

Book Review

George Kelly – The Psychology of Personal Constructs

by Trevor Butt

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reviewed by

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This book on George Alexander Kelly is one of the first two to be published in this series of “Mind Shapers – Key Psychologists and their impact”. Trevor Butt, the author of this book, has decided to focus on what shaped Kelly as well as how he shaped psychology. George Kelly’s own philosophy of constructive alternativism has been a major influence on the development of the movements in the human sciences of constructivism and constructionism. The development of narrative psychology largely stems from his method of inquiry; the self characterisation.

Trevor Butt has done what few, if any, have done before. He has taken what he sees as the major ideas of Kelly and discussed them in historical, that is philosophical, terms. He starts off with a history of personality. At this point I need to make my own position clear as a reviewer of this book. I have never studied philosophy – except for ten lectures on the history of psychology during my psychology degree. I am therefore not an ideal person to review this book. But I decided to accept the request from Jörn Scheer. As all behaviour is an experiment I have asked myself why I agreed to do something I do not feel qualified to do. Not a habit of mine. I decided that it was about time I took up the challenge and tried to get to grips with philosophy. It was, perhaps, also time to no longer have philosophy as a no-go area.

The first chapter is about ‘Issues in Personality’. After an overview of the history of personality and a

quick coverage of Kelly’s early working life, the chapter moves quickly on to the history of personal construct psychology and where Kelly and his ideas fit in. There is a description of Kelly’s model of the ‘person as scientist’. Rather surprisingly Butt says that this no doubt relates to Kelly’s education in mathematics and engineering. But for me the crucial point about Kelly’s education was that his degree was in *physics* and mathematics - that definitely makes him a scientist. Kelly actually then did one term of training as a mechanical engineer because he developed an interest in social topics. He did many other courses, one of which was of obtain his PhD with a dissertation on common factors in speech and reading disabilities. Apart from Kelly’s model of the person this section talks about Kelly’s notion of role which Butt says stems from George Mead and the symbolic interactionists. Basically, they said, you put yourself in the other person’s position and adjust your own behaviour accordingly. Kelly developed this idea into his sociality corollary.

Butt points out that Kelly’s theory, like that of many other personality theorists, arose out of the practice of psychotherapy. He stresses that for Kelly there is no dynamic ‘unconscious’. This is taken up in Chapter 7 when Butt links it to destructiveness. He manages to give a general feel for personal construct theory in just a few pages. The chapter concludes by saying that personal construct theory can be described as *pragmatic* because it does not claim to have ‘the truth’, *phenomenological* because it

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makes the point that it is only through the eyes of the client that the person can be helped and *humanistic* because it says that people are agents and therefore “are ultimately responsible for the choices that they make in life” (p.14). Butt adds later in the book that Kelly can also be called an *existentialist* because of our responsibility for our choices. Butt now closes this first chapter by saying he is going to take each of the above four philosophical approaches and see how personal construct psychology fits in to each. As you may imagine, my heart sank a little at that prospect. In fact, the whole book is about philosophy and where Kelly’s ideas fit in. Indeed, an unusual way of presenting Kelly’s ideas.

Chapter 2 is on pragmatism. Dewey was a leading figure in the development of American pragmatism and Kelly cites him as being very influential in the development of personal construct theory. To give an example of this influence, Butt cites how Dewey saw a cycle between induction and deduction. “The experimentalist develops theories based on experience, then proceeds to test them in practice, revising the theory as she does so” (Butt p. 17). Mead was also a pragmatist and influenced Kelly in relation to his concept of ‘sociality’. Mead argued that to understand, one needs to see the world through the other’s eyes.

Kelly placed great emphasis on the difference between discovery and inventing knowledge. We do not discover facts we find them when we know what we are looking for. That comes from the pragmatists who talked about the nature of science. Butt makes a very important point here that “if science is not pure discovery, we have to question the simple separation of the person from the world” (p.21). This led the pragmatists to be against all dualisms. Kelly was adamant that it was not useful to think of mind and body being separate entities. His theory shows how it is possible to conceptualise both as being intimately related and their being related, in turn, to action.

More of personal construct theory is discussed in how it relates to pragmatism. So much so that I began to feel that Kelly had not really been very original at all! But that is clearly not the case as I soon convinced myself. There is a lengthy discussion about how the ‘social’ fits into the pragmatists’ views and how both Mead and Dewey were major players here and it is made clear where Kelly’s key

idea of ‘sociality’ came from. This is what I have always seen as *reflexivity*. Butt rightly points out how this position differs from orthodox psychology both in 1950 and now in the 2000’s.

Butt ends this chapter by looking at the fundamental postulate of personal construct theory. He stresses that ‘a person’s processes’ are not ‘determined’ but are ‘channeled’, which relates to the idea that the person is a form of motion. Kelly saw no requirement for a concept of motivation. The person is always doing something as long as they are alive. We are in action. We construe the events that happen to us rather than being shaped by them. Chapter 3, ‘Personal Construction and Meaning’, focuses first on phenomenology. Butt points out that Kelly had a distorted view of phenomenology when he claimed that it did not apply to his theory. That was not surprising since the work of the European phenomenologists was not translated into English until 1962. These writers said that all we know of the world is how it appears to us. Butt takes us on a tour of Kelly’s early experiences as a psychologist and the importance Kelly placed on distinguishing between ‘events’ and ‘constructions’. What happens to us matters because it is these events we construe and have to make sense of. Arguing that the world is real but we only know our constructions of it puts Kelly in the phenomenologists’ camp.

Butt then talks about ‘the personal construct’. He again emphasises that personal constructs do not represent a ‘true’ picture of events but only our interpretations of them. It is the personal construct’s bi-polarity and Kelly arguing that construing is related to intended action rather than to behaviour that again makes Kelly a phenomenologist. Our interest is always in understanding what a person *intends* doing when they behave in certain ways – particularly unusual ways – and, thereby, what they are *not* doing. In the section on ‘the construing system’ Butt says that the power of the construct system is that it underlines that we do not construe in ‘a psychological vacuum’. We may decide to sit down and eat rather than stick to our diet. But the meaning of that decisive action is connected to many other personal constructs. The ramifications of using one particular way of construing are directly explored by Hinkle’s ‘laddering’ procedure. Butt rightly sounds the alarm bells at the ease with which we have come to talk about ‘constructs’ rather than construing. That often

leads to the idea that constructs are ‘things’ that somehow exist rather than being part of a construing system which we make use of to understand and predict the world around us. It is repertory grids that are largely responsible for making ‘constructs’ cognitive entities. The interpretation of the results from, say, a principal components analysis of a grid, needs always to be done by trying to imagine what the world may look like from this person’s point of view. To take the literal meaning of the construct words can lead to some very strange conclusions.

The next section is on ‘Researching construct systems’ – not ‘construing systems’ though. Butt is at pains to point out that methods such as *laddering* and *repertory grids* all require experience to use them in a meaningful way. They are skills and not techniques that one just learns the mechanics of doing. All the data produced is ‘soft’ data.

Dealing in the next section with the vexed question of how Kelly deals with emotions, Butt focuses on how Kelly describes them phenomenologically, that is in terms of how an individual construer interprets events. Kelly would have no truck with reductionism in any form, nor dualism. No physiological underpinning of emotions for him. Hence, emotions must be accounted for within his psychology of personal constructs. But Dewey is never far away since he, too, completely rejected Cartesian dualism.

Butt points to Kelly’s distinction between aggression and hostility as the best illustration of his phenomenological approach. Aggression is about doing things. A person who is aggressive in Kelly’s sense actively pushes against boundaries, trying to extend or widen their ‘perceptual field’. On the other hand, hostility goes on inside the person. Perhaps the person has been threatened by a series of events that demand he do something about changing his construing to accept what is happening. But that would mean having to change some very personally important constructs. That is not easy or perhaps even desirable, so the person ‘extorts’ evidence to prove they were right in the first place and that there is nothing to worry about. Butt makes the important point that Kelly is here again emphasising the point that we cannot get at the intention of a person by studying their behaviour. Behaviour tells us nothing about what the person may ‘really’ be doing. As with hostility and aggression, anxiety is to do with our construing. In the case of anxiety it is when we

are unable to adequately construe something that is usually described as ‘things that go bump in the night’. Butt points out that Kelly did not wish us to equate his definition of anxiety, aggression, and hostility with what we call this behaviour in our everyday lives. Kelly always made the point that if you have new ideas you either have to use new words or redefine existing words. He chose both methods in different aspects of his theory.

The chapter on ‘Personal construction and meaning’ ends rather surprisingly with a section on ‘trauma and stress’. Whatever the reason, Butt gives a clear and succinct account of the different present-day interpretations of what causes the results of trauma and stress in medical and psychological worlds. As we would predict, personal construct psychologists want to look at how the individual person construes the traumatic event.

Chapter 4 looks at the last of the philosophical positions that Butt identified earlier in the book – that of *humanism*. Because of the problems created by some people confusing humanism with humanitarianism, Butt suggests we use the construct *humanism* versus *mechanism*. He defines humanist theories as seeing the person as essentially a free agent who is responsible for his or her choices during their life-time. He makes a comparison between Carl Rogers and Kelly. To a large extent this centres around the concept of ‘self’. For Rogers there was a real self which can be developed in the right environment. For Kelly the self is little more than another construction we have created. A major disagreement with the humanists was that they rejected the role of science in society. Dewey rears his head again here as both Kelly and Dewey saw the hope for the world lying in the advance of science.

After discussing Descartes’ dualism, Butt takes us on to an extension of the self construct in Kelly’s idea of ‘core structure’. This obviously is related to the idea of ‘self’. Both, in Kelly’s thinking, are constructions. Core constructions are fundamental to our psychological wellbeing and our stable sense of ‘ourself’. Our ‘core roles’ are particularly important and emphasise the importance Kelly gave to ‘role’ which the sociality corollary places squarely in the social world. We play a ‘role’ with someone when we try to see the world through their eyes and then act according to our understanding. Butt describes the core role in the context of the experience of guilt

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– which is when we are dislodged from our core role.

Chapter 5 is about ‘The problem of choice’. A problem it is indeed – for some at least. Butt divides his excellent overview of the topic into ‘action’, ‘choice’ and ‘ethics’. The philosophical underpinnings of Kelly’s ideas are, again, at the forefront, this time with a new philosophy. Butt says:

These themes are not independent, but related into a proposition about the human condition that is reminiscent of the philosophy of existentialism. Considering this will lead us to think more about Kelly’s roots in both pragmatism and Christianity. (p.67)

Being a ‘form of motion’, the person is obviously not continually thinking through things consciously. We are a continually construing being. Butt emphasises that Dewey’s pragmatism sees the person as ‘inquiring, experimenting and hypothesising’. Even when we are doing nothing we are doing something. No motives are required to make us get into action. Choice is involved in everything we do, and Butt discusses Kelly’s two ways in which we make choices. One is by the CPC cycle of “C” circumspection, “P” pre-emption and “C” control – although he says the “C” could stand for Choice. We look at possibilities, decide on the one for us and go into action and then make a choice. There are a few difficulties with this idea. Where the difficulties sometimes arise is with the Choice Corollary which focuses on choosing which pole of a personal construct is the better one for us. Butt points out that the opposite poles of our constructs are not always logical opposites but they are the result of ‘psychologic’. Again, Butt gives a number of excellent examples to make his points. Interestingly he chooses to discuss this under the sub-heading of ‘ethics’. He deals with all the complexities of the Choice Corollary in detail. The basic one being that choice in relation to our own behaviour is usually carried out at a ‘low level of cognitive awareness’. We have chosen that pole of our constructs on which we want to see ourselves in nearly the whole of our construing system. Choices have been made on the basis that describing ourselves by that pole of a construct is likely to lead to the greater possibility of the extension and definition of our construing system.

Embedded in this issue of choice is the idea that we are responsible for our actions, which represent our intentions. Butt not only links this to ethics but also to Kelly’s known religious beliefs. This may also be linked historically to Kelly’s education at a Quaker university. Here is an excellent section of the book and it is well worth digging into. At this point I have to confess I started to feel I had had enough philosophy when I read the next section to be ‘A type of existentialism’. Suffice it to say that Butt sees PCT as having strong similarities to existentialism.

On to Chapter 6 which is about ‘Psychological Change and Reconstruction’. After quoting Kelly as saying that the focus of convenience of his theory is ‘the psychological reconstruction of life’ followed by a history of psychological therapies, Butt moves to a discussion of personal construct psychotherapy. He points out Kelly’s rejection of the ‘medical model’ and his focus instead being on the person’s construing. In the case of a psychological problem the person is failing to reconstrue in spite of repeated invalidation. There follows a useful overview of ‘therapeutic strategies’ including Kelly’s own technique of fixed role therapy. He makes the important point that because personal construct therapists have a very robust theory to guide their work they are free to use any technique created by those working with other approaches. Although not mentioned by Butt, we might include here the work being done by those using ‘narrative psychology’ that is based on a development of Kelly’s self characterisation.

Butt then pays attention to the therapeutic relationship. Kelly having stated that this does not differ substantially from what he sees himself as doing with a research student. But then Butt does a rather unusual thing, he looks at how Kelly saw the role of the teacher in higher education. He shows how this distinguishes between cognitive behaviour and personal construct therapy. The former plays the role of teacher as *trainer* whereas the latter therapist plays the role of a teacher in higher education. In higher education the teacher does not have all the answers. He or she helps the student find new ways of approaching problems. Butt’s coverage of this complex therapeutic approach is thorough and simply put with many good examples.

Then there follows a very interesting section on ‘neurotic misery and common unhappiness’ giving

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an account of how different the scope of psychotherapy was in the beginning of the twenty-first century compared with Kelly's day in the 1930's.

Now in chapter 7 comes that difficult construct of 'the unconscious' which Butt chooses to link to 'Human Destructiveness'. There is a useful discussion of how Freud came to develop the idea of 'the unconscious'. That is followed by a section of 'human destructiveness' which I found less useful in a book on Kelly but it is worth reading none-the-less. What I do quarrel with is the idea that Kelly 'dismisses the concept of the unconscious almost out of hand'. To me, that is definitely not the case. One of the ideas I find missing here is to do with 'dynamism' or 'energy' in the system. Freud was a medical man whose science included the notion that for movement to occur there has to be some energy to move it. Freud decided to talk of 'psychic energy'. It is this that energises *the* unconscious and, in fact, the whole person. As Butt has emphasised, Kelly said there was no need to have a separate energy system since the person is alive and one of the crucial features of life is that it moves and acts. What we have to explain is why we act as we do. So we do not have to think of each person as having an unconscious which harbours this energy and any material that is 'repressed' and kept out of consciousness. Kelly was well aware that much of our construing is not available to conscious awareness, that is, it does not have verbal labels attached to it. Butt does look at Kelly's ideas of 'suspension' and 'submergence'. But Kelly's concept of 'levels of cognitive awareness', which I have always found of great use, is not focused on.

Butt introduced me to how existentialists understand unconscious construing. Young children are not conscious in the same way as adults are. We only become conscious when we are able to reflect on things with language. I am not sure I am sold on that idea but find it very interesting and I am certainly not going to dwell on it.

The last chapter in this fascinating book is on 'A psychology of understanding'. Here the author wants to look at Kelly's contribution to contemporary psychology. Before starting with a discussion of constructivism he makes, to me, an unusual statement about Kelly cautioning about not having theories with too wide a range of convenience. Kelly clearly stated in 1955 that the focus of his theory

was psychotherapy – that is where it would be found most useful. However, in a chapter he published in 1966, Kelly was quite prepared to extend that range of convenience in line with his alternative fundamental postulate publically: It states that: *It is the nature of life to be channelized by the ways events are anticipated.* I would see that as extending the range of convenience of his theory to all aspects of all living creatures. I just mention this in passing because it is something I have, again, found most useful in my work – and life.

Butt's point about the focus of convenience of PCT being psychotherapy is, of course, correct – but it has not stayed there and refuses to do so. His main point in this chapter is that all theories of personality are designed to help us make sense of ourselves and our social worlds. This has led today to an increasing interest in constructivist and constructionist approaches. These stem from Kelly's philosophy of constructive alternativism, which Butt points out again stems from Dewey's pragmatism. What is particularly useful here is that Butt makes this into a bipolar construct with the discipline of psychology, focuses on objectivism which Kelly named accumulative fragmentalism – another of his tongue-in-cheek expressions. Constructivists look at the person and the world as if they are inseparable – we do not construe 'the truth'; we construe the world in our own way; we and the outside world are inseparable. Orthodox psychology is different in that it sees the person and the world as being different. As Butt says: "The person's knowledge of the world (that is called cognition) is the subject of psychology. A reality is assumed to be 'out there', and we discover it through our senses" (p.126)

In his next section on 'constructivism' Butt points out that constructivism is now 'common sense' to many and plays a part in the emphasis of journalists and others being interested in getting personal accounts from individuals caught up in some event.

The next section is on 'From "man the scientist" to person as author?' I imagine Butt is joking when he remarks in relation to the person-as-scientist model: "After all, how much of the time are we actually testing hypotheses, running experiments and noticing the effects of what we do?" That seems to imply that Kelly's person is doing all that consciously. Since Butt cites me as being against his

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suggested model of the person, I will continue to argue for a model that puts the construer in direct touch with the outside world. After all, Kelly suggested that *all* behaviour is an experiment. That, in my view, does not make him a behaviourist. Even the most mundane habit-formed actions are testing anticipations based on our construing. Picking up a packet of nuts by the top of the packet which is known to have been opened at the bottom instead of the top, results in the floor being covered with nuts. That particular personal construct about packets always being properly opened at the top is invalidated with a messy result. It is surely the same with our construing of floors – they are predicted to be solid enough to bear our weight. I am loath to lose that idea because it is extremely useful in trying to understand another person's world.

I absolutely agree with Butt that part of Kelly's genius was to link behaviour with thinking and feeling but there are obviously other aspects of his original thinking. I agree that the climate has changed and that the scientist metaphor probably does need changing.

I come back to my point of disagreement with Butt. For me, person-as-author or person-as-narrator do not have enough to the idea that we test out our intentions on the outside world. After all, the person is a form of motion. Both authors and narrators are rather too focused on themselves, they are doing too much of looking inwards rather than outwards. I am therefore hoping there will be more discussion on this point. I prefer something like Beverly Walker's 'person as adventurer' (Walker, 1996). An adventurer goes out and does things although I do not immediately know how that person is testing out his or her hypotheses. Along those lines there are 'person as explorer' – who does suit my requirements of always testing out how well his or her construing – our actions – are meeting up with the world outside. Then there is 'person as creator' which I particularly like as creators always have to make sure their creations fit the world around them and, as Kelly says, we have created ourselves and so can re-create ourselves if we do not like the current model. But 'creator' does have a rather unfortunate connotation. What about returning to Kelly's own choice of 'person as inquirer'?

It is remarkable how much detail Butt has managed to get into this small book – only 145 pages.

One of its main features is the excellent examples he gives of some of the difficult concepts. This is a rare book that puts Kelly's ideas within their philosophical context. It does, indeed, show not only how Kelly was 'shaped' but also how Kelly 'shaped' psychology.

Whatever my construing of philosophy to start with, I have learned where most of Kelly's ideas came from and am much indebted to Trevor Butt for introducing me to them in such a gentle and careful way.

What I am left wondering is who the target readership is that Butt had in mind. It looks as if it might be people who know some philosophy and who are disenchanted with orthodox psychology and would like to know about Kelly's ideas; or else perhaps those who are enchanted with constructivism and who now want a theory to guide their work. For those, like me, who have never studied philosophy, I can tell them that for me the act of reading this book has been to take me up a steep learning curve. But a climb I have been delighted to make. In fact, I think this book would be of value to anyone with an interest in Kelly's ideas. These ideas are elaborated in a most unusual way and discussed in an unusual context.

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scribing personal construct theory and its methods and over 100 papers. In 1968 she gave an early description of the use of 'laddering', a technique first described by Hinkle in 1965. Her work applying personal construct theory and its methods to help people overcome stuttering and to test out the theoretical assumption that behaviour and construing are intimately related, was published in 1972. That work also influenced the practice of speech and language therapy and was also a deliberate attempt to test a major tenet of personal construct theory - the Choice Corollary. In 1980 she founded the Centre for Personal Construct Psychology in London. That is now part of the University of Hertfordshire, UK. She is now semi-retired but still very much involved in personal construct psychology activities.
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