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Personal Construct Psychology – Still Going Strong at 70?

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ABSTRACT

This paper considers the status of personal construct psychology (PCP) 70 years after George Kelly published his magnum opus presenting this approach. A description is provided of the basic tenets of personal construct theory, and the applications of the theory in a range of different settings is reviewed. Limitations of, and challenges that have faced, PCP are considered, including those relating to international growth, relationships with other approaches, methodology, and institutionalization. Possible ways forward are outlined, and an illustration of the potential of personal construct theory and its methodology to address global issues of topical and interdisciplinary concern is provided by considering a research program on perpetrators and victims of extreme violence. It is concluded that personal construct psychology remains healthy and of considerable contemporary relevance, but that it has unfulfilled potential in relation to explicitly addressing political issues.

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This paper is being written 70 years after the publication of George Kelly's (1955) magnum opus *The psychology of personal constructs*, which set out in two volumes the first fully elaborated constructivist psychological theory. After describing the basic tenets of Kelly's theory, it will consider the contributions that it has made in a range of areas of application, its limitations and challenges, and possible ways forward. An illustration of the potential of personal construct theory and its associated methodology, and of future directions in which it might be elaborated, will be provided from one of my own research programs.

Personal Construct Theory

The theory that Kelly put forward in 1955 was intended to be no less than a new psychology, radically different from the dominant psychologies of his day, with their mechanistic, deterministic, and reductionist views of the person. Unusually, and in contrast to the “third force” of humanistic psychology that was being developed at the time, it was set out very formally, in terms of a “Fundamental Postulate” and 11 corollaries of this. As indicated in its basic philosophical assumption of “constructive alternativism,” people are regarded not only as actively construing their worlds but as

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being able to reconstrue. They are viewed as primarily concerned with the anticipation of events, and as operating like scientists, formulating hypotheses, testing these out and, if the hypotheses are disconfirmed, or invalidated, revising them or attempting to minimize invalidation. The individual's choices are directed toward the better anticipation of their world, and when seen in this way choices which at first seem puzzling or self-destructive may become comprehensible. The bases of the person's anticipations are personal constructs, bipolar discriminations (e.g., "exciting—dull") between aspects of the individual's world. They are organized into a unique hierarchical system, in which constructs differ in their levels of superordinacy. Although each individual's construct system is unique, there may be some commonalities between people's construing, especially if they have a similar cultural background. Sociality, or the construal of another person's construction processes, is central to significant personal relationships, including that between a personal construct psychologist and their client.

To facilitate the psychologist's construing of their client's construction processes, Kelly (1955) provided a set of "diagnostic constructs." Areas addressed by these constructs are covert construing, which is at a low level of awareness; structural features of construing; strategies to avoid invalidation of construing; decision-making and control; and transitions in construing, the awareness of which is the basis for what would traditionally be viewed as emotions (although Kelly rejected the distinction between cognition, emotion, and conation).

In addition to a complex theory, Kelly (1955) developed techniques for the assessment of construing, the most well-known of which are the self-characterization and the role construct repertory test, the grid version of which is the most popular variant. The former is essentially a biographical sketch, as if written by a person who knows the client intimately and is sympathetic to them. The repertory grid involves the elicitation of constructs from the client by asking them to compare and contrast elements of their world (often aspects of the self and significant others). The client then sorts the elements (usually by rating or ranking them) in terms of the constructs.

Historical Achievements and Contributions

Kelly's theory was ahead of its time in many respects, and debts to it have been acknowledged by many later theorists and practitioners from a range of orientations, primarily within the cognitive tradition. However, statements such as that he was "perhaps the first cognitive-behavioural theorist" (Ivey et al., 1987, p. 302) would have been unlikely to be welcomed by Kelly (1969a), who made it clear that he "wanted no part of cognitive theory" (p. 216). In some cases, ideas and practices that have been claimed by other psychological orientations and that are now commonplace were, in fact, originated by Kelly. For example, the use of formulation as an alternative to psychiatric diagnostic systems, which is generally associated with a cognitive-behavioral approach (Bruch, 1998), was first proposed and elaborated in *The psychology of personal constructs* (Winter & Procter, 2014).

The "focus of convenience" of personal construct psychology, the area in which it was first developed and in which it has most frequently been applied, is the clinical setting. Over the years, it has been used to conceptualize the problems of, and form the basis of therapeutic approaches for, a very wide range of client groups, presenting with

psychological problems and/or physical health issues, across the age spectrum (Winter, 1992a, 2016a; Winter & Viney, 2005). Personal construct psychotherapy has been found to be similar in effectiveness to other therapeutic approaches, including cognitive-behavioral therapy (Holland et al., 2007; Metcalfe et al., 2007; Viney et al., 2005; Winter, 2003).

Burgeoning contributions of personal construct psychology in the years since it was introduced have by no means been limited to the clinical sphere (Fransella, 2003; Walker & Winter, 2007; Winter & Reed, 2016). Applications in educational psychology were pioneered by Ravenette (1999), who developed various methods for the assessment of children's construing, and more recent work has focused on the learning process and on helping teachers and students to be more aware of their own and each other's construing (Pope & Denicolo, 2016, 2020). Another area in which considerable work has been carried out is the organizational setting, including both a focus on the individual in the organization, such as by the use of personal construct coaching methods (Bradley-Cole & Denicolo, 2021; Pavlović, 2021), and on aspects of the organization itself, such as team building, resistance to change, and conflict resolution (Cornelius, 2016; Jankowicz, 1990). In the forensic field, there has been exploration of the personal meaning of offenses and the development of interventions (Horley, 2003; Houston, 1998). Work on interpersonal relationships and groups (Kalekin-Fishman & Walker, 1996), including Procter's (1981) view that families and other groups can be regarded as having construct systems, has indicated that, despite its name, personal construct psychology is as much a social (or in Procter's terms, a relational) as an individual psychology (Procter & Winter, 2020). Amongst the various other areas in which personal construct psychology has been applied are the arts (Scheer & Sewell, 2006), sport (Savage, 2003), anthropology (Orley, 1976), religion (Todd, 1988), architecture (Agiel et al., 2019), politics (Bannister, 2003), law (Reed, 2016), environmental issues (Reed & Page, 2016), artificial intelligence (Pavlović, 2026), and even accounting (Purdy, 2000).

The very wide range of application of personal construct psychology over the past 70 years has been facilitated by developments in personal construct methodology, involving not just refinements in existing methods, such as software packages for repertory grid analysis, but the creation of entirely new methods for the exploration of construing (Bell, 2016; Caputi et al., 2012).

Limitations and Challenges

Neimeyer's (1985) analysis of personal construct psychology in terms of Mullins' (1973) sociological model of the development of scientific disciplines traced the relative progress of Kelly's psychology in different countries from a *normal stage*, in which isolated workers carry out relevant research, through a *network stage*, in which there is communication between, and some development of organizations by, these like-minded individuals, and a *cluster stage*, involving the formation of groups at different centers, to a *specialty stage*, in which members of the discipline become more dispersed and may be concerned with the integration of their work with that carried out in other fields. This process was envisaged to reach a point at which personal construct theory "is gradually reassimilated into the interdisciplinary matrix from which it emerged" (Neimeyer et al., 1990, p. 17) after "like an aging parent {it} will have helped shape the future of that which outlives it" (p. 18). Neimeyer's analysis also identified four

major problems that personal construct psychology was facing: intellectual isolationism; the crisis of methodology; relationship to the cognitive therapies; and formation of an international organization.

I shall now examine how personal construct psychology has fared in the subsequent 40 years in terms of its development in different countries and in relation to the problem areas identified by Neimeyer (1985), which I have reframed in terms of choices faced by personal construct theorists, namely to subsume or be subsumed, to grid or not to grid, and to institutionalize or remain anarchic (Winter, 1992b).

International Growth and Decline

At the time of Neimeyer's (1985) analysis, the predominant contributors to the personal construct psychology literature were from the U.S.A. and the U.K., followed by Canada, Israel, the Netherlands, the then West Germany, Sweden, and South Africa. While there were still major contributions from most of these countries (although little from Israel or Sweden) on the subsequent analysis by Neimeyer et al. (1990), work by personal construct theorists in other countries (in particular, Australia, Italy, and Spain) was then well in evidence.

The situation today in academic settings is that, in the U.S.A., the U.K., and Australia, the death, retirement, or movement to Emeritus or primarily administrative positions of leading figures in the field has generally not led to their replacement by a new generation of personal construct psychologists. After a promising beginning in Spain (Feixas, 1989), personal construct psychologists are still represented in clusters of research groups in different university departments, but there are indications of movement to a specialty stage, involving integration with work in other fields. In Italy, as well as in Canada, Germany, and Sweden, there also continues to be some university representation, although this seems to have ceased in the Netherlands. Countries in which there has been a growing presence of personal construct psychology in academic settings since the work of Neimeyer (1985) and Neimeyer et al. (1990) are Serbia and the Czech Republic, while there continue to be a few isolated personal construct researchers in universities in other parts of the world, including Ecuador, Hong Kong, and Taiwan.

Although the relative prominence of personal construct psychology in academic institutions may provide a reasonably fair reflection of its popularity in different countries, it should be borne in mind that in some countries there are numerous personal construct practitioners who are not associated with academia and most of whom never publish (Cummins, 2016). For example, in Italy, the UK, and Ireland, such practitioners may be affiliated with private training centers or associations rather than with universities. One such center in the UK pioneered the development of a personal construct psychotherapy training program that provided a route to registration as a psychotherapist, and there is still a mechanism for accreditation of personal construct psychotherapists in the UK. While, with one or two notable exceptions, the inclusion of personal construct psychology in university programs has diminished (with most undergraduate psychology courses probably giving scarce, or no, mention of this approach), this has generally not been the case with training programs offered by independent centers, some of which have a broader constructivist orientation but are strongly influenced by personal construct psychology.

An alternative picture of international involvement in personal construct psychology is provided by an examination of the countries that have hosted the biennial International Congress on Personal Construct Psychology, which originally alternated between the USA and Europe before Australia became part of the circuit (see [Table 1](#)). Particularly informative is that, although the U.S.A. hosted over a third of the first 19 congresses, it has not acted in this capacity since 2011. Additional regional conferences, as well as being held in North America and Australasia, took place in several European countries, with over a third in the UK but also in Germany, Malta, Italy, Sweden, Serbia, Ireland, and the Czech Republic.

Neimeyer et al. (1990) refer to the first ten years of work in personal construct psychology as “the American decade,” which was followed by a “British decade,” in which productivity in the field in the U.K. outstripped that in the U.S.A. In more recent years, it is clear there has been a decline in activity in the U.S.A., but a burgeoning of interest in various European countries. I have argued elsewhere (Winter, 1992b) that this greater apparent enthusiasm for personal construct psychology in Europe than in the country of its origin may perhaps be explained by the long history of constructivist ideas in Europe, its climate of social, linguistic, and cultural diversity, and its psychological tradition, in which “the origin of every successful idea led to the birth of an opposing idea” (Weinert, 1990, p. 165), as well as personal construct psychology’s greater compatibility with European than American personality psychologies (Thomae, 1990).

Problems and choices

To subsume or be subsumed

This choice relates to Neimeyer’s (1985) problem areas of intellectual isolationism and relationship to the cognitive therapies. The former refers to what Neimeyer saw as the tendency of personal construct psychologists to distance themselves from, and to pay scant attention to work carried out within, other theoretical orientations, following Kelly’s (1955) rather dismissive approach toward alternative psychological traditions. Neimeyer (1985) regarded this isolationism, from a sociology of science perspective, as a necessary early stage in a theory group’s development, but one which would ultimately be detrimental. He subsequently advocated a “theoretically progressive integrationism” (Neimeyer, 1988) with approaches that share personal construct psychology’s basic assumptions, and more recently Stojnov (2016) has urged the formation of “coalitions” with such like-minded theories.

Table 1. Host countries for International Congresses on Personal Construct Psychology.

Host Country	Number	Dates
U.S.A.	7	1976, 1983, 1987, 1991, 1997, 2005, 2011
U.K.	4	1977, 1985, 2003, 2015
Netherlands	1	1979
Canada	2	1982, 2017
Italy	3	1989, 2009, 2021
Australia	5	1993, 2001, 2007, 2013, 2019
Spain	2	1995, 2023
Germany	1	1999
Serbia	1	2025

One of the early questions posed regarding integration was whether the “cognitive revolution” in behavior therapy heralded increasing commonality of personal construct psychologists, and opportunities for collaboration, with cognitive-behavioral therapists. For most of the personal construct psychologists interviewed by Neimeyer (1985), the answer to this question was in the negative. Fransella (1978, p. 6) viewed the opportunities available more in terms of competition than collaboration, asserting that ‘*If behavior therapy is up for grabs—we must be in there doing the grabbing!*’, and that ‘*We are making a take-over bid for the discipline of psychology*’ (italics in original).

Fransella’s position perhaps reflected the fact that at that time, as described by Neimeyer (1985), personal construct psychologists occupied more of an “elite” position in her home country of the U.K. than they did in the U.S.A., where more was to be gained by some affiliation with the elite group of cognitive-behavioral therapists. Subsequently, however, in the U.K. as in most other countries, it is cognitive therapy that has done most of the “grabbing,” in terms of both subsuming other approaches and monopolizing resources. Indeed, textbooks now not infrequently classify personal construct psychotherapy as a cognitive therapy (e.g., Carr, 2009; Cooper, 2008), and some personal construct psychotherapists may not be averse to accepting this classification if it allows them to practise in services that regard cognitive-behavioral approaches as the only acceptable evidence-based therapies (Winter, 2010). This is despite Kelly’s (1969a) insistence that his approach should not be labeled as cognitive, and evidence of significant differences in the process of personal construct and cognitive therapies, at least those of a more rationalist orientation (Winter & Watson, 1999).

Although there have been some attempts, largely drawing on repertory grid technique, at integration of personal construct psychology with cognitive-behavioral, cognitive, and psychoanalytic approaches (O’Connor, 2015; Ryle, 1975), the psychological orientations with which it has generally been considered more aligned are the humanistic (Epting, 1984) and systemic (Procter, 1981; Procter & Winter, 2020) models. However, the major debate in recent years has concerned integration with other approaches that could be regarded as constructivist. Reflecting the more isolationist position, Fransella (1995, p. 131) initially warned that personal construct theory “will sink without trace” within a sea of constructivism. However, she later appeared to change her views somewhat (Fransella, 2001), and most personal construct psychologists have been happy to be subsumed under the “constructivist” label and to be open to cross-fertilization with other constructivist approaches. This has been reflected, for example, in the transition of the *International Journal of Personal Construct Psychology* into the *Journal of Constructivist Psychology* and of the North American Personal Construct Network into the Constructivist Psychology Network.

To grid or not to grid

Another crisis enumerated by Neimeyer (1985) concerned the reliance of personal construct psychologists on repertory grid technique, which at that time was used in 96 per cent of published empirical studies in the area. A reduction in this figure to 92 per cent in a later analysis of the literature (Neimeyer et al., 1990) was regarded as indicating a partial resolution of this crisis, although it can hardly be viewed as a significant decrease.

More recent years have seen a diversification in the personal construct methodologies used in research studies (Caputi et al., 2012), perhaps facilitated by a greater openness of journal editors to accept papers other than those that report traditional quantitative research. Indeed, in something of a backlash against quantitative applications of the repertory grid, it has sometimes been argued, as by Cummins, that these “have given Kelly a very bad name” (The Personal Construct Psychology Association, 2014) and that only a qualitative approach is really appropriate for the study of human meaning-making. In my view, this represents as unfortunate a methodological constriction as does over-reliance on the repertory grid. In its traditional form, the grid, after all, can be regarded as epitomizing a mixed methods approach and as continuing to differentiate personal construct psychology from humanistic psychology in general by providing “a technology through which to express its humane intentions” (Kelly, 1969b, p. 135).

To institutionalize or remain anarchic

Institutionalization of personal construct psychology has been met with some resistance, not least because of the anarchism and iconoclasm that has been seen as central to the theory’s basic assumptions (McWilliams, 1988, 1991; Warren, 1996). At the time of Neimeyer’s (1985) analysis, there was some informal organization of arrangements for biennial international congresses. Subsequently, regional personal construct associations and networks were established in Europe, North America, and Australasia, together with national groups in the UK, Italy, Ireland, and Serbia. Some of these groups organized regional or national conferences, but they have experienced varying fortunes. More recently, however, a step in the direction of at least a loose institutionalization has been taken with the formation in 2016 of the George Kelly Society, which, amongst other tasks, has taken on the responsibility of agreeing the venues for international congresses on personal construct psychology.

Ways forward

In order to address some of the problems and choices outlined above, I have suggested various interlinked directions that personal construct psychologists should take to ensure that their approach continues to flourish (Winter, 2015).

Show aggressiveness

For Kelly (1955), aggressiveness involves the active elaboration of one’s perceptual field. It has been displayed by personal construct psychologists when they have applied their theory and methodology in relatively uncharted territory, thus extending the range of convenience of personal construct theory. Opportunities to increase the visibility of personal construct psychology have been provided by the possibility of applying it to topical issues, such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Cipolletta et al., 2022; Cipolletta & Ortu, 2021; Winter et al., 2025; Winter et al., 2023; Winter & Reed, 2021). Visibility will also be enhanced if such work is not only published in journals devoted to the field, such as *Journal of Constructivist Psychology*, but also those targeted at different, interdisciplinary readerships.

A particular area of potential aggressiveness, in which personal construct psychology may be regarded as not having fulfilled its promise, concerns politics. While this topic has not been unaddressed (e.g. Bannister, 2003; Scheer, 2008), rarely have personal construct psychologists taken a stand on political issues, perhaps because of a position that political statements should be excluded from science, or due to a belief that the legitimacy of alternative constructions should be respected. In regard to the former position, as Stojnov (2016, p. 178) has pointed out, it “is itself a value-laden political statement;” and, in regard to the latter belief, taking a credulous approach to alternative views of the world should not preclude condemnation of those views, and associated actions, that involve violation of the essentially humanitarian values that underlie personal construct psychology (Winter & Gaxherri, 2026). To take a timely example, surely followers of this approach should, of all people, not be amongst the ranks of those who look away as genocide is committed. To choose to speak out rather than stay silent about such acts, and the dehumanizing constructions on which they are based, is not only fully consistent with the ethics of personal construct psychology, but would also have the indirect benefit of further demonstrating the contemporary relevance of this approach. The visibility of personal construct psychology could perhaps also be enhanced by the development of its own political manifesto (Winter, 2026).

Be open to dilation, but avoid dilution, of personal construct theory

As Raskin (2004) has contended, openness, or in Kelly’s (1955) terms permeability, to other approaches may allow the evolution of personal construct psychology. While this is to be encouraged, a caveat is that, when attempts have been made to subsume personal construct psychology within other approaches, there has not infrequently been misrepresentation of features of Kelly’s intricate theory, often involving imprecise use of terms (Winter, 2015). Attempts to dilate personal construct psychology by encompassing other approaches should therefore take care to avoid the theory’s dilution.

Celebrate personal construct psychology’s individuality and distinctiveness

Amongst the most distinctive features of personal construct psychology are its elaborate theoretical structure and language, and its innovative techniques, such as the repertory grid. As indicated above, there have been some calls to de-emphasize, or relinquish, such aspects of the approach, partly because they have been seen as barriers to its development. However, in my view, “if personal construct psychology regards features such as repertory grid technique as dispensable quantitative encumbrances rather than innovative and unique jewels in its crown that still have great potential to attract newcomers to the approach, it is likely to consign itself to being just another, not particularly remarkable, psychology of human meaning-making” (Winter, 2015, p. 53).

Acknowledge commonalities at a superordinate level with other approaches

Rather than, as occasionally in the past, viewing the acknowledgement of commonalities with other approaches as a potential threat to the survival of personal construct

psychology, I would argue that commonalities should be welcomed as offering valuable possibilities for solidarity, collaboration, and cross-fertilization. Such acknowledgement is fully compatible with personal construct psychology retaining its unique identity: thus, in relation to other constructivist approaches, it can be regarded, to use a Thai colloquial expression, as “same same but different.”

Display sociality

For followers of an approach that emphasizes the importance of construing the construction processes of others, personal construct psychologists have sometimes shown a remarkable lack of sociality with their professional colleagues, including policy-makers. This was evident, for example, in early resistance to “playing the evidence-based practice game.” Even though, as indicated above, there is now a not insubstantial evidence base for personal construct psychotherapy, the studies involved rarely influence the guidelines that dictate which treatments may be used in health services, partly because their participants are generally not defined in terms of the psychiatric diagnostic categories used by such guidelines. Although this may be an expression of personal construct psychology’s understandable eschewal of psychiatric nosology, refusal to acknowledge the necessity of using the constructs of the group which one is trying to influence (in this case, health service commissioners and policy-makers) may lead to an outcome similar to what Kelly (1961) termed suicide as a “dedicated act” (Winter, 2000). Such an act may involve opting for death rather than relinquishing cherished beliefs: in this case choosing professional suicide (leaving the field open to domination by cognitive and cognitive-behavioral approaches) instead of compromising in the use of language and research methods. A similar “suicidal” choice is perhaps apparent in what might be seen as an occasional reluctance by personal construct psychologists to “dirty their hands” with marketing their approach in a user-friendly way.

A personal construct research program on topical issues

As an example of an aggressive (in the Kellyan sense) extension of the range of convenience of personal construct psychology by applying it to areas of likely broad interdisciplinary and public interest, including in cultural settings very different from that in which the approach was first developed, I shall now briefly review a research program on perpetrators and victims of extreme violence. Aspects of this program also illustrate the potential for integration of personal construct psychology and its methodology with alternative approaches.

The limits of credulity

In describing the credulous approach that he advocated, Kelly (1955, p. 322) remarked that “From a phenomenological point of view, the client—like the proverbial customer—is always right.” One of the aims of the research program was to test the limits of this approach by exploring how possible it is to be credulous with, and to construe the construction processes of, people whose views and/or actions may seem

repugnant (Winter, 2006, 2007a, 2016b). This included serial killers, with one of whom, Ian Brady, who had written a book on his specialist subject of serial killing, the approach included an analysis of his book by converting it to a repertory grid (Winter et al., 2007). Other individuals whose construing was explored included the Commandant of Auschwitz concentration camp, Rudolf Hoess (Reed et al., 2014), again drawing upon analysis of a book, in this case his autobiography; and South African men who had killed their children (Sedumedi & Winter, 2022), this study using an interview method, Experience Cycle Methodology (Oades & Viney, 2012), designed to explore the process of framing, testing out, and revising constructions. These various investigations have allowed the delineation in personal construct terms of alternative pathways to violence.

The aftermath of civil war

Work with survivors of the brutal 11-year civil war in Sierra Leone explored the construing of both perpetrators and victims of extreme violence, as well as ways of facilitating the recovery of these individuals after the trauma that they had experienced (Winter, 2016c; Winter et al., 2016). One group who were investigated, former child soldiers, could be regarded as both victims and perpetrators in that most of them had been abducted by rebel soldiers and subjected to initiation ceremonies in which they were forced to mutilate or kill other people, often including their own family members. They were subsequently required to engage in many further such acts while fighting for the rebel forces. Surprisingly, a repertory grid study showed that the self-construing of former child soldiers was more favorable than that of young people who had experienced the civil war but had not been combatants (Goins et al., 2012). Amongst the explanations for this were that the former child soldiers were able to view themselves positively by contrasting themselves with their rebel commanders. The unexpected finding also perhaps reflected the empowerment that they had felt during the war, which was very different from the normal experience of children in Sierra Leone at that time. Whatever the reason, though, it demonstrated the human capacity for resilience in the face of major adversity.

Some of those who developed psychological problems after their experiences in the civil war were admitted to Sierra Leone's only psychiatric hospital, where research was also carried out from a personal construct perspective. At the time of commencement of the research, 75 per cent of the hospital's in-patients were kept in chains. Two personal construct methods, repertory grid technique and the ABC model (Tschudi & Winter, 2011), were used to investigate staff's reasons for chaining particular clients, indicating that those who were kept in chains were less easy to construe (for example, in terms of mental illness), and therefore perhaps more anxiety-provoking (Winter et al., 2011). Work was carried out with the staff to encourage sociality with the clients, trying to look at the world through their eyes. This included the use of music, dance, and other recreational activities as ways of helping staff to appreciate the clients' humanity. Over the course of six years, the number of clients kept in chains reduced to about 20 per cent.

A particular group of victims of the civil war were those who had been subjected to the rebels' favorite form of terror, amputation of limbs. A study of some of these

individuals, using interviews and repertory grids, highlighted the invalidation that they had encountered, including experiences of anxiety and guilt, but indicated how they had been able to recover self-respect and hope by forming an amputee football team (Winter, 2016d). Essentially, playing football allowed them to experiment with an alternative self, similarly to Kelly's (1955) fixed-role therapy. While recovering from the civil war, Sierra Leone was faced with a new tragedy, an Ebola epidemic, and the use of personal construct methods allowed the experience of this epidemic to be compared with that of the civil war (Winter, 2018).

Radicalization

One of the perpetrators of violence whose construing was explored by an analysis of his writing was Anders Breivik, the Norwegian right-wing terrorist who killed 77 people in a single day (Winter & Tschudi, 2015). This elucidated aspects of his process of radicalization, which had enabled him to construct a new self that was viewed much more favorably than his old self. Radicalization and deradicalization were also explored, using a repertory grid method developed for this purpose (Winter, 2011) and narrative interviews, in a study of Salafist Muslims in Tunisia, some of whom had become deradicalized (Winter & Muhanna-Matar, 2020). It was apparent that these individuals progressed through successive radicalization cycles, and that they construed themselves more favorably and less conflictually as members of the group with which they identified than as nonmembers.

This work enabled the refinement of a personal construct model of radicalization and deradicalization (Winter & Feixas, 2019), which integrated features of several existing models from alternative theoretical perspectives. It outlined how, in an individual with a history of invalidation of construing, including some episodes of massive invalidation, radical beliefs may provide a "turning point" in their identity, with the development of a more structured and certain view of the world. As extreme negative constructions of another group are developed, there is further definition of the self by contrast with this group. Contact with others who hold similar views allows validation of the person's radical beliefs, which may also be shored up by the extortion of evidence for them, a process that Kelly (1955) equated with hostility.

Support has been provided for this personal construct model in two studies of political activists, which have also demonstrated the potential for integration of personal construct theory with the social psychological concept of identity fusion. In those who demonstrated for and against Brexit¹ (Mason et al., 2022) and in supporters of Donald Trump (Mason et al., 2025), becoming an activist was found to have involved the development of a more favorable and structured view of the self, and extreme negative construing of opposing groups, as compared to the individual's own group. Those who were more fused with their group were more willing to engage in extreme acts in support of the group. In the study of Trump supporters, of particular interest was that those who were involved in the storming of the Capitol building construed themselves most negatively.

The personal construct model, and the associated research studies, provide implications for interventions which might foster deradicalization, for example by developing a view of the world that offers at least as much structure as do the individual's radical beliefs.

Responses to killing

Work with a man who had killed his father illustrated the guilt that “one-off” offenders like this are likely to experience as a result of finding themselves acting in a way that is inconsistent with their core roles, how they have always seen themselves (Winter & Gould, 2001). Also apparent was how constructions concerning such an act of extreme violence can be suspended from awareness, leaving the individual in a state of “constructive bankruptcy” (Sewell, 1997), manifested in symptoms of post-traumatic stress, when trying to make sense of what they have done. In this particular case, personal construct psychotherapy enabled the man to find a way of construing his actions.

The responses to killing of such individuals, “reactive offenders,” can be contrasted with those of “instrumental offenders,” such as Ian Brady and Anders Breivik, who feel no guilt for what they have done because it is consistent with their core roles. Extension of this analysis to include “state-sanctioned” killers, such as executioners, military personnel, and genocidaires, as well as politicians who are the orchestrators of these individuals’ acts, has allowed the tracing of pathways of construing following killing (Winter, 2025). These include the use of various mechanisms to avoid “moral injury” and “perpetration-induced traumatic stress,” both involving awareness of dislodgement from one’s core role, as perceived either by oneself or others, and, in personal construct theory terms, consequent guilt and shame. The mechanisms include hostile extortion of evidence that their actions are the responsibility of another, including the victim/s; reducing the permeability of moral constructs so they are not seen as applicable to situations of warfare; depersonalization of killing, as in the use of remote weapons that distance the killer from his or her actions; and dehumanization of the enemy. The use of such mechanisms is very evident in current international conflicts, in which, for example, genocidal policies may be enacted without guilt (and with minimal condemnation) as a result of the construal of their victims as “human animals” (Karanth, 2023). It is not necessarily sociality that is lacking in those who implement such policies (for sociality is as much an essential characteristic of a successful torturer as of a saint) but the acknowledgement of commonality, a shared humanity, with those against whom they are perpetrated (Winter, 2022).

Constructions of genocide

At a time when the world is witnessing, or often choosing to turn a blind eye to, genocide, the way in which such situations is construed is a particularly topical issue. It was investigated in a pilot study employing a repertory grid in which the elements were situations that could be regarded as involving genocide (Winter & Gaxherri, 2026). Participants showed more distinct construing of situations in which the group with which they identified was a perpetrator or victim; and the greater the degree of participants’ identity fusion with their ethnic group, the more polarized and less differentiated was their construing of the situations. Of particular concern was that some participants construed certain situations of possible genocide in a very positive way, especially if the group with which they identified could be regarded as a perpetrator of the killing involved. This provided a chilling reminder of the potential of “ordinary people” to be complicit in acts such as genocide (Browning, 1992; Hatzfeld, 2003).

Conclusions

When he set out his new theory, Kelly (1955) also provided a list of “design specifications” for a good psychological theory, namely that it should have an appropriate range and focus of convenience, be fertile, produce testable hypotheses, show validity and generality, be amenable to operational definition, be ultimately expendable, avoid the problems associated with the assumptions of mental energy, be able to account for the choices that people make, and recognize individuality. A reflexive evaluation of the first 50 years of personal construct theory indicated that it had met all of these criteria (Winter, 2007b), apart from that concerning its expendability in that, except perhaps for extensions in the social realm, it had been subject to little modification since it was first introduced. In answer to the question in the title of this paper, the evidence would suggest that, despite reduced interest in its country of origin, it is still “alive and kicking” at 70 years of age. It can also be regarded as “still radical after all these years” (Winter, 2013), although perhaps falling short of completely fulfilling its radical potential by a reluctance to take a stand on political issues. As the research program that was described above has indicated, with its applicability in a range of cultural contexts, it remains of considerable contemporary relevance, with the capacity to provide analyses, and possible methods of intervention, in relation to areas of significant global concern.

Note

1. The United Kingdom's departure from the European Union.

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