George Kelly's legacy: exploring the impact of personal construct psychology

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George Kelly's Legacy: Exploring the Impact of Personal Construct Psychology

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Abstract

This article begins with a reflective account of George Kelly's profound influence on the authors' thinking and practice, aligning closely with the central theme of this collection. We illustrate the personal impact of Kelly's ideas, demonstrating how his work not only reshapes the theoretical approaches of researchers but also profoundly influences their personal development. This starting point for the paper introduces readers to Kelly's theory by grounding it in lived experience while highlighting its broader implications for understanding human sensemaking and behavior.

Next, drawing on Kelly's biography and his Personal Construct Theory (PCT), the article examines his contributions to understanding sensemaking through a systematic and epistemological lens. Kelly's PCT does not merely offer a theory but provides a comprehensive framework for inquiry – one that bridges qualitative and quantitative methodologies and emphasizes the dynamic interplay between constructs, validation, and identity. Kelly's epistemology redefines knowledge creation as an iterative, construct-driven process of sensemaking.

This article underscores the transformative potential of Personal Construct Psychology (PCP) for applications in counselling, coaching, and organizational contexts. In conclusion, we offer Kelly's legacy as a bridge between theory and practice, enabling a richer understanding of both personal and organizational dynamics.

Keywords

Personal Construct Psychology, Reflexivity, Sociality, Personal Values, Change.

Laying the Groundwork: Kelly's Influence on Our Journey

Dorota's Reflection

The beginning of my love affair with George Kelly and Personal Construct Psychology coincided with my arrival in the United Kingdom in January of 2000. As a fresh graduate student from

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a Master's programme in Poland, I arrived in a country I have never visited before, equipped with one suitcase and a heart full of dreams and anxiety.

Devi was my doctoral supervisor. He introduced me to Kelly and his work through the Repertory Grid technique. As boring as this may sound, in practice it was nothing but. For those unfamiliar with the Repertory Grid, it essentially asks respondents to consider how two elements in a person's experience are similar and yet different from a third. This deceptively simple yet profound question forces us to identify and then examine the constructs through which we view the world. *Constructs*, in Kelly's theory, refer to the mental filters or lenses that individuals use to interpret their experiences. I like to think of them as 'labels' we place on the world and our experience which help us navigate our lives.

Completing Repertory Grids, calculating and exploring the relationships in the information about the person we are interviewing using this technique, is so playful and such fun. It reminded me of dusting off an old canvas and gradually revealing a picture which we kind of knew on some level but maybe never fully saw or understood. The small 'aha!' moments and realisations are fascinating, and this is what I always loved about research. And PCP offers wonderful methods for it.

The beauty of PCP lies in its capacity to unlock deeper understanding. The more I used these tools, the more I realised how much I still had to learn. The richness of Personal Construct Theory, (PCT, the principles that underly these techniques), became evident. Initially, I thought I 'got it,' only to realize months later that I had merely scratched the surface. This is a testament to the depth of Personal Construct Psychology (PCP, the broader corpus of Kellian thinking and application); it is deceptively accessible, with Kelly's writings being clear and engaging. However, as one delves into his major work, *The Psychology of Personal Constructs* (Kelly, 1955/1991), the complexity quickly reveals itself through the intricate network of Corollaries (Kelly's PCT principles describing how constructs operate) that accompany the Fundamental Postulate of his theory.

My journey into PCP naturally led me to draw comparisons between Kelly's work and the ethnographic approaches I had previously studied and used, especially in organizational culture studies. Ethnography, as a qualitative research method, focuses on understanding cultural phenomena by immersing oneself in the social world of the participants. Pioneers such as Geertz (1973) and Bronislaw Malinowski (1922) laid the foundation for ethnographic research, emphasising the importance of detailed, contextual 'thick' descriptions of culture. Ethnographers strive to capture the lived experiences of individuals, particularly how they navigate their cultural environments.

In my previous research into organizational studies, I employed ethnographic methods to explore how organizational cultures are formed and maintained. I used Schein's model (1992) which delves into the underlying assumptions, values, and artifacts that constitute organizational culture. While ethnography provided me with a robust framework for understanding individuals and groups through observation and in-depth interviews, PCP took this process to a deeper level.

The key difference between conducting research with PCP versus ethnography lies in the approach to the "grey areas" that inevitably arise in research. Ethnographers often interpret these ambiguo us spaces, connecting the dots and representing respondents' realities as faithfully as possible. PCP gave me the tools to move away from my interpretation and instead ask my respondents the right questions and apply tools which would enable me to add detail to the emerging picture which I would otherwise was not able to do.

PCT principles, (we'll expand on these below) allow us to describe the sense a person makes of their world in rich detail in his or her own terms, whether focusing on the elements to which s/he attends; the constructs s/he uses to express their meaning; or the personal values that give expression to his or her fundamental notion of selfhood.

This shift from researcher-led interpretation to participant-led exploration is what, in my opinion, distinguishes PCP from traditional ethnographic approaches.

What impact did this have on me as a researcher? One concept that truly reshaped my thinking was *validation*. Traditionally, validation, for individuals, refers to the process of seeking confirmation from others that their thoughts, feelings, actions, or beliefs are legitimate and understandable. We seek validation to feel accepted, understood, and supported by others, reinforcing our sense of self and ensuring that our perceptions align with social norms or shared values.

However, Kelly's understanding of validation differs fundamentally. In PCP, validation refers to the process by which individuals test their personal constructs against their experiences. Rather than seeking an objective truth, validation in PCP is about the extent to which a person's predictions about the world (based on their constructs) are confirmed through experience. When experiences align with predictions, the construct is validated; when they do not, the construct may need to be revised. This dynamic, iterative process underscores Kelly's belief that humans are essentially 'scientists' constantly testing and revising their mental models of the world, a powerful belief– much more than a theory– since it offers a complete epistemology of how anyone, scientist or layperson, understands the phenomena s/he encounters.

We often use statements such as 'everybody is always doing their best'. With PCT that statement gains a slightly different tone. It is not simply about confirming what is 'true' or 'false' or 'good' and 'bad' in an absolute sense but rather about understanding how each person is continually testing and validating their beliefs in light of their experiences. Through this lens, I came to appreciate that everyone is doing their best, not in moral or objective terms, but in terms of their own system of predictions and validations. This nuanced understanding of validation changed both my approach to research and my outlook on people.

This insight also made me reconsider how we interpret data in research. I became more acutely aware of how easily we can misinterpret another person's story when viewed through our *own* constructs. This awareness made me more rigorous in my research, asking better questions, and never assuming that I fully understood what my respondents meant.

Personally, PCP has made me more tolerant, understanding, and kinder, both to myself and others. It has given me the courage to make bolder choices. I often think of myself as a scientist in a lab when facing new challenges, experimenting with constructs and possibilities. This mindset, which I also encourage others to adopt, brings a sense of lightness and openness to life's challenges. Just treat the challenge, new situation and ultimately life as an experiment, and see what happens.

Devi's Reflection

It's very strange. Kelly's ideas have inspired my work as a psychologist for over 50 years, yet, early on, I kept missing him time and again.

I enrolled as an undergraduate at Brunel University in autumn 1965, about a year after he had visited to give a talk that was to prove an inspiration to both staff and students.

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My department offered an elective course that highlighted his impact on clinical psychology, but I chose an elective in information theory instead.

A research studentship leading to a doctorate in cybernetics took me still further away from any contact with his ideas.

My first work and publications were in psychometrics– psychological testing for employee selection purposes– a field whose basic assumptions and approach to evidence are, and will always remain, so very different to his.

But there was something about his ideas, and about the man himself, that drew me back; (too late, alas, for any hope of personal contact, for he died in 1967). The return was precipitated by an encounter with one of my Brunel lecturers a few years later, as he read one of my psychometrics papers. 'What you're doing, Devi, is telling people about themselves in psychological language. Why don't you start telling them about themselves in their own language?'

A paper I wrote, (Jankowicz, 1987), describing his impact on psychological thinking up to the late 1980s, provides further reasons for why I returned– as we shall see below. And as I became more deeply informed about his theory, with its associated techniques for understanding why people construe the world in the way that they do, I realised their enormous value; not simply in occupational psychology, the field in which I work, but, perhaps more importantly, in their profound impact on my own understanding of the basic assumptions I make use of in that work. That, in turn, led me towards the interest in research methodologies that has underpinned my own doctoral supervision.

In outlining the Fundamental Postulate and eleven Corollaries that constitute PCT, I'll expand on Kelly's concept of Sociality in particular, and on the way in which it shapes social relationships through a process of negotiation, as his most profound theoretical contribution.

But I also hope to say rather more about the status of that theory, for it's a complete epistemology of how he; you; and I, create theories in the first place– which is the chief source of his impact on how I make sense of the world. There really is nothing privileged about the knowledge they seek to create that separates 'official' scientists from the ordinary folks in the street, and this equivalence in metaphysical status has always attracted me, and many in the PCP field, because it allows for a moral equivalence too: an empowerment of the ordinary Joe or Jane.

Kelly in Context: Biography and Influences

One of the first things that attracts you to PCP is the *vivid style* in which Kelly expresses his ideas. Initially presented in a two-volume work aimed at clinical psychology practitioners (Kelly, 1955/reprinted 1991), when the first volume was offered to a more general readership (Kelly, 1963) the Dedication read as follows:

> *To a lot of people I know, and some I don't, most of whom I like, and some I don't, but acquaintances or strangers, friends or scoundrels, I must confess I am indebted to them all.*

It is also usefully direct, as when he begins his introduction of his key epistemological idea:

> *It is customary to say that* the scientist's ultimate aim is to predict and control. *This is a summary statement that psychologists frequently like to quote in characterizing their own aspirations.*

> *Yet curiously enough psychologists rarely accredit the human subjects in their experiments with having similar aspirations.* (Kelly, 1963, p. 5)

And this *directness* permeates all his writing and makes it engaging.

Finally, there is the *commitment to action*. Kelly's constructivist approach offers a shift of the emphasis in Comte's Positivism, where the need to apply theory is emphasised but viewed as dependent on a sufficiently developed theory. Kelly's view is that as experimenters, people are *continuous* theory-makers– quite literally, scientists– who develop their understanding of experience by predicting the outcomes of their actions, and that this is a constant, never-ending process. (For such predictions may be unhelpful as well as helpful, pointing to a need to revise their theory– theory development relies on concomitant *enactment* and testing.)

A Biographical Sketch

Born in 1905, being raised on a farm set in the remote flatlands of Kansas, moving between 4 different High Schools and living away from home during the formative years between 14 and 18, (Kelly, in Fransella, 1995, p. 6) created a self-sufficiency that makes for the development of a very idiosyncratic personality theory, unique for its time: a theory that eschews the notion of personality traits as enduring characteriztics positioned on a standardised sample distribution, but rather, a theory which focuses on the unique content of each individual's meaning-making from situation to situation. Kelly's first degree major in Physics covered the then-new Einsteinian and quantum-mechanic alternatives to Newtonian thinking, with their suggestion that a search for absolute truths is pointless. One can understand how this led him to articulate a constructivist theory that eschews Comtean Positivism.

Formative Influences

The educational influences on his thinking were broad. While an undergraduate major in Mathematics influenced his subsequent sophistication in measurement and analysis (Fransella, 1995, p. 7), his subsequent studies were in a different field entirely: Educational Sociology at Masters level at the University of Kansas, followed by a Bachelors in Education at Edinburgh University and a doctorate in Psychology at Iowa University. His two theses, on the prediction of teaching success and on reading and speech disability respectively, express a progression from the physical sciences to the clinical engagement that characterized his subsequent professional practice, while maintaining a concern for methodologies that combine rigorous analysis with therapeutic contribution.

Beginning his professional career in 1931, Kelly combined teaching in the State College at Fort Hays, Kansas, with the provision of clinical services on a travelling basis to patients throughout rural Kansas and Ohio, using his graduate students as his co-therapists and as time progressed, training several cohorts of doctoral candidates as clinicians thereby. He learnt to fly immediately before the Second World War, leading the College's local flight training programme, prior to being commissioned into the U.S. Naval Reserve in 1943. A series of publications on aviation training, cockpit layout, and analog computer design ensued, followed by appointment to the Chair of Psychology at the University of Ohio in 1945 and as Director of Clinical Services there in 1946. Professionally active on a national level, he was a founder-member of

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the American Board of Examiners for Professional Psychologists, and served as its President from 1951 to 1953.

Conceptual Influences

Kelly's thinking during the 1930s and 40s was influenced by John Dewey's view of behavior as anticipatory, those anticipations being guided by hypotheses about its consequences (Kelly, 1963, p. 129); and this, combined with Dewey's adoption of Herbert Mead's Pragmatism, (that philosophy, psychology and sociology should rely on scientific method in the validation of their proposals), had a great influence on his emerging theory of personal constructs.

This is particularly discernible in the way in which his Fundamental Postulate is expressed: 'A person's processes are psychologically channelised by the way in which he anticipates events', although here, he went further than Dewey, by emphasising that 'our lives are *wholly* oriented to the anticipation of events' (Kelly, 1963, p. 127); and that in doing so, the individual acts no differently to the scientist in the interpretation of experience. Parallel influences come from Alfred Korzybski's emphasis on the personal interpretation of experience, and from the notion that the language in which a person expresses this interpretation says as much about the person as it does about the phenomena being experienced (Fransella & Neimeyer, 2005, p. 25).

The Foundations of Personal Construct Theory

Kelly outlined the basic assertions of his theory in a rather formal, but very precise way, by means of a single Fundamental Postulate and eleven Corollaries. (His use of the personal pronoun reflects the mores of the times, 75 years ago). Every word counts, and almost 50 pages are required to make the argument for them in Kelly (1963). Table 1 gives you the flavour of his careful exposition in his own words, while we convey the gist of what's being said in a very brief form below, with some elaboration towards our subsequent material.

Kelly's Theory

Fundamental Postulate

The world out there is real and the world in here is equally real, in the sense that they are interdependent. You can understand people in physiological terms, or neurological, or sociological if you want to; but psychologically, people are built to create internal interpretations of the phenomena they experience. They do so in order to actively predict what will happen next. This activity has the same epistemological status as the activity of the 'scientist' when s/he seeks to understand & explain nature.

Construction Corollary

People develop these internal representations by recogizing regularities and recurring patterns in their experience, which they represent internally by means of contrasts called *Constructs*.

Dichotomy Corollary

Constructs are reference axes, not concepts; so to understand someone's meaning, you need to know 'both ends', i.e. the *expressed or emergent pole* but also the *implicit, contrasting pole*, of the construct. Thus, *'Good' as opposed to 'Inadequate'* expresses a very different meaning to *'Good' as opposed to 'Evil'*. It's the complete contrast, *Expressed-as-distinct-from-Implicit*, that carries a single meaning.

Range Corollary

Unlike a concept, which applies to everything it encompasses, a construct is limited to a *focus of convenience* found useful by the person using it. It's not used for all things in all circumstances.

Table 1. Personal Construct Theory: the Formal Statement

Fundamental Postulate A person's processes are psychologically channelised by the ways in which he anticipates events.
Construction Corollary A person anticipates events by construing their replications.
Dichotomy Corollary A person's construct system is composed of a finite number of dichotomous constructs.
Range Corollary A construct is convenient for the anticipation of a finite range of events only.
Modulation Corollary The variation in a person's construction system is limited by the permeability of the constructs within whose range of convenience the variants lie.
Organization Corollary Each person characteriztically evolves for his convenience in anticipating events, a construction system embracing ordinal relationships between constructs.
Fragmentation Corollary A person may successively employ a variety of construction systems which are inferentially incompatible with each other.
Experience Corollary A person's construction system varies as he successively construes the replications of events.
Choice Corollary A person chooses for himself that alternative in a dichotomised construct through which he anticipates the greatest possibility for the elaboration of his system
Individuality Corollary People differ from each other in their construction of events.
Commonality Corollary To the extent that one person employs a construction of experience which is similar to that employed by another, his processes are psychologically similar to those of the other person.
Sociality Corollary To the extent that one person construes the construction process of another, he may play a role in a social process involving the other person.

Modulation Corollary

Some constructs are more permeable (can accommodate many new events within their *range of convenience* than others), e.g. *'Good – Bad'*; others are less permeable (apply to only a few), e.g. *'Fluorescent – Incandescent'*.

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Organization Corollary

We can view the system as a data structure: the internal representations we call constructs are organized as a hierarchic system. Some constructs are superordinate, more central to the individual, and have the nature of personal values, subsuming other, more specific constructs.

Fragmentation Corollary

While there is a tendency towards consistency between different parts of the system– especially between *Core Constructs* (personal values) and their subordinate constructs– this consistency isn't total; it may vary according to circumstances and events as the individual interprets them. Here's where internal tensions might lead to difficulty, but also to a pressure for experimentation towards change.

Experience Corollary

Constructs represent working hypotheses about what will happen next. If they, or their implications, aren't effective in prediction, they are open to amendment in the light of those events, though people differ in the extent to which they are prepared to make, or even notice a possible need for, such amendment.

Choice Corollary

We often express preferences for one pole of each construct as opposed to another. If the whole system is to be effective in anticipating events, it makes sense for us to develop a preference which allows us to develop the system in a way which increases the accuracy of our predictions and anticipations.

Individuality Corollary

Different people develop their own meanings– their own constructs– for the same events. This is what gives them their individuality and distinct personhood. And it also leads to the adoption of stakeholder positions, especially if the constructs are closely linked to more central values pertaining to personal or organizational objectives. Where these differ from other people's, a process of negotiation may be entered into when both parties agree to do so.

Commonality Corollary

People are similar to the extent that they construe (see the meaning in) events similarly. This is not necessarily because they have encountered similar events, but because it reflects the sense they have made of those events. Nor is it necessarily because they behave in the same way, for they may be enacting different beliefs in a similar way. A Jehovah's Witness and a Roman Catholic will both attend a church on Sunday but what they do there will reflect the similarity of their construing of what they see as the Eternal Verities: some will be similar, some different.

Sociality Corollary

We enter into effective role relationships with other people (e.g. boss-subordinate; parent-child; husband-wife) to the extent that we are aware of, and can understand, some of the other person's constructs. (And not because the two sets of constructs are the same; nor because society has defined similar roles for us.)

Kelly's Epistemology

It's clear from the above that Kelly's PCT is not merely a theory of personality; it offers a systematic approach to how people make sense of experience in general. And in doing so, it offers something more profound still: an epistemology that differs from the conventional positivist view of how knowledge is created. The positivist approach follows a realist ontology, dealing with *variables* viewed as existing independently of how they are perceived, and governed by laws whose nature is the same whoever makes the observation; it seeks to *discover truths*. PCT emphasises a phenomenological ontology and deals with *issues* as they are *understood* by the person in question, an understanding that is continually tested against the evidence available from current experience, including the person's construing of other people's positions.

Reflexivity

But notice: the 'person in question' includes the researcher as well as the researched; if we find it sensible, and seek, as researchers, to apply the theory to describe how other people construe, we must surely notice that we are engaged in the same process ourselves.

> *From a construct theory viewpoint the difference between psychologist and subject is at best only a matter of level of abstraction: psychologists are trying to make sense out of the way in which the subject makes sense.* Bannister (1981, p. 194).

The epistemological distinction between the researcher and the researched, with its concomitant assertion of a privileged position in making sense of the world, disappears. There are profound implications for the social scientist. As Fransella puts it:

> *It is the theory's reflexivity which distinguishes it most sharply from traditional psychological viewpoints… Reflexivity demands that a theory account for its own construction. Psychologising in all its forms, inventing personal construct theory or proposing any other psychological theory is a human act, a piece of human behavior*, Fransella, (2003, p. 35).

This places PCT outside the domain of the 'cognitive' psychological theories and into a position that parallels the social constructionist theories (Chiari & Nuzzo, 2003). In placing it in the middle of a continuum between the radical constructivism of Maturana, and von Glasersfeld on the one hand, and the social constructionism of Gergen, and Shotter on the other, Procter & Winter (2020, p. 25), recognizing the epistemological similarities of all three, have been developing a unified approach to psychotherapy that emphasises the reflexive construing in which therapist and client engage in mutual sensemaking. It may well be that, just as Kelly's theory was shown to have a wider range of convenience than the clinical practice at which he aimed its first enunciation (Kelly, 1955/71), so their unified approach may come to influence the general field of applications within PCP.

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A Toolkit of Kellian Techniques

Having asserted the epistemological identity of researcher and researched, we do of course recogize some procedural differences. The rules by which the formal scientist makes sense of the subject-matter under investigation are usually more explicitly aligned with fellow-researchers of a shared academic discipline than those of the lay scientist (for all that both kinds of scientist are part of a broader community of practice). The past experience drawn on by the former tends to be explicitly organized by means of a literature review; and the empirical evidence is often (alas not always) checked against the experience of fellow-researchers by means of formal reliability checks and/or the explicit check on shared experience provided by triangulation. Finally, most research methods in the social scientist's armoury insist on an explicit *testing of* the match between data and the belief being examined; others, admittedly, are more akin to the way in which the layperson will welcome a situation in a carefully stated belief is shown to be *compatible with* data as in Interpretivist Method (Jankowicz, 2017, p. 103).

Kelly's PCP makes use of a variety of techniques, and people who have developed an interest in PCT will familiarise themselves with them as soon as they decide to take on the role of Kellian researcher. The purpose of all of the techniques is to identify and analyse the nature, structure, and use made of an individual's construct system; some generate largely qualitative description, while others combine qualitative with quantitative approaches.

Descriptive Procedures

Self-Characterization Techniques

The most straightforward way of implementing Kelly's assumption that the person being studied might be usefully involved in that effort is simple enough: 'If you want to know what a person thinks why not ask him?' (Kelly, 1991, p. 241). We invite the person to provide a character-sketch of him-or her-self, as if written by a sympathetic friend who knows the person very well. As Denicolo (2003) indicates, this encourages a non-trivial, precise description of self, warts and all, in a non-threatening way, the outcome being an account of how the person makes themselves plausible to others.

> *Such sketches are replete with constructs, the emergent poles at least, not only about how people view themselves but how they perceive the worlds that they inhabit* (Denicolo, 2003, p. 125).

Denicolo *et al*. (2016, p. 94–101) have outlined some further characterization techniques used to identify the constructs people use about themselves; among these are *Mirroring*, in which the interviewee is asked to describe what they see and feel about themselves as they look into a mirror, imagining that this is someone they have met for the very first time; and *Blind-Date Characterization*, where the interviewee is invited to imagine how their best friend would describe the interviewee to a potential blind date. The *Rivers of Experience* technique focuses on the ways in which an interviewee construes their personal development over time. Here, the interviewee is asked to draw a river, showing what they feel are the key points in their lives by representing these as bends in that river, labelled with the incidents that caused the change in direction, and using metaphors such as 'deeps', 'shallows', 'rapids', 'calm flows' and the like to characterize the more important, superordinate constructs they have about personal change.

Self-descriptions can be very simple to arrange, yet powerful in their yield. Epting *et al.* (1993) suggest asking the interviewee for a short inscription to be placed on their tombstone, which they felt would summarise something important about themselves. As with all these procedures for construct elicitation, it's important to specify the implicit pole as well as the emergent one.

I died with my boots on'… versus *'I'd stopped unnecessary struggling ages ago'*

says something more usefully specific than simply *'I died with my boots on*.

We can also use a Kellian framework to talk about others as well as ourselves. Davis *et al.* (1986) encouraged parents to describe their child's personality in considerable detail, analyzing their tape recordings to categorize the different kinds of constructs the parents identified.

Laddering

This procedure makes direct use of the Dichotomy Corollary, working directly with the bipolarity involved in each construct; we outline it here since it can be used to elaborate the details of constructs obtained by Self-Characterization techniques, but also those obtained by the other techniques described below.

All experience is described in terms of contrasts. So, a manager describing her perspective on innovation might offer constructs such as

Structured versus Flexible, or
Innovative versus Risk-averse

Constructs often reflect the social norms and cultural values of the environment in which individuals operate, and so it is helpful to identify the cultural values in question. However, since personal constructs are shaped by individual experiences and environments, the individual's constructs also vary significantly and may not necessarily mirror the culture or the social norms so accurately, and so one looks for a technique that is sensitive to personal values. (For example, the construct of *Structured versus Flexible* may be interpreted in different ways; some individuals may see *Structure* as essential for productivity and clarity, but also believe that it should be applied in a *Flexible* way to allow for creativity and innovation.)

Laddering provides a straightforward but very powerful way of utilising the Organization Corollary to explore superordinate constructs and identify the personal values that underpin the subordinate constructs previously identified.

Taking a construct elicited from the individual, we ask them

a) Which pole of the construct they prefer; and
b) why, for them, this is important;
c) expressing the reason as a new construct (i.e. asking for both poles and…
d) repeating steps a) to c) on each superordinate construct until no further reply is forthcoming.

For example, an individual who has offered the construct *Innovative versus Risk-averse* may prefer the former– why? Well, she might indicate that for her, *Innovation* indicates an *Openness*

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to the Future… as opposed to the Danger of becoming Stuck in the Past. At the next iteration, she might indicate that *Openness* means *Being better able to Confront Change as opposed to Adopting a Rigid, Defensive Stance towards Events*. The next iteration may justify a preference for *Being better able to Confront Change* because its important to her that she lives up to a value for herself as being *Happily Self-confident* as opposed to being *Fearful and Anxious about Life*. (Note, of course, that a different person who had provided an initial construct *Innovative versus Risk-Averse* may offer different superordinate constructs as the construct ladder is climbed, ending up with *A Fear of Chaos versus A wish for Productive Stability*, perhaps.)

Relatively few iterations are required to arrive at constructs that are value-laden; those that refer to the Self and its maintenance are characterized as 'Core Constructs' in PCT, Bannister (2003). This becomes important as we address change, and resistance to change, below.

The Laddering process requires some sensitivity on the part of the researcher, and an ability to recogize when the more superordinate and value-laden constructs are approached; Jankowicz (2004) discusses this in some detail, and offers several indicators of when a value-laden, core construct level is reached: abstraction, universality, intimacy, self-reference, and self-evidence of the language in which the constructs are described.

Analytic Techniques

The Repertory Grid

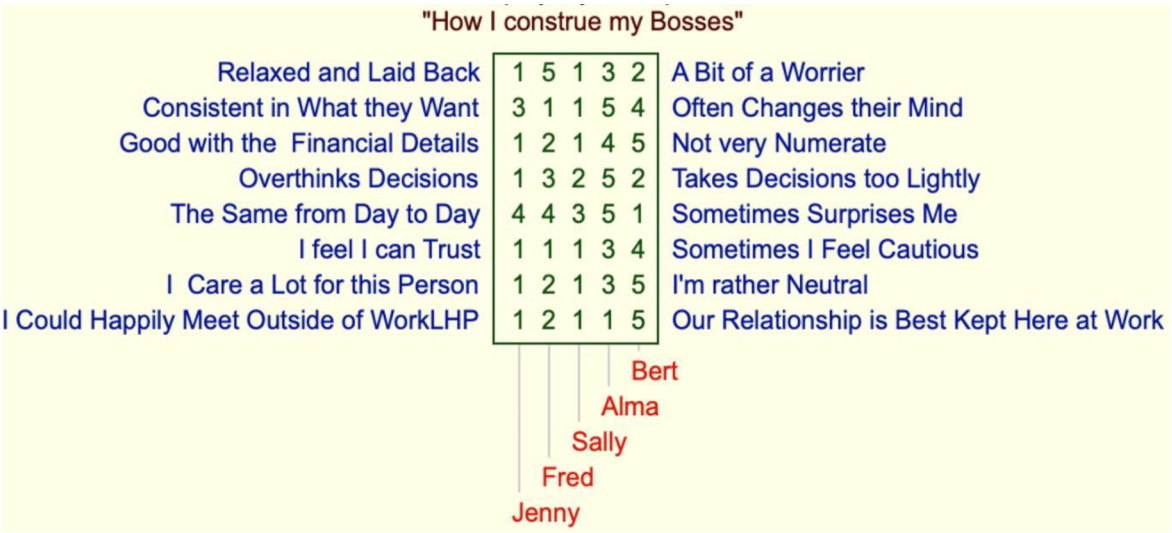
This is the most commonly used approach to construct elicitation, most likely because it adds a strong quantitative element, making for ease of detailed analysis, to the qualitative nature of the constructs we have outlined hitherto. The procedure is in four steps: a *Topic* is agreed between the researcher and the interviewee; a set of *Elements*, each being an instance or issue associated with the Topic; a set of *Constructs*, elicited by comparing the elements systematically; and a set of *Ratings* of elements on constructs. And so for example, when exploring someone's thinking about employee supervision, the Topic might be 'Managers I have Known', and the Elements would be the names of 6 to 8 Managers the interviewee nominates as likely to illustrate how s/he construes supervision.

Constructs are elicited by asking the interviewee to consider them 3 at a time, and to identify two of the three that have something in common in contrast to the third. The attribute they have in common is written down as the *emergent pole*, and the attribute that characterizes the third– and it must be a particular contrast, not a simple grammatical opposite– is written down alongside– the *implicit pole*. Of course, several attributes may occur to the interviewee as characterizing the 3 elements, and these can be noted down as additional constructs. The procedure of triadic comparison is repeated until no further, new and distinct, constructs can be obtained. Finally, since all constructs are bipolar, each can be regarded as a rating scale, with the emergent pole anchoring the '1' end of a 5-point scale, and the implicit pole anchoring the '5' end of the scale; each of the elements the receives a rating to indicate its position between the two anchors.

Figure 1 provides an example, in which the interviewee has provided 8 constructs about 5 managers known to him; each manager can be described using the ratings in the relevant column, the rating convention being that the left-hand pole carries the rating of '1' and the right-hand pole carries the rating of '5'. And so, for instance, Jenny Overthinks decisions (1), is Relaxed and laid-back(1), is neither always Consistent or liable to Change her mind (3), Trust-

worthy (1), Good with the finances (1), and so on downwards in the leftmost column. Bert is seen as very different, tending to receive ratings at the opposite end of the scale.

Figure 1.



The Grid is a powerful technique since it combines two forms of expression and hence, of analysis. And notice: unlike conventional rating systems, the Grid uses the interviewee's own constructs and not those of the researcher; it speaks in the interviewee's own language.

Qualitative Analysis

The constructs themselves can be discussed in detail; and laddered to explore the values the interviewee has about supervision. Should both agree that a particular construct might be expressed more specifically, it can be laddered 'downwards' by posing the simple question 'in what way, specifically?' and the reply, with emergent and implicit pole obtained, substituted. A precise description of the person's construct system with respect to the topic in question is thereby obtained; and it is very likely that any values obtained by laddering (upwards) will be found to be operating when the individual contemplates other, related Topics.

The way in which groups of people construe a Topic can be identified by applying standard content analysis procedures to all the interviewees' constructs pooled across the sample; and given sufficient care, impressive levels of reliability, well over the standard level of 0.80 can be obtained (Jankowicz, 2004, p. 163).

Quantitative Analysis

Since each grid records the ratings of elements on constructs, a detailed description of *what* the interviewee thinks about each element, and likewise *how* s/he thinks about the Topic, can be obtained by examining the ratings by columns, and by rows, respectively. Two forms of statistical analysis are typically used: Cluster Analysis and Principal Components Analysis.

Looking down the columns, the Cluster Analysis of Figure 2 allows us to notice and discuss how Sally and Jenny are construed as most similar. Comparing the rows, we see that the two constructs '*I care a lot for his person* as opposed to *I'm rather neutral*', and '*Good with the financial details* as opposed to *Not very numerate*' share the most meaning. 'It looks as though you

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like bosses who are good with figures… can you say a bit more about people who aren't?' might be something to explore in a personal development/counselling situation.

Figure 2.

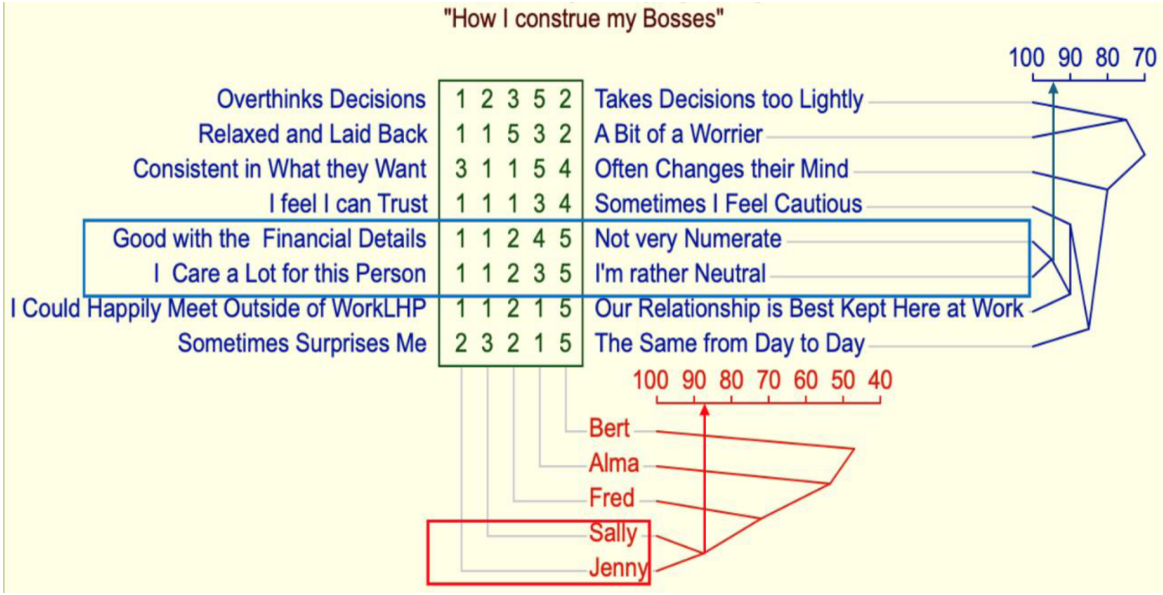


Figure 3 shows the same relationships in a different way; what is particularly useful in the discussion of the interviewee's construing is the indication a Principal Components Analysis gives (among several possible measures, Fransella *et al.*, 2004), of the cognitive complexity, or simplicity, of the person's construing about the Topic in question. Here, we see simplicity... just two components account for over 82% of the variance in the ratings… two, really distinct, factors are involved. (A substantially lower percentage figure would suggest further, distinct ways of construing the topic, indicative of greater cognitive complexity.)

Further forms of analytic procedure exist, offering similar levels of depth of analysis of the implicational structure of a person's construing, and of the resistance to change of the constructs a person typically uses (Fransella *et al.*, 2004).

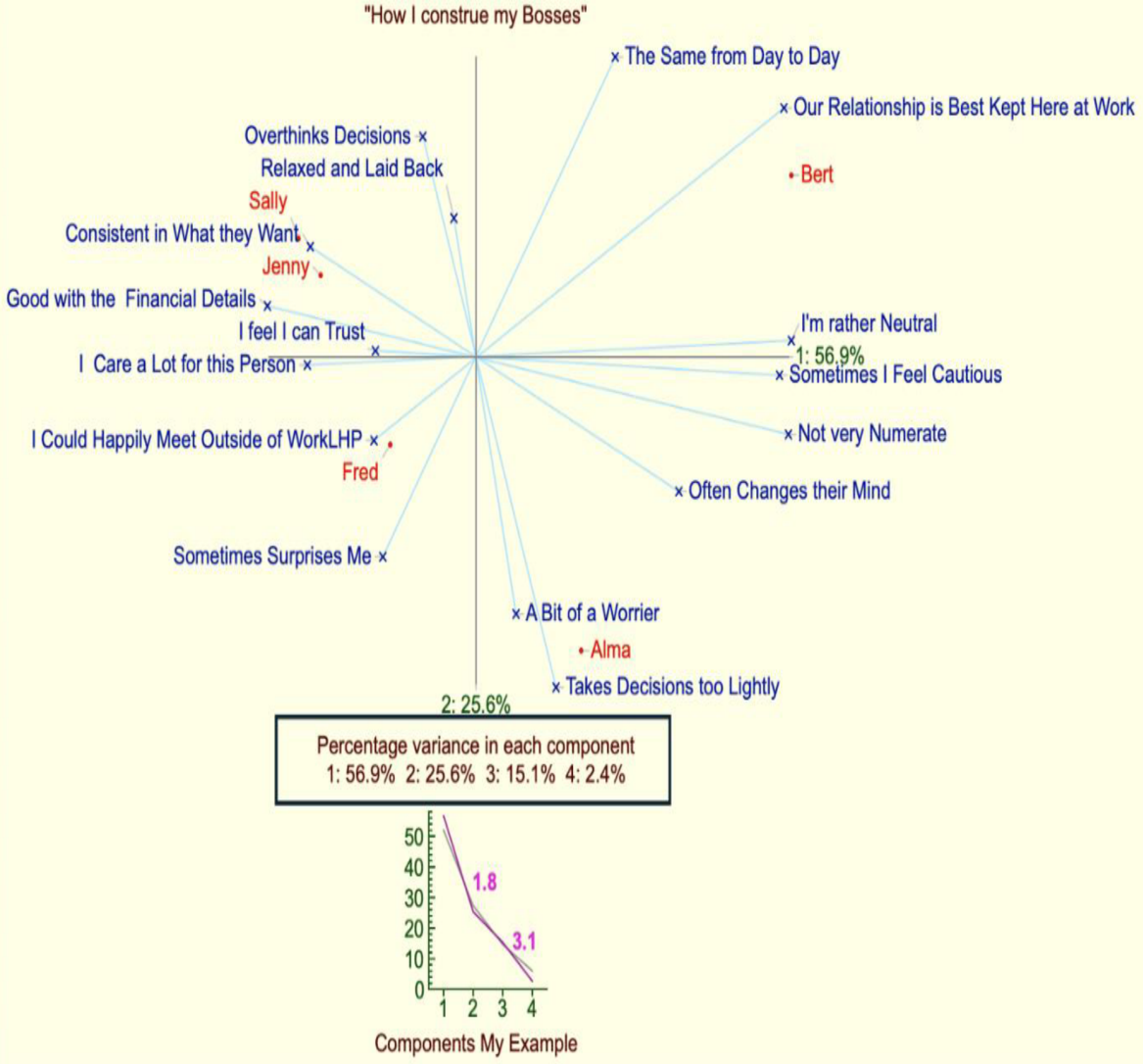
Fixed Role Therapy

Fixed Role Therapy (FRT) is an extensive and robust technique designed to create a safe platform for experimentation with new identities and constructs. On the surface, it may resemble cognitive-behavioral techniques such 'Act as if' (Ellis, 1962), however unlike these approaches, FRT is designed not just to encourage behavioral change but also to foster deeper transformation through identity work.

For this reason, an exploration of the person's core values and constructs is involved in this procedure. *Self-characterization* will often form the first step which is followed by the *Repertory Grid Technique* and other methods needed to form a full picture of the person's core and permeable constructs. From that, a *Character Sketch* is designed which will incorporate some elements from the self-characterization and current traits but also introduce new constructs and behaviors. This blend of old and new constructs and behaviors is intentional, encouraging the person to experiment and actively adapt to a new identity that aligns with their core con-

structs. This aspect is perhaps the most powerful component of the technique and explains the mechanism through which lasting change can occur.

Figure 3.



Perceiver Element Grid

The Perceiver Element Grid (PEG), developed by Procter (1996), is a qualitative PCP tool designed to explore how individuals perceive themselves and others within a given social context. This matrix-style grid positions individuals as both perceivers and elements, helping to map out the complex relational dynamics in groups such as families, teams, or communities. PEG facilitates the exploration of Sociality, or the capacity to understand and engage meaningfully with others' perspectives, making it a valuable tool in settings where improving interpersonal understanding and cooperation is critical.

In concluding this material on the Kellian Toolkit, it is wise to return our attention to the previous sections on his epistemology and its particular consequence, reflexivity. The identification of a person's constructs is an interactive activity. Constructs don't reside in the person's head to be extracted like a dentist extracts teeth; they are identified from consistencies the

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person recognizes in behavior, and their meanings agreed in a process of negotiation over meaning between the two people involved, one the 'official' researcher and the other the one being researched – and we always remember that each holds both roles during the encounter (Jankowicz, 2019, p. 2024).

Why does He Matter to Organizational Inquiry? Kelly's Impact on Organizational Thinking and Practice

While clinical psychology practitioners were Kelly's original audience (Kelly, 1955), a developing interest by psychologists in general prompted the re-issue of its first volume (Kelly, 1963) focussing more on theory rather than therapy; around the same time, occupational psychologists were beginning to use his techniques in their consultancy work in organizational settings.

It is said that the first such applications were in a market-research study of how consumers viewed bathroom design; but the earliest published study appears to have been Stewart's (1967) influential demonstration in the general management literature that Factory Managers differ from General Managers in construing their role as requiring more trouble-shooting, variety and fragmentation.

In offering an early primer on Repertory Grid technique to practitioners, Stewart *et al.* (1982) listed a broad range of organizational applications, including market research (how consumers construe products), quality control (what experienced operatives look at when they construe a product as sub-standard), employee selection and training evaluation, employee guidance and counselling, employee motivation, organizational climate, and how managerial effectiveness in different roles is construed.

A review by Jankowicz (1990) covered similar ground, pointing out that by then, organizational applications were developing in two distinct ways. First, as a 'front-end' to conventional practitioner techniques (job analysis in the drawing up of job specifications and personnel descriptions for employee selection; task analysis for training evaluation and trainee learning assessment; performance appraisal questionnaire design; expert system design). Second, as a set of principles and a technique in its own right; for example, studies of employee stress and coping mechanisms; or in team development, feeding back the implications of their construing to team members as a way exploring and developing group norms. Since then, a wide range of applications has continued to emerge in decision-making and problem-solving support, based on the comparison between an 'Ideal' element and the other, 'activity' Elements in a grid designed to identify a preferred choice and subsequent course of action. Employee guidance and counselling has continued to grow in recent years.

Cornelius' more recent review (Cornelius, 2016) suggests that the initial enthusiasm for organizational applications that characterized the 1980s and 90s has waned. After reviewing 49 studies in all the fields covered by Jankowicz (1990), with the inclusion of material on human-computer interaction and knowledge management among the items newer than those which Jankowicz addressed, she highlights an emerging problem:

> 'Though there is a clear and enduring interest in PCP-based business and management research, the common rhetoric within the PCP community, that the power of a good theory would enable PCP to supersede many of the other less robust and well-articulated methods

and theoretical ideas, has not translated effectively into a central role for PCP in this field.' Cornelius (2016, p. 271).

She suggests that sociological approaches towards the study of organizational meaning-making, and an increased consultancy-client demand for psychometrics are the main causes, to which we might add the continuing preference in university psychology departments for hypothetico-deductive, Comtean-positivist epistemology as an underlying influence; together with the predominance in the business and management literature of Weickian approaches that address sense-making largely though an organizational rather than personal level of analysis (Weick, 1995). She does, however, appear optimistic that Kellian contributions to organizational thinking and practice have a potential for growth in the recent interest in rigorous research epistemologies beyond the positivist approach; bringing discipline to mapping and soft modelling practices in management settings. She advocates a careful strategic positioning of PCP towards these areas, together with a focus on international sense-making within organizations, and on leadership in particular.

This discussion of leadership research in Cornelius' account provides a useful background to the impact of PCP on leadership development.

FRT for example, has been successfully adopted in leadership development and the facilitation of authenticity in management. Ranieri (2023) demonstrated how FRT can be used to encourage the adoption of new leadership behaviors such as better communication or relationships with subordinates. FRT has also been used as a method for leadership identity work resulting in better alignment between the leadership role and one's self-concept, ultimately leading to enhanced authenticity.

Barbour and Bourne (2022) applied PEG in post-conflict Northern Ireland to support community reconciliation. The structured reflection which was achieved in their case study through a PEG exercise helped reveal underlying biases and fostered empathy, aiming to support community leaders in their efforts to repair and strengthen social bonds.

A significant contribution to the practice of employee coaching has been provided by Stojnov & Pavlović (2010), by developing a framework they call 'Personal Construct Coaching', in which the coach facilitates the client's self-exploration, guiding them to adopt new perspectives and explore identity changes through a carefully structured process. This framework offers a flexible approach which meets the unique needs of each client and aligns with Kelly's constructivist foundations.

Fisher and Savage (1999) have focused on enhancing leadership adaptability, exploring personal and leadership transitions from a PCP perspective, while Frances (1999) has emphasized the importance of cultural alignment and change within organizations, showing how PCP techniques help individuals better integrate personal and professional constructs, leading to improved job satisfaction and productivity.

Given Cornelius' caution with respect to the wider adoption of PCT – the theory within PCP – it may be that we must rely on the work of practitioners and consultants to expand the application of PCP techniques in the organizational and management fields, and maintain the relevance of PCT thereby; with the application to organization and leadership development, the facilitation of change, and the fostering of inclusivity being at the forefront. These applications showcase PCP's versatility and effectiveness in navigating complex interpersonal and group dynamics, supporting mutual understanding and collaboration, and promoting constructive change within diverse organizational environments.

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The Power of the Opposite Pole in Understanding Change, and Resistance to Change

As a clinical psychologist interested in helping people experiencing distress, Kelly was particularly interested in the facilitation of change. We can illustrate change in construing by means of three different instances. Assuming that the Topic stays the same,

a. the person may choose to alter some of the ratings shown in an original Repertory Grid with the constructs remaining as before;
b. s/he may offer one or more different constructs, retaining or dropping some that were there before, as offering a better summary of recent experience towards a new prediction of future behavioral outcomes;
c. which may bring about differences in superordinate constructs: although these are likely to be relatively small, since, as the Organization Corollary and our treatment of Laddering indicates, constructs at the top of the hierarchy are value-laden and resistant to change thereby.

As we examine these instances, we see that the key aspect of a personal construct which is crucial in understanding change is the notion of the *emergent and the contrast pole*. These poles can be seen as a compass which we use to navigate our behavior and categorize our experience (especially where we identify with the preferred, emergent pole); and an exploration of both poles offers insights into why change efforts often fail. For case a) above, Kelly coined the term '*Slot-rattling'* to describe the phenomenon of a vicious cycle of temporary changes of the ratings that express which pole is preferred, which eventually revert to the original status quo but may be followed by another, failed attempt to change again. The difficulty of breaking old habits or addictions is something that many people are familiar with and provides a good illustration of slot rattling.

Slot-rattling happens when change occurs only at a superficial level without any of the shifts in subordinate or superordinate levels of our construct system which would be required for lasting transformation, as case b) above, indicates. Until the adjacent constructs involved in the change process are modified to support the new patterns in a meaningful and consistent way, slot rattling is likely to occur, as opposed to any enduring change (Fransella, 1991). From this perspective, *resistance to change* can occur when the person is encounters the need for a change with respect to the undesirable pole of a construct with which they can't comfortably identify. Until individuals can modify or expand their constructs to integrate the new pole as a genuine part of their identity, they are likely to remain in the vicious cycle of slot rattling or abandon the change efforts altogether. Fransella (2003) has assembled several papers on change, and further papers on organizational change, emphasising the practical utility of understanding constructs in navigating resistance.

Bourne's studies also provide practical examples of how resistance to change can manifest when constructs are deeply embedded. Thus, Bourne (2010) showed how employees preferred the *Stability* pole in their '*Stability versus Disruption*' construct, viewing the introduction of new technology and innovation difficult to adopt since it was construed as *Disruptive*. Bourne and Kostera (2007) presented the innovative idea of global standards versus local practices within

a multinational corporation, illustrating the struggle to reconcile global corporate expectations with culturally embedded practices. Lastly, Bourne and Jankowicz (2006) expanded the discussion on resistance to change at General Motors by illustrating how the construct of '*Control versus Autonomy*' was central to the employees' struggle to maintain a sense of freedom and creativity when faced with imposed standards of organization and centralised control.

And so we turn to instance c), above: 'resistance to change' often reflects a deeper struggle to preserve valued, core constructs related to personal and organizational identity. Change is unlikely to occur, for we must take into account the underlying tensions between constructs and values, and seek to support shifts in personal and collective construing at intermediate levels of the construct hierarchy. While changing superordinate, value-level constructs doesn't happen, a search for *fresh, intermediate constructs that express existing values* can offer movement towards change. Jankowicz (2002) examines these issues at the level of national culture in some detail, and establishes the circumstances in which the concept of 'resistance to change' is used shallowly by change agents. PCP offers a framework and the tools to engage more deeply with the meanings which are at play during change and to craft a more effective approach to its management.

Concluding Thoughts: Kelly's Lasting Legacy in Management

The *reflexivity* of Kelly's theory – a theory of the theory-making in which we all, 'scientists' and laypeople, engage – is a theme running through all of the present account.

On the level of personal description, analysis and application, Kelly's legacy can be usefully addressed by drawing on his Sociality Corrolary: that we can be effective in our role relationships with other people – (as boss-subordinate; parent-child; husband-wife) – *not* by occupying a similar role; *not* by construing an event in the same way as them; but only to the extent that we are aware of, and can understand, some of the other person's constructs. We are effective if we can step into the other person's shoes; and that is true even if we find the other person's constructs personally repugnant. This thought reinforces Cornelius' (2016) suggestion that Kelly's notions of self-characterization, personal change, and the Commonality & Sociality Corollaries offer a useful route for PCP into emerging organizational research agendas, leadership and leadership development in particular. Some guidelines on the negotiation processes involved are offered in Jankowicz (2024).

On a conceptual level, his most important legacy remains the constructivist epistemology, which reminds us of something we share across all the disciplines that contribute to our journal, whether from a critical theory basis, the wide-ranging social constructionist perspectives, from Kellian constructivism, or the story-telling and the interpretivist traditions – this notion of reflexivity. A theory like Kelly's, which describes other theories including itself – and in doing so, embraces self-critique, the likelihood of change in the theory, and the optimism of amendment – has much to offer our efforts in critical organizational enquiry.

Going forward, Kelly's theory and its principles offer a valuable philosophy for rethinking how we engage with today's rapidly evolving organizational landscape and environment. We live in times defined by complexity, change, and the pressing need for inclusivity. Kelly's emphasis on personal meaning-making and reflexivity offers us a way towards more adaptive and inclusive approaches to leadership, culture, and change. Kelly's legacy remains relevant

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for organizations seeking to remain agile, people-centered, and critically reflective in the face of contemporary challenges.

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