

# Personal Construct Psychology at 60



# Personal Construct Psychology at 60:

*Papers from the 21st  
International Congress*

Edited by

David Winter, Peter Cummins,  
Harry Procter and Nick Reed

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*For the late Trevor Butt, who made an enormous contribution to the elaboration of personal construct psychology.*



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## PREFACE

2015 was the 60<sup>th</sup>. anniversary of the publication of George Kelly's two-volume magnum opus *The Psychology of Personal Constructs*, in which he set out personal construct theory as a radical new approach to psychology. Although Kelly was a clinical psychologist, personal construct psychology has had an extraordinarily broad range of application, extending beyond the clinical setting to include areas as diverse as education, organizations, management development, social psychology, the arts, forensic practice, coaching, law, and politics. It presaged constructivist developments in many spheres of knowledge, and its innovative research methods, including repertory grid technique as well as narrative and other more qualitative approaches, have been used in a vast number of studies focused on the exploration of personal and interpersonal meaning.

2015 was also the occasion of the 21<sup>st</sup>. International Congress on Personal Construct Psychology, held in the United Kingdom at the University of Hertfordshire 40 years after the first such congress, and attracting delegates from five continents. We are delighted to be able to present in this volume contributions by many of these delegates, ranging from established authors in the field to neophytes reporting on their initial explorations using personal construct psychology in a very wide range of different fields. Their chapters reflect the diversity of contemporary applications of personal construct psychology, and the continuing relevance and vitality of Kelly's ideas and methods. In our view, the perspective that Kelly introduced in 1955, and its development over subsequent years, still not only offers a radical approach to psychology but also to a wide range of other spheres of knowledge. We have broadly organized those that are covered in this book into sections on theory and methodology; social relationships; children and young people; the clinical context; education and training; organizations; and political, international, and environmental issues, although several of the chapters touch on various of these topics. Abstracts of all the presentations given at the congress can be found here: <http://www.kellysociety.org/conferences.html>

We would like to thank other members of the congress committee for their contributions to the success of the congress: Trevor Butt, Mary Frances, and Precious Sedumedi. We also wish to acknowledge the invaluable assistance provided by Jörn Scheer, as a consultant to the committee, and the tireless team of volunteers from the University of Hertfordshire Doctorate in Clinical Psychology: Clare Coppock, Stephanie Minchin, Camilla Nguyen, Elizabeth Odusanya, James Randall-James, and Jessica Saffer.

*David Winter, Peter Cummins, Harry Procter, and Nick Reed*  
*October, 2016*

# **THEORY AND METHODOLOGY**

## CHAPTER ONE

# TURNING PSYCHOLOGY INSIDE-OUT AGAIN: FROM A GEOMETRY TO A POETICS OF EXPERIENCE

JOHN SHOTTER<sup>1</sup>

Something has, in recent years, gone very wrong with what we take to be the everyday, commonsense background to our thinking about ourselves as human beings, a thinking reflected in what we take to be the basic nature of our own mentalities: that we are self-contained individuals acting only *rationally* in relation to our own self-interests. Rather than facing the task of living in the somewhat disorderly real world, in which things continually *happen* to us over which we have only a minimal control, we have come to live more and more in a world of rational *models*, of *logical implications*, of *quantitative calculations*. In short, we have come to live more within our heads than within our bodies. What seems to have completely disappeared from our thinking are our relations of dependency on all the others and othernesses in our surroundings, along with the basic spontaneous, i.e., non-deliberate, responses of our living bodies to events occurring around us.

Everything seems to have become a *cognitive* matter, a matter of deliberation and decision making, with thinking mostly thought of as “information processing.” Little attention is paid to our living immersion within the larger flowing currents of social activity which, in affecting us more than we can affect them, *socialize us* into an unacknowledged background of *perceptual judgments* we share with the others around us, *judgments* to do with “what” we take to be happening before our eyes, within our ears, to our touch, and in what we can smell.

As a consequence of this, in our professional inquiries, we almost unconsciously oscillate between living in *two worlds*: (1) as professional inquirers, we live in a timeless world of an almost geometric kind, in

which we aim at understanding everything in terms of the logical implications of a set of nameable theoretical entities, arranged in one way or another within a single order of connectedness, according to a fixed set of laws or principles; (2) whilst the other world in which we also live is the everyday world of everyone else, in which things are born, live, and die, in which everything takes time to grow and change, a world within which novelties and surprises that we cannot predict continually emerge — a world which we try, *from a special eternally fixed place outside of this everyday world*, to explain in terms of the timeless, professional world we have structured amongst ourselves, in accord with our *interests* (Smail 2005).

### David Smail's, and Miller Mair's "Take" on George Kelly

Among the few very concerned at this trend, at least as I see it, have been David Smail and Miller Mair, tragically now both dead. As organizing motifs for what follows below I would like to take David Smail's (2005) claim — with which I am in 100% agreement — that: "the principal achievement of the founders of modern psychotherapy [has been] to turn the relation of person to world inside out, such that the former became the creator of the latter" (7); the point I made in other words above. Along with it, I want also to take Miller Mair's (2014a) claim that our task in our lives is: "to know who and what and where we are in the world and how we are to understand ourselves *as children of the universe*" (3, my italics). In other words, as they both seem to imply, we all far too easily seem to think that we can make of the world what we please, and are rather reluctant to accept that somehow — in some as yet still not fully understood fashion — the world has made us, that we are *still* as Miller Mair puts it: "children of the universe," and we cannot just make and re-make it and ourselves in any old way, we are *of* the world in that we only know of ourselves in relation to it. Rather than coming to inhabit it from somewhere else, outside of it, we have emerged as *participant parts* within the world's overall becoming, a process which means that we must assume that nothing can act on other things without itself being acted upon.

The amazingness of all this is easy to forget. In the middle of the *scientization* and *commodification* of almost every aspect now of our everyday lives, we have forgotten the amazingness of the fact that I can, thus, with these noises coming out of my mouth — as a world-made, acting and acted upon thing — jiggle what we call *your* "atoms" and "molecules" around, so that both you and I become *participants* in a

common, unfolding, energetic “movement” of some kind, a movement that arouses expectations and anticipations within us, a movement with both a *saying* and a *said* to it, a movement that *both* leaves behind in our bodies a (possibly) memorable residue, *and* which also *points towards* a possible future to come — a characteristic of our talk that Kelly (1955) captures in his Fundamental Postulate (or axiom): “*a person’s processes are psychologically channelized by the ways in which he [and she] anticipates events*” (46, my italics).

How is it that all this has been forgotten, and as Miller Mair (2014b) says, that not only almost everything “in ‘scientific’ psychology [has become] ugly, hard-edged, angular, uncomfortable, [and] unconvincing” (15), but even worse than that, as David Smail (2005) says: “Psychology has imposed on our subjectivity an entirely inappropriate normativeness, a narrow set of moral and aesthetic prescriptions which turns each one of us into a kind of self-diagnosing psychiatric inquisitor, ready to infer from the recognition of each new feeling pathological deviance from an ideal we think we see embodied in everyone else” (64). Our very basic reciprocal or dialogical (Bakhtin 1981, 1986), spontaneously responsive relations with everything around us have disappeared.

With these comments in mind, I want to distinguish between what I will call *Cartesian, geometrical or calculational forms of thought*, and *Wittgensteinian or poetical forms*: that is, between 1) ways of thinking in which people commit themselves to using a particular “framework,” “perspective,” “theory,” or “model,” formulated in terms of *definitions* and *general concepts*, that they take as *corresponding with* reality to organize what they experience; and 2) a kind of thought and talk in which people, instead of correspondences, continually make use of *comparisons* enabling them to sense both *differences*, as well as similarities.

Straightaway, we can point to a number of major advantages of such *differing* or *differentiating* activities over those working in terms of *correspondences*: firstly, they do not put boundaries around the field of inquiry, but leave it open for further study; secondly, instead of requiring a one-time fitting-or-not-fitting correspondence, further inquiries can, over time, introduce further inner articulations into the field, thus enabling our inquiries to have a developmental quality to them. I have called these kinds of inquiry Wittgensteinian (1953) ones because he suggested we make sense of what is bewildering us by using what he called, “objects of comparison” (no.130), *particular understandings* — like the notions of

“language-game” (no.7), and “form(s) of life” (no.19) — which themselves could not be precisely defined, but whose (in fact countless) features could be made clear *poetically* or *metaphorically* as required; but thirdly, and most importantly, rather than merely with one-time correspondences with *shapes* or *forms*, we begin to deal with *meanings*, with events happening in/through/over time that can “move” us in our very being-in-the-world.

As I see it, and as will become much clearer later on, the importance Kelly (1955) attached to focusing on our use of the *difference-making* nature of *constructs* — or, as I will put it later, on the difference-making power of our speech or speakings, rather than upon *definitions* and on *conceptual* forms of thought — parallels in many respects Wittgenstein’s reasons for wanting to conduct his investigations in a comparative fashion. For like Wittgenstein, Kelly (1955) sees our inquiries as taking place in time; as he puts it: “it is proper to speak of construing as taking place successively. Like other features of life, its principal dimension is time, and it is itself a process, a phenomenon” (73), which means, of course, as we shall see, our inquiries can always remain open to our noticing further distinctions that we might make in our *meanings*.

Kelly (1955) himself makes his reasons clear for wanting to adopt *constructs* rather than *concepts* in the following example: “Consider,” he says, “a person’s use of the construct of *respect* vs. *contempt*. Under conventional logic one would consider these as two separate concepts. If we wishes to understand the person’s use of the term ‘respect’, we might seek to find out how broadly he [sic] applied the term — how he ‘generalized the concept’” (70), and so on. For in our everyday lives a person may *use* the term “respect” in countless different meaningful ways, thus our search for the person’s *particular meaning* could prove endless. Thus, says Kelly (1955), we need to “see the construct as composed essentially of a *similarity-contrast* dimension which strikes through a part of his field of experience. We need to look at both ends of it if we want to know what it means to him. We cannot understand him well if we look only at the similarity — ‘respect’ — end of the dimension. We cannot understand what he means by ‘respect’ unless we know what he sees as relevantly opposed to ‘respect’” (71). This is crucial if our concern is with coming to an understanding of the *unique* nature of the mental distress of the *particular* person before us, rather than with understanding people in general.

## More on Cartesian versus Wittgensteinian Forms of Thought and Talk

The urge to talk in terms of *concepts* and *conceptualizations* in our inquiries is very strong, indeed, the phrase: “How do you conceptualize that?” is a very over-used phrase in all social scientific meetings; while the notion of constructs and difference-making forms of talk is heard hardly at all. This, I think, is because — to revert back to my initial comments above — our very notion of what is it to be a *properly rational* thinker in the world at the moment is still heavily influenced by the Cartesianism implicit in our everyday, taken-for-granted forms of talk and thought. For in a Cartesian world, in a Cartesian *ontology*, people commit themselves — prior to any form of inquiry — to the existence of *two* worlds, (1) to a pre-existing, timeless, in effect, a Platonic world consisting in a set of separate, nameable *ideal forms or entities*, identified in terms of their unchanging spatial, “picturable” *shapes*, in which all change is solely a change in how they are arranged or configured, along with (2) the everyday world of our often bewildering lives together with all the others around us.

The advantage to us in working like this — in an *ideal* world of (hoped for) *certainities* and *perfections* in terms of which to *explain* events occurring in this somewhat imperfect, but nonetheless very *real* world in which we actually live our everyday lives — is that we can be clear, when challenged, that we know *what* we are *talking about*. We can be clear because we have *already* put certain boundaries around our field of inquiry. But in thinking and speaking like this, it is only too easy for us to perceive and to act in the world around us, *only through* or *in terms of* such *selective ideals*, representing the basic *constituent entities* or *abstract generalities* of a world order. Indeed, as I intimated above, it entails a kind of thinking that, elsewhere, I have called *aboutness-thinking* (Shotter 2010); for instead of focusing on the actual situation within which we are immersed, we turn away from it, and begin to think *about* it *in already adopted, general terms*.

Whereas, in staying focused upon a circumstance that is bewildering to us, and seeking to find possibilities of drawing distinctions within it, we can, by a step-by-step sequence of internal articulations, arrive at a *structured likeness to it* (as well as a difference from it) in terms of something already well-known to us. In other words, instead of seeking *identities* with ideal *forms*, we can continually make use of *comparisons*, thus enabling



ourselves to sense both *differences*, as well as *similarities* — where this way of *making sense* of what is before us allows us to give expression to the circumstance in many different ways, but not just in any.

In this kind of thinking and speaking — that elsewhere I have called *witness-thinking* (Shotter 2010) — people can feel free to use a whole set of such “poetic comparative devices,” that is, images, metaphors, memorable phrases, etc., without necessarily feeling committed to any of them. As Wittgenstein (1953) himself says, language is *like* a city (but not completely), it is *like* a toolbox (but not completely), words are *like* the controls in a train driver’s cab (but not completely), and so on, with each comparison, as an aid to our *perception*, drawing our attention to *aspects* of our *use of language* that might otherwise have remained unnoticed.

Similarly, our task is to seek to understand what we experience and perceive only in terms of what we experience and perceive, to understand “it” in terms of itself, rather than in terms of another, external, eternal, perfect, hidden world, in fact, of our own creation — to explain what is real for us only by what is real for us, and the situated and time-bound only by the situated and time-bound. We need to see mentally distressed persons before us as the unique persons they *are*, each with their own *particular* distress as the distress it *is*. That is, we must talk *from within* our actual lives as we are living them, rather than from an *illusory* place outside them.

I emphasize this kind of talk and thought because our task, as I see it — and I speak here as someone with an *interest* (Smail 2005) in de-mechanizing and re-humanizing *all* our human practices, not only in psychotherapy, but in all our professional work-life settings — is to explore *unique possibilities*, relevant to *this* person, in *this* place, at *this* time, not to establish *general, timeless facts*. Yet, if the thinking that spontaneously just happens within us is of the Cartesian, geometric kind, as Miller Mair (2014b) points out, it will lead to our using PCP (and all our other “theoretical” aids), “largely within the framework of our conventional psychological assumptions and values,” so that we will end up “posing no radical challenge at all” (3). This is why I think we need to turn psychology inside-out again, to turn it back into a discipline of inquiry in which, instead of asking “What goes on inside individual people’s heads,” we ask “What do people’s individual heads go on inside of?” Where, of course, one of the most obvious first answers is that they go on inside a world both of other people, along with a whole lot of other

things, which, besides *just being*, are also continually *coming into being* in ways influenced in each moment by their surroundings.

## Why Have I Put the Word “Geometry” in My Title?

But I must be careful here of not getting ahead of myself. I need to explore why I have I put the word ‘geometry’ in my title. For at least the following three reasons:

- *Reason 1*): If we go back to Descartes’ (1968) influence on us in his 1637 *Discourse on Method*, we find him saying that it is by: “[those] long chains of reasoning, quite simple and easy, which geometers use to teach their most difficult demonstrations, .... [that] there can be nothing so distant that one does not reach it eventually, or so hidden that one cannot discover it” (41). In other words, we find here the beginnings of the whole idea of *thinking as calculation*, and of *inquiry* as seeking to discover the hidden, *timeless* “ideal forms” supposed to be shaping our behavior.
- *Reason 2*): Kant, in his 1796 book, *The Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science*, continued this claim that: “in any special doctrine of nature there can be only as much proper science as there is mathematics therein” (4:470) — and, as I see it, we are still in thrall, in slavery, to this notion, no matter how critical of it we may try to be.
- *Reason 3*): But yet another reason is that we need to note that George Kelly [1905-1967] himself was not wholly free from these beliefs either. He majored in mathematics and physics, and for a time earned his living as an aeronautical engineer — a life that in fact parallels my own quite closely, but I won’t go into that — and because of this, I think, in his system of postulates (axioms) and corollaries, it looks as if he tried to set his *theory of personality* out as, in fact, a scientifically testable, logical system. So although he said that, “a postulate is, of course, an assumption,” he goes on to say that, “it is an assumption so basic in nature that it *antecedes everything which is said* in the logical system which it supports” (46-47, my italics), and indeed, it is an assumption from which, he says, we can make “deductions” — usually called “theorems,” but which if they are considered to be an “easy consequence” of another theorem, they are called “corollaries.”

Some, clearly, not unreasonably, still take Kelly's theoretical system in this way, as an *explanatory* system, and consequently see Kelly as, in fact, an early *cognitive* theorist (e.g., Shaw and Gaines 1992). For, after all, he did consider "*A mathematical approach to psychology*," and suggest (like Spencer-Brown, in his *Laws of Form*, 1969) that:

Our *psychological geometry* is a *geometry of dichotomies* rather than the geometry of areas envisioned by the classical logic of concepts, or the geometry of lines envisioned by classical mathematical geometries... By such an act he interposes a difference between incidents — incidents that would otherwise be imperceptible to him because they are infinitely homogeneous (Kelly, 1969, 104–5).

This, however, is/was not at all how Miller Mair and David Smail read him — and as I read Kelly, as someone very much alive to the *anticipation arousing* function of *words in their speaking*, he seems to me to be a person very much at odds with himself, for he also is sensitive to the crucial working of our *wordings* upon us. For immediately after stating his Fundamental Postulate, he goes on to say in an almost Wittgensteinian fashion: "Let us look at the words we have carefully chosen for this fundamental postulate" (47), and he proceeds, most importantly, to explicate every one of them — not in terms of *definitions*, but in terms of *indications* and *characterizing assumptions*; that is, in effect, in *poetic* terms, not with what, *ideally*, they are identical to, but in terms of *what they are like*: That is, in *relational* rather than *absolute* terms.

Indeed, as he himself says: "In theorizing, some people think that one ought to start out *by defining* the boundaries of the field of psychology. But we see no point in trying to stake out property claims for psychology's realm. The kinds of realms we are talking about are not preemptive at all — what belongs to one can still belong to another" (48, my italics) — where this is a fundamental consequence of our assuming, not a Cartesian world of separate, nameable *entities* all *impacting* upon each other, but a world of *processes*, of intra-mingling strands of flowing activity, from within which *what we are now* has emerged, and *what we are still to become* can further emerge.

Further, Kelly did not assume, like Descartes (1968), that God had created a world of matter, and had "agitate[d] diversely and confusedly the different parts of this matter, [thus to] create a chaos as disordered as the poets could ever imagine, and afterwards did no more than to lend his usual preserving action to nature, and to let her act according to his

established laws” (62). Instead, Kelly (1955), rather than “postulating an inert substance, ... the subject of psychology is assumed at the outset *to be a process*... For our purposes, the person is not an object which is temporarily in a moving state but is himself a form of motion” (47 – 48).

Indeed, as he continued, he said:

We conceive a person's processes as operating through a network of pathways rather than as fluttering about in a vast emptiness. The network is flexible and is frequently modified, but it is structured and it both facilitates and restricts a person's range of action... His structured network of pathways leads toward the future so that he may anticipate it... Anticipation is both the push and pull of the psychology of personal constructs (49).

Where the *ways* a person *anticipates* things cannot be objectively established; “they are revealed by the client wherever he talks about other people, as well as when he talks about himself” (135) — in other words, they *show up*, so to speak, in how they *shape* or *give form* to a person’s utterances and other expressions.

One of the best accounts of how such anticipations work within us known to me is William James’ (1890) account in his famous *Stream of Thought* chapter: “The truth is,” he says,

that large tracts of human speech are nothing but *signs of direction* in thought, of which direction we nevertheless have an acutely discriminative sense, though no definite sensorial image plays any part in it whatsoever... [These] ‘tendencies’ are not only descriptions from without, but that they are among the *objects* of the stream, which is thus aware of them from within, and must be described as in very large measure constituted of *feelings of tendency*, often so vague that we are unable to name them at all (vol.1, 252-254).

Let me repeat certain crucial phrases in this account: “signs of direction,” of which we “have an acutely discriminative sense,” of “which we are aware from within [the stream],” yet they are “often so vague that we are unable to name them at all” — which do not, in relation to the acutely discriminative sense we have of them, prevent us from saying very precisely *what they are like*.

So, although talk of *feelings* or *sensings* may seem to be far too *subjective* when done in the *general, de-contextualized setting* of a scientific

laboratory, and far too vague in themselves to determine the precise actions needed in a particular context, this is not the case. Such *feelings* are in fact very precise, and in each context of their occurrence, they can work as “standards” in terms of which to guide us toward their accurate expression — a fact well-known to us as we search our *thesauruses* for the “right word” to satisfy a particular *felt tension* within us in writing each sentence of a text that matters to us. That *acutely discriminative sense* sits there in the background of our efforts at expressing ourselves, guiding us like a plumb-line as to whether we have sequenced our words aright (or not). British readers will all remember a famous grilling in May 1997 by TV presenter, Jeremy Paxman, of the then Home Secretary, Michael Howard, in which we could hear “out loud,” so to speak, Michael Howard *not answering* the same question 12 times.

Why? Because our speech, our speakings, our utterances work, not primarily in terms of arousing “pictures” or inner representations of outer states of affairs, but in arousing *felt anticipations* within us as to its “point,” as to what we are *trying to do* in our talk. And in recent times, in this respect, the work of Bakhtin (1981, 1986) has come to the fore; as he puts it:

The word in living conversation is directly, blatantly, oriented toward a future answer-word; it provokes an answer, anticipates it and structures itself in the answer's direction. Forming itself in an atmosphere of the already spoken, the word is at the same time determined by that which has not yet been said but which is needed and in fact anticipated by the answering word. Such is the situation of any living dialogue (1981, 280).

Thus, already at work in the unfolding flow of a sequence of intra-connected *anticipations* and *partial satisfactions* that begin to emerge, as we move from one *anticipation arousing* word to the next, is the beginning of an essentially *hermeneutical-dialogical* process in which fragments of a situation, gathered here and there, at different points in time — as in the reading of a text — begin to cohere into a distinct and uniquely organized unity, a *particular* unity, not only *open to* an indefinite number of different *characterizations*, but also to an indefinite number of *comparisons with other such unities* — with each comparison bringing to light previously unrealized new features of each.

I mentioned above the *anticipation arousing function of words* because, as is quite clear — and Kelly clearly senses this — *we can use words in many different ways*, but the two main ways in which we use them are 1)

*retrospectively* and 2) *prospectively*, that is, 1) representationally to “picture” an *already completed* state of affairs, or 2) responsively to “point towards” a future possibility — and it is clearly this latter, prospective or anticipatory *use* that Kelly favors.

Indeed, let me go further here, as Wittgenstein (1953) makes very clear, “the meaning of a word is its use in the language” (no.43), not the *thing* that we think of it as *standing for*. So, although we have a whole lot of mental words — such as “motives,” “thoughts,” “ideas,” “theories,” “intentions,” etc., etc. — there are no such things as motives, thoughts, ideas, theories, intentions, etc., etc. As Kelly (1955) notes, to repeat, “they are revealed by the client wherever he talks about other people, as well as when he talks about himself” (135) — in other words, they *show up*, so to speak, *after-the-fact* of a person’s utterances and expressions, in how they *shape* or *give form* to them.

Yet, as David Smail (2005) remarks, this is among “a number of things many people find very hard to accept” (21). Indeed, as he goes on to suggest, this means that: “The best way of understanding ourselves and the significance of our actions *is not through personal reflection and introspection*, (i.e., we have as individuals no privileged access to [what we call] our own motives)” (21)...Our greatest intimacy is with bodily sensations that mediate our relations with the world around us: because we *feel*, physically, what is going on, we have a sense of ‘interiority’ which seems to be just about the most indubitable indication of what is happening to us” (22) — in other words, we ignore the *acutely discriminative sense* (James 1890) that we have of what is happening to us at our peril.

## Breaking Out

What I have argued above, then, is that there are two very different ways of relating ourselves to what we call our “theories,” to our “theoretical talk,” we can use 1) “theories” to *think about* what is before us; *or* use them 2) to *see* or *perceive with*.

In using theories to think *about* things, our thinking and reflecting comes first, and we need always to think ourselves into action; as Descartes (1637/1968) put it: “I am only a thinking and unextended thing, ... [my] body... is only an extended thing... which does not think,...my mind, by which I am what I am, is entirely and truly distinct from my body, and