

## “HOSTILE DREAMERS” AN EXPLORATION OF PCP CONSTRUCTS OF TRANSITION

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*Abstract: George Kelly's Constructs of Transition are his re-workings of anxiety, threat, hostility, guilt, and aggression. In his theory of Personal Construct Psychology, he redefines these experiences in particular ways which are very different from familiar descriptions and assumptions, and which often diverge sharply from standard definitions. Even so, there can still be a tendency to pathologise these constructs. Professional practice often leans towards what we believe we know, with a focus on finding encouraging people to move on from positions which are regularly understood as disorders. In the context of the Choice Corollary, we propose that the Constructs of Transition might be explored in a more creative light with an emphasis on the infinite variety and validity of individual meanings. Our hostile refusals, for example, may well contain our most hopeful dreams.*

*Keywords: Constructs of Transition, PCP practice, hostility, anxiety, theoretical fertility.*

### INTRODUCTION

Mary and Massimo have been working together for many years on a wide variety of PCP projects. As we live in different countries, our conversations are usually by video or email exchanges. Kelly's Constructs of Transition have always been a primary interest for us as we believe that these ideas lie at the heart of PCP as a psychology of change. This transcript is largely from a recording of a video conversation, with a few additions in response to comments from early reviewers, for which we were very grateful, and which we were able to talk about in person during Mary's recent visit to the Institute of Constructivist Psychology in Padova. We have enjoyed the opportunity to share and develop our ideas, and we hope that this 'live' conversational approach might inspire our PCP friends and colleagues to share their ideas, and we look forward to hearing other perspectives and/or elaborations. And so, the conversation begins.

*Massimo:* As we are exploring Kelly's Constructs of Transition, I think our first consideration might be an important feature of the theory itself: its level of abstraction and emptiness. In fact, consistently following the principle of Constructive Alternativism which is the philosophical and epistemological basis of PCP, Kelly offers us an abstract and empty theory, as far as possible devoid of content. As PCP practitioners, we adopt its core assumption that alternatives, both known and unknown, are always available, while simultaneously honouring the relevance and validity of the meanings and behaviours of others. As a result, we are reminded to challenge ourselves always to make sense of individual positions and understandings through the other person's own constructions.

*Mary:* Like you, I have always valued this theoretical emptiness and its constant challenges. The practitioner is continually striving to work creatively within the construct system of the client. When I was first learning about PCP, teachers would describe it as a 'superordinate

theory', the content and process of which would develop uniquely for each person as they explored it. Embracing this core of our theory, we then have to make our own way rather than follow any set manual or standard procedures - not an easy path, but I have always loved that gift, and its extraordinary challenge.

*Massimo:* Even so, and perhaps particularly in the case of the constructs of transition, within PCP practice there can still be a tendency to pathologise, perhaps because those who use and describe the theory are predominantly clinicians, but also because professional practice can lean towards focusing on 'solutions', encouraging people to move on from positions which are generally seen as negative or problematic.

*Mary:* I guess that many people asking for help and support may indeed be hoping for speedy solutions, so I think that the challenge for the practitioner is probably to keep all options open. PCP's practical and procedural minimalism seems to endorse this approach - it requires us to stay curious and to develop ways of working together, acknowledging that experimentation and 'not knowing' often apply to both of us. As you will know, I don't practice in clinical settings, but with people's working lives. It is well over 40 years since I discovered PCP and I have no doubt that it is the most useful theory of psychology for non-clinical settings precisely because it proposes no norms, no ideals, no types, no categories, no pathology, no abnormalities. The theory applies to all of us, all of the time.

*Massimo:* I agree, there is much in Kelly's theory that makes it revolutionary even today, despite several attempts to tame it. Its relative openness and emptiness, travelling through space and time, incessantly, will be expressed by people, groups, and cultures, in their own direct experience of their own lives. The theory, in other words, is presented like a travelling instrument open and ready for different, alternative visions of the world. In this we can perceive an ethical value, a political value, and also a great beauty. We might say that Kelly suggests a sort of Socratic 'doctrine

of ignorance', where the practitioner recognizes the competence of the other person and the significance of their experiences, their meanings, and their vision of the world. The ignorant one, in all of these things, is the practitioner.

*Mary:* I love the travelling instrument analogy, thank you! Perhaps one reason this wider perspective becomes lost is because Kelly wrote his two volumes of theory and practice in the context of clinical work. He does have quite a lot to say to say in terms of classic diagnostic labels because that's where he was working at the time. I do think it is a great sadness that he died before he was able to move beyond the clinic. He seemed to be moving in the direction of international relations and I would guess that he would have reconfigured the theory in a new non-clinical major work, which, in my imagination, would have overtaken the two volumes and been the moment when PCP would break through on a much wider scale.

*Massimo:* I think it is true that, on one hand, this happens because those who manage and use the theory are above all clinicians, and, on the other hand, because it is possible to observe everywhere the tendency to search for certainties. Certainties that, unfortunately, become overwriting, and, as a consequence, the theory loses its focus on "how" and becomes a theory of "what". This tendency to overwrite also happens regarding transitions. Yet the source of the incredible fertility of this theory is precisely in its refusing any predefined structure of contents, judgements, directions.

I just would like to add that in Italian the etymology of the word "*felicità*", (in English "happiness"), can be traced back to the Sanskrit root *bhu*, and Greek *φύω* "I produce, I generate", from which originate the terms fertile and fetus, and finally to the Latin *foelix* or *felix* - a happiness that is fruitful, fertile, and in a broader sense, satisfied, fulfilled. In this sense, for its fertility, PCP could be seen as a theory of happiness.

*Mary:* I agree absolutely with this theoretical core of fertility, although I am very suspicious of

theories of happiness! I believe that our role is to walk alongside and to validate misery, despair, and all kinds of uncomfortable dread, with happiness often far out of reach. I have sometimes heard PCP referred to as a positive psychology, and, in its own particular way, I guess it is. It presupposes that there are always alternative constructions available, even though we may struggle to find them. Perhaps I would substitute 'hopefulness' as the fertile spirit of PCP - what do you think?

*Massimo:* I understand your perplexity. The focus of the concept is fertility, heuristic movement, possibility. In this, etymologically, the sense of happiness is, perhaps, traceable. Happiness, if we follow its linguistic root, can be seen as an inclusive process of the many moods that make up our existential journey rather than being a state, a goal. However, if we mean happiness in relation to substantial hedonism, or if we mean happiness in contrast to all those human experiences that are not happy but are nonetheless meaningful, I fully agree with you. If we intend to preserve the root "fertility" avoiding the possible perception of this opposition, then I think you have suggested the right word: 'hopefulness'. Hopefulness, moreover, is a word that contains in itself an idea of movement, of development - of fertility, in fact - that may not be perceived in the word happiness.

*Mary:* Very interesting - yes, I can see what you mean. Like you, I see the Constructs of Transition as one of the most useful parts of our theory, but I remember that I didn't always think this! When I first encountered them, I wondered why Kelly had taken wellworn and heavily-laden labels such as aggression, anxiety, threat, hostility and guilt, and was now describing them in quite unique and unusual ways. Why didn't he just give them new names? Now, of course, after living the theory for so long, I really appreciate what he did. Kelly's descriptions normalise these experiences, moving them away from problems or 'disorders' and locating them in the changes that we all experience, regularly, throughout our lives.

*Massimo:* Mary, we have spoken many times about the Constructs of Transition and the idea of 'hostile dreamers' - maybe you can say something about this?

*Mary:* The construct I have found most interesting personally was that of hostility - something I know well from my personal and professional life. It is defined by Kelly as 'the continued effort to extort validation evidence in favour of a social prediction which has already been recognised as a failure' (Kelly, G, 375-6). He also describes it as 'painting ourselves into a corner', refusing to acknowledge the extent to which we are now trapped. In my field of organisational work, 'resistance to change' is a widespread idea, and usually seen in an entirely negative light. My perspective on hostile resistance changed completely when I first heard PCP colleagues suggesting that we might more usefully work with resistance to change if we understood it as 'the persistence of necessity'. It struck me as a beautiful and revolutionary re-wording, moving away from an investment in promoting speedy reversals, towards exploring and understanding the unique and often complex web of personal meanings in play which have led to this position. At the same time as learning the theory, I was reading a book by Nicholas Mosley called *Hopeful Monsters* (Mosely, N. 1990) - an intriguing and controversial novel of ideas. At one point, a character speculates about the arrival of genetically different creatures which may not survive, or would survive only as monsters, but which may perhaps have evolved and adapted too early into a world not yet able to support them - born before their time, these hopeful monsters. It led me to think of people who held alternative beliefs, who were committed to certain kinds of change or progress, who refused to change sides or 'tone it down', who were punished and even imprisoned for many years, many of whom died, trapped in their small corner. For a very few, it seemed that, quite suddenly, the world began to hear and understand their message and eventually turned to embrace them. I would have little doubt that those people had long ago recognised the apparent 'failure' of their

social predictions but this did not lead to a change of position, though in a few cases it did lead to extraordinary change on a much larger scale, eventually, and at a high price. I also thought, for example, about activists I knew in the 1970's who were warning us about climate change many decades ahead of the catastrophes we are experiencing now, but who were ostracised and ridiculed for their arguments. Their vociferous opponents laughed at their fears on 'global warming', pointing to the many harsh winters of those years. I'm sure you will remember this - how bravely and persistently these activists stood firm in their unpainted corner.

These are perhaps heroic examples, but at heart they describe the experiences of people believing in something different from the mainstream, having alternative ideas, or looking at things from an unfamiliar perspective. PCP practice leads us towards sociality rather than prescription and encourages us to explore, and attempt to understand, strange and unusual constructions, and to be very careful and thoughtful about explaining or diagnosing or attempting to change other people's positions. Staying firm, not changing course, refusing to let go of a currently invalidated social prediction is also a choice, and, of course, it may involve significant negative experiences.

*Massimo:* Your early experience is similar to mine both in university and in the psychotherapy school. Anxiety was basically presented as if it were wrapped in a halo of negativity - just a disorder. To be clear, considering the context in which I was studying at the time, this was completely understandable.

The way in which Kelly approaches the world of transitions is deeply phenomenological. He is not interested in an observer's 'objective' point of view, and he does not suggest that anxiety, per se, can be considered a good or bad thing. He suggests that "it represents the awareness that one's construction system does not apply to the events at hand" (Kelly, 1955/1991, p. 367). His focus is the effort to understand the experience and perspective of the person who acts. Transitions are what we experience when our

systems of constructs are moving. We must remember that all our constructions – transitions included – are the ways in which we try to anticipate events, to find recurrences in the impetuous flow of life. Kelly reminds us that "constructs themselves undergo change, and it is in the transitions from theme to theme that most of life's puzzling problems arise" (Kelly, 1955/1991, p. 359) In other words, we are continuously moving in a sea of uncertainty, which we try to govern. Anxiety is what we feel when our system of construction meets its border, when we feel that something we perceive escapes our comprehension, and we don't know it well enough. We are in the presence of our ignorance. Even though Kelly erected his theory in the framework of the clinic, his project was to provide a wider theory of human experience, so what might usually be named as 'emotions' can be described in an innovative way as transitions, which is very far from the cultural and scientific mainstream. They are more like signals or directions, anticipatory processes not in any way prescribed as positive or negative. Anxiety, neither good nor bad, presents its "characteristically ambiguous quality" (Kelly, 1955/1991, p. 366) and it is open to personal meanings. We may find many different ways to live with it.

For example, imagine you are travelling with a friend on an organized trip through a foreign country. Each stage is established and well described, but you feel limited by this precise programming. There are different people out there, a culture to know, new food, possible adventures: an unknown world that attracts you. Then you propose to your friend to leave the organized trip and to venture together towards this new experience, towards the novelty and uncertainty, outside the usual border. But your friend refuses your proposal, they prefer the organized trip which is not very exciting but feels safe. So, you support each other to take two different paths: you will hunt for anxiety and they will stabilize in safety.

Kelly suggests that anxiety is "a precondition for making revisions" (Kelly, 1955/1991, p. 367). Ignorance is the precondition to the action of

knowing. The problem lies not in ignorance, in anxiety, but in the ways we have to face the adventure of knowing, the challenge of exploration. In PCP terms, we need to have superordinate constructions sufficiently permeable in order to accept what is temporarily not construable, anticipating that what is not known and anticipatable now will become apparent in the future; while at the same time accepting the risk of chaos. In his notes on the Modulation Corollary, Kelly reminds us that "if a person is to embrace new ideas in [their] organized system, [they] need to have superordinate constructs which are permeable - that is, which admit new elements". Without this, he reminds us, we are left with only "a more or less footless shuffling of old ideas" (Kelly, 1955/1991, p. 359). This is the risk of every learning enterprise, of every human exploration, including the most difficult of all: the journey of self-discovery, where borders are not necessarily a limit, but can become a horizon, never-crossed routes. Anxiety is the faithful friend of curious and adventurous people: the anxiety hunters.

*May:* This is very interesting, although please remind me never to go travelling with you! There are many situations where I believe that anxiety is a necessity, an essential component of moving through time. An example might be taking on unfamiliar or potentially daunting roles, such as making a speech, leading a discussion, managing an event, or appearing on screen. We may both want and dread these experiences. Professional performers like musicians and actors often describe (usually long after the event) the absolute terror they lived through in advance of their performance, but they also mention the risk of not being afraid, of becoming too comfortable and no longer doubting their abilities - these are their worst experiences, their biggest failures. They understand how valuable and helpful anxiety can be, even though it doesn't feel like it at the time. Without diminishing the problematic and negative aspects, these examples remind us of wider, more imaginative constructions of our experience, including the importance of validating

these difficult wretched experiences - this too is a choice.

In relation to everything we have mentioned, I would like to give a grateful nod to Kelly's Choice Corollary (Kelly, 1955/1991, p. 45-48). This corollary has led to some lively discussion and debate at recent PCP conferences about whether it adequately describes how we make decisions. My own view is that PCP does have a very good theory and model of decision-making, which is the CPC cycle (Kelly, 1955/1991, p. 379-380), and we also have Tschudi's ABC model (Tschudi, 1977) which supports the process of deliberation and decision-making. Personally, I would understand the Choice Corollary less as a theory of decision making, and more as a theory of movement. PCP assumes that we are all in motion, all of the time. Our myriad choices happen in nanoseconds - they are not something we necessarily register at a cognitive level. Our options at any and every moment are vast. Choice is therefore improvisational, and non-stop. In this context, we are perhaps proposing that all of the constructs of transition might be explored in a more positive and creative light with an emphasis on the infinite variety of individual movement and meanings. Our hostile refusals, for example, may well contain our most hopeful dreams.

So, here we are - life on planet earth - changing or persisting, moving on or electing to stay put, changing our minds or holding our ground, hostile and/or hopeful, monsters and/or dreamers, side by side.

*Massimo:* Yes, and each of us, from the competence of our own worldview, will find our own meanings, and the sense and direction of our own experiences. This implies the superordinate and empty theory we started with, and the difficult, exciting, and rigorous practice of a doctrine of ignorance. This is one of the nuclear constructs of the theory, a part of its identity - no judgment, no category, no predefined path to travel. It is something that, even today, seems very far from the siren calls towards certainty and the mainstream.

Seen in this light, in its travel in a stubborn and contrary direction, perhaps adopting PCP theory itself can be considered as a persistent and hostile invitation to Kellyian anxiety, to navigate a life with imagination and hopefulness, but no certainties.

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