The Wiley Handbook of Personal Construct Psychology
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Edited by

David A. Winter and Nick Reed
For Don and Fay
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I was driving down to the Cherokee Strip along the southern tier of Kansas to visit a Native American artist. My route took me near Perth, where George A. Kelly was born. Going south from the Flint Hills and out of Wichita for a while I turned right on a county road when I saw the sign “Perth 6” (miles). As a student of Dr. Kelly I had heard of his lonely childhood there. I was curious; besides, I was looking for a convenience store to get gasoline, a restroom, and a bite to eat.

When I arrived I found that all of Perth was on the right. On the left were miles of flat fields, all barren since the wheat season was over. On the horizon was a small clump of trees. First, on the right, came a cyclone fence behind which was a graveyard. Then came a graveled lane with no curb or gutter. This was the main street of Perth. I turned in.

I passed the small white church. After two side streets and about 17 houses, I was at the outer limit on the north. No commercial establishments existed except for the old and the new grain elevators. Almost every western Kansas town that has a railroad spur has a grain elevator. The town was vacant except for one barking dog. I imagined that the entire town was surely at some community event in another town. Everything was clean, kept up, and without trash. The lawns were neatly mowed. Neither elegantly rich nor ramshackle houses were to be found. Seeking a moment of subjective privacy I left the car and waded through weeds to the back of the new grain elevator. Jumping ahead of me were hundreds of grasshoppers. I then realized why the yards were so uniformly well groomed. It was to fend off the grasshoppers.

With nothing to explore (or eat) I drove back to the graveyard to look for Kelly’s parents’ graves. At the far end of the new section I found them. They shared a single attractive red granite marker. Unlike the other graves the place of birth was inscribed. Kelly’s father was born in Iowa. His mother was born in Barbados.
I was overcome with the loneliness of the place, just as Dr. Kelly had described. There had been no children of his age. His parents home schooled him in his early years. This schooling continued as the family had an abortive ranching venture into the even more vacant eastern Colorado grasslands. While there, one of Kelly’s chores was to collect buffalo chips from the prairie grass for his mother’s cooking fire.

As I drove away from Perth, I envisioned how Kelly could spend his time day after day dreaming and imagining a world much to his own unique making. Perth seemed emblematic of George Kelly himself: proper and practical. Proper, that is, in his personal demeanor but highly proactive, as we shall see, in his thinking and writing.

When I arrived at The Ohio State University for graduate school in clinical psychology in the fall of 1950, Kelly was at work on his theory (1955). His several graduate students were doing research on aspects of it. He kept his students closely involved with his theory, not only by doing research but also by criticizing the text of his forthcoming publication. He was generous with recognition, for example, by calling various thesis findings “the Bieri effect” and “the Lundy effect.”

Originally the theory was called role theory, then role construct theory, then personal construct theory. The term role was shunned as others were creating role theories that could be confused with his. The term construct became increasingly attractive because it conveyed the notion that each person builds a structure for viewing the world.

Kelly’s early teaching experience included drama and school plays. Their influence on him might be drawn from the parallel between Kelly’s theory and the views of Paul Meier (1994). Meier is an actor, director, international consultant on dialect and accent, and a professor of drama. In approaching the art and philosophy of the theater, Meier focuses on the development of the actor as a person. Soon after birth a person makes the physical distinction between self and non-self. Self is that inside the skin and non-self is everything else. Proceeding on in life, persons accumulate a myriad of “pairs of opposites” to govern their activity. As pairs of opposites increase in number, lives become richer and more complex. For the art of stagecraft, three notions are of import. One is the loneliness of the individuation of the person as this all takes place. Meier assumes a striving to merge back, first to the mother but also to other entities. Examples are falling in love, the dance, and the becoming part of a team—athletic, commercial, combat. On such occasions the self-distinction is yielded over, and the person is a part of a larger unit. The ecstasy of sex represents a momentary attempt to give up self and merge. The second notion is fusion,
i.e., that moment in time when the person is in the process of giving up his own constructs and becoming part of a larger unit. The third notion is “the mirror.” As one is engaging with another role, one sees a reflection of oneself. As the audience responds to the actor, both they and the actor see reflections of themselves.

These ideas are not far afield from the anthropological tenet that human nature is affiliative and conjugal, thus creating families, clans, and tribes where the unit need not be viewed as the individual.

Meier’s pairs of opposites relate, of course, to Kelly’s notion of constructs. The merging and fusion described by Meier parallel Kelly’s notion that the person is trying out various sets of constructs (i.e., various roles). Meier’s concern is in the art and creativity of the stage. The concern of Kelly is the transition—the subsuming and revising—to allow the person to “get on with it” for a better life. Both authors use the term “fit.”

A significant issue arises for both authors when pairs of opposites (i.e., bipolar constructs) are at odds between the actor and the part to be played. A prime example involves the bipolar “Good” vs. “Evil.” Persons tend to see themselves as good and to see evil somewhere out there in the rest of the world. What happens when the actor assumes the role of a character who is “evil,” and therefore counter to his own self-characterization? On the stage this can take one of two directions. The actor may reserve part of his original self (his own pairs of opposites) and act out the role figure as one to be despised. Or else the role may be played so that “evil” is fully embraced. Such a performance and fusion make the character more pitiable, calling out for help and compassion. Kelly’s focus was not on the art of presentation but upon helping the person see the consequences of his contradictory constructs.

In both the instances of Meier and Kelly, they are confronted with the cultural values and what is acceptable at that particular time. If the culture would not accept with unconditional sympathy the role of a terrorist or a Hitler, then both authors have thrown the role-taker and his own society against each other. For the personal construct therapist one is confronted with whether to allow the psychological transition to emerge with complete freedom or to insert value judgments based upon societal and personal dictates. Should the leaders in the western world have more reverse role-playing with terrorist role figures?

Having used good vs. evil as an example, it is now evident that the implications of contradictory pairs of opposites (constructs) are applicable to all other construct dimensions as well. In this sense, the “assuming of a role” is a step more complex than the notion of constructive alternativism.
Once Kelly’s volumes were published, many tried to categorize them as cognitive, existential, psychodynamic, and so on. Kelly resisted being cast into a category. The book itself resisted such categorization. Kelly’s resistance was justified, if only for the reason that people want to categorize or even preempt its content as “nothing but” another brand of theory except under new labels. This is a form of intellectual laziness since, if such can be confirmed, then there is no need to deal seriously with the new lexicon. Kelly was very aware that such a view would undermine the importance of his volumes. But there was more than that. Kelly, as a matter of personal self-esteem, wanted to see his work as creative and drawn from whole cloth. After publication, questions were asked about the absence of references to other work. Kelly rejected and made fun of this. On a humorous note, one day before a case conference, he said that he thought that he might answer these critics by writing an additional chapter full of references and entitle it “Apologetics.” He then explained to us that apologetics is a branch of religion concerned with proofs of the existence of God.

Although Kelly tried in some cases to act as if his theory was above antecedents, on other occasions he capitulated to the pragmatism and influence of John Dewey (see Paris & Epting, 2015). In this respect Kelly complied with his own theory by having contradictory hierarchies that could be applied as needed.

Many changes have occurred over time in the methods to pursue knowledge. Kelly’s constructivism may be viewed as opening a new era. In the medieval period the prescribed pathway to advance knowledge was through meditation (Abelard, 1995, 2006). To be skilled in meditation enabled one to believe in God. In turn, God, apparently to acknowledge this belief, provided the person with knowledge. In the 1100s this view was upended by a young French priest, Peter Abelard. He insisted that logical and psycholinguistic analysis was necessary for truth to be affirmed. With accumulated truth came knowledge. With knowledge came the capacity to believe in God. With this shocking reversal, a change occurred in how people were viewed. Instead of being a passive flawed recipient of knowledge the person has an active role in acquiring and advancing knowledge.

Not only Abelard but also the great plague helped set the stage for the Renaissance of the 1300s to 1500s. With the horrendous death toll, wealth became amassed into small centers. A leisure and banking class began to fund art and science endeavors in great numbers. Such a creative era was not possible during periods when all resources were devoted to survival. Without these influences the Renaissance might not have happened. It became another era for knowledge-seeking. The person became not only a
The word “science” became part of the lexicon, and in 1450 the Gutenberg printing press spread knowledge beyond the elite. It set the stage for the ditto machine of Kelly’s era.

But human impediments remain. These occur when a unit of incomplete or inadequate knowledge becomes treated as absolute truth. It has become “etched in stone,” so to speak. These impediments have been researched and described in different ways. Viewed within learning theory (Ebbinghaus, 1885), if a choice is reinforced (validated with an anticipated outcome) only part of the time (as compared to all of the time), then that habit of choice will resist extinction and become entrenched. As viewed by psychoanalytic thinkers, some ideas, wishes, and fears, only occasionally exposed, will become reified and treated as absolute truths. Herb Simon (1957, 1978), psychologist and Nobel laureate in economics, coined the word satisficing to account for the fact that people do not examine all logical possibilities in decision-making but instead will sample decision alternatives until they find one acceptable. In other words, they will “settle for half a loaf” and commit to it rather than exhaust the range of decisions possible to consider.

These so-called “human impediments” create a situation in the knowledge record where many ideas considered absolute or firm truth actually have little or no truth. For the absolutistic thinker, a disconfirmation is highly disruptive. This is because it bears upon other notions within the knowledge rubric. Many related constructs must also be revised or discarded. This chaotic transition has been called a “paradigm shift” (Kuhn, 1962). It is more prone to occur among absolutistic thinkers. With relativist thinkers, each new bit of knowledge is accepted with a degree of confidence less than 100%. The trauma of corrections is usually not as difficult.

The genius of George A. Kelly is that he set these “human impediments” as the opposite pole of “constructive alternativism.” Thus a new era is opened where the person is not only the analyst of thought and the observer of the natural world but also a challenger of the way in which knowledge is set on record. Objects, events, and ideas that are “out there” are continually questioned for certitude. Constructive alternativism becomes the antithesis of the notion that one, and only one, answer is correct.

The simple rules of constructive alternativism include:

a. Prediction of an event has no single right answer.
b. More than one construct may be valid in event prediction.
c. An event may have different dimensions of outcome and may require the same or different constructs to predict it.
d. Predictors may contradict each other in content; yet have utility in predicting outcome.
e. A valid predictor may replace or supplement another highly accepted but less efficiently valid predictor.
f. To predict an event does not mean that you understand it.
g. Understanding should lead to another question or hypothesis.

Sixty years have gone by. Kelly’s views have prospered. Regular international and regional congresses occur. Journals have been initiated. Books have been written. The time is overdue to “rank the matrix” of personal construct theory with a handbook. This handbook, as planned by David Winter and Nick Reed, is user-friendly for both the novice and the veteran. Within each section is, first, a review of the status of the area. Then come the chapters with views at the cutting edge. The contributors are worldwide in origin. The “center of gravity” of the field appears to have moved away from America. Applications of the theory range from war-ravaged children to the hard rules of business. Attention is still paid to fundamental issues. For example, “anticipation” has different meanings. In terms of scientific pragmatism, anticipation refers to predictive utility. In contrast to this, Butt (2004) emphasized understanding, especially through the method of phenomenology. This is an alternative meaning for anticipation.

As an example, I had the opportunity once to study 227 patients admitted to a coronary care unit with acute coronary attacks (Cromwell, Butterfield, Brayfield, & Curry, 1977). One aim was to predict which ones would have a recurrent coronary attack and/or die within 90 days. Results indicated that psychological measures of anxiety and depression were stronger predictors than electrographic and blood enzyme variables. Such research is pragmatic in that useful and accurate prediction was the aim. Once done, however, then a better understanding of the results becomes important. Understanding may lead to new questions and new research. This anabolic-analytic cycle, from hypothesis-building to hypothesis-testing, parallels Kelly’s notion of loosening and tightening of construct systems in the Creativity Cycle. Prediction and understanding can be viewed as the two faces of anticipation.

Implicit in these chapters is a dilemma regarding the climactic point in PCP philosophy. Some focus upon the meaning of an event as the consummatory phase. Others view the meaning as only a transitional phase that leads to another testable hypothesis. For them the latter is the consummatory phase. On one level of description meaning-makers and hypothesis-seekers could represent different life orientations. On another
level of description the two climactic points are iterative, one phase always leading to the other.

With the constructivist the endpoint of all advances in knowledge, whether it is logically reasoned or empirically investigated, is the quest to anticipate and validate. Whether one is discussing the lives of people, the nature of death, or the origin of the universe, the final record ends in a question, not a conclusion. The antithesis of constructivism is exemplified by a subset of physicists (e.g., Greene, 1999) who have maintained that if superstring theory can be confirmed, the nature of the universe will be explained completely and this area of inquiry will be closed. Such a view overlooks the natural human tendency to move always toward one more question. Borrowing from a bit of Unitarian levity, the way to drive a personal constructivist out of the community is to set fire to a huge question mark on his front lawn.

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References


Sons.
This book will be published 60 years after George Kelly’s *The Psychology of Personal Constructs* (1955). Kelly considered that one of the specifications of a good theory was its ultimate expendability, but judged by this criterion, Kelly’s personal construct theory has clearly failed as an earlier personal construct psychology handbook (Fransella, 2003), a review of the literature on the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of his magnum opus (Walker & Winter, 2007), and now the present handbook have all demonstrated a very broad, and growing, range of applications of his ideas.

This handbook commences with a reprinted chapter by Fay Fransella introducing the reader to the notion of a personal construct. Fay, together with Don Bannister, was instrumental in introducing Kelly’s theory to an audience beyond its country of origin, including the editors of, and several of the contributors to, this volume. Fay and Don were members of the “Kelly Club,” formed in the U.K. in the 1960s, and we are very pleased to be able to end the handbook with a previously unpublished paper by another highly influential member of this club, Miller Mair.

Between these two contributions are 38 original chapters, divided into seven sections, each concerned with a particular aspect of personal construct psychology or area of its application. Each of these sections commences with a review chapter by an authority, or authorities, in the field. These chapters are intended not only to introduce newcomers to work in particular areas, but also to update readers who are more familiar with personal construct psychology on key new developments. The remaining chapters in each section provide specific illustrations of work in the fields concerned. The book concludes with an appendix introducing personal construct psychology and its terminology.

It has been a pleasure to have been joined in this venture by authors from 12 different countries, ranging from former students of Kelly and others who have contributed to the field for many years to some who are in the