollary*). We can even tolerate constructs which are inconsistent with other constructs, changing back and forth between them as we see fit (*Fragmentation Corollary*). Like Emerson, Kelly would see that “a foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds” (“Self-Reliance,” 14), and like Whitman might declare, “Do I contradict myself?/ Very well then I contradict myself,/ (I am large, I contain multitudes)” (“Song of Myself,” 51.6-8).

People can share constructs, but people who have been through events together may construe those events quite differently (*Sociality Corollary*). On the other hand, people who have lived quite different lives may construe events quite similarly. It is not the events that determine the constructs used to construe them but the people who do the construing who determine how the events are to be construed. People construe each other of course and to the extent they construe each other accurately they can interact productively and predict each other’s actions with a high degree of reliability. One person may construe another at a higher level of abstraction or understand him better than he is understood and therefore A may predict the actions of B better than B predicts the actions of A.

It is important to note that Kelly’s definitions of familiar psychological terms can be quite refreshingly different from the definitions we have become accustomed to (Chapter 10 “Dimensions of Transition,” 1955). For instance, anxiety is not just apprehension and psychic tension to Kelly but the recognition that one does not have the constructs necessary to construe a situation or event. Guilt is not just an awareness of

wrongdoing or of society’s condemnation for wrongdoing, rather it is a displacement of our self from our ideal self. For example, parents who lose a child may feel guilty for not being the perfect protectors they believed themselves to be even though they did everything possible to save the child and, rationally speaking, deserve no blame, while, on the other hand, a delinquent teenager may feel guilty for doing something good if his/her ideal self requires all behavior to be anti-social and rebellious. *Aggression* is not simply destructive action toward another person but has to do with one person’s pushing him/herself, and perhaps others, into the expansion of construct systems. The aggressive person creates situations which force him and others to make choices, reconstrue situations, and move into action, ready or not. And finally, *hostility* is not just A treating B as an enemy but rather is A’s attempt to coerce B into behaving as A has wrongly predicted he would behave. It is an attempt to make an invalid social prediction come true; to reclaim a lost bet.

This brief descriptive paraphrastic summary can do no more than skim the surface of Kelly’s intriguing theory. Readers who are not acquainted with Kelly’s writings owe it to themselves to read him. He is not only a magnificent psychological thinker but an entertaining and amusing writer. Attention to all the books and periodicals listed is guaranteed to be worthwhile, but the ideal place to start is with the 1955 two-volume *The Psychology of Personal Constructs*, or the paperback reprint of the first three chapters of that set, issued under the title *A Theory of Personality: The Psychology of Personal Constructs*.

KELLY AND THE ARTS

Why is Kelly so important to the arts and to criticism? Because the idea of the individual struggling to bring constructs into verbal expression which have previously been nonverbal and preverbal has a great deal to say about artistic creativity; because art and art forms have so much to say about construing and prediction, and finally because so many authors have held informal, implicit personality theories very similar to Kelly’s *Psychology of Personal Constructs*. The

next two articles (Whitehead, 2016a, 2016b) examine two plays by authors whom I think we can claim as construct theorists: Sophocles and Shakespeare. In future issues of *Constructive Criticism* we will examine works by other construct theorist/authors: Nathaniel Hawthorne, Thomas Hardy, Anthony Burgess, James Dick-ey, and many others.

In addition to exploring construct views of various novels, short stories, and poetry, *Constructive Criticism* in future issues will explore a construct theory of tragedy and comedy, and will begin to consider what construct psychology can say about music, starting with an examination of Leonard Bernstein's use of Noam Chomsky's linguistic theory in his Norton Lectures at Harvard in 1973 and offering speculations about how Kelly's theory might extend our understanding of this kind of approach to music.

Readers who know of Kelly's theory only what they have read in this brief article need not fear. Many details will come clear in the discussions of Hamlet and Oedipus Rex which follow.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Cintra Whitehead (1929-2015) held an interdisciplinary doctorate in psychology and English literature and has taught in both fields. For a time she was publisher and contributing editor of *Constructive Criticism: A Journal of Construct Psychology and the Arts*. Retired from teaching, she lived in Ocala, Florida as a freelance writer and lecturer, concentrating on psychological literary criticism, critical theory, and personality theory.

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