

FRANZ R. EPTING  
1937 – 2023

## AN OBITUARY FOR A CONSTRUCTIVIST GIANT

by

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We were the last two students that Franz Epting took under his wing. We didn't realize it at the time, but we were at the tail end of a magnificent era. Franz was part of the few remaining humanistic psychology researchers in American academia. "I'm the last of the Mohicans," he used to joke. And earlier this month he left this world, leaving us with precious lessons and memories, including his distinctive laugh – so embodied, sincere, and contagious.

Franz's constructivism emanated from a deep humanistic core. He infused heart into anything and everything intellectual, away from the cold rationalism of cognitivist theories and the mind/body and emotion/reason separations. Years after retiring from his university position in the Counseling Psychology department at the University of Florida, where he worked as a loving and caring professor for 36 years, he continued to volunteer to mentor the first-year incoming graduate students.

Franz's humanistic, constructivist approach wasn't something he naturally picked up from his environment growing up - which makes his approach that much more remarkable. Franz grew up in the deep South in an environment that was anything but constructivist. He shared with us his memory of the first time he entered a cafeteria that was not segregated by race. By encouraged us to use when talking with clients: Isn't it fascinating that there's a part of you that

then, he was already a university student and entrenched in liberal values. But he still felt the gut reaction of surprise mixed with novelty at seeing Black and White students sitting side by side. His vulnerability at capturing his reaction at the time and sharing it with us decades later revealed a deeply authentic part of him: He was able to see his biased knee-reaction ingrained constructs and share them to show us that awareness is more important than feigning being right.

These early experiences encouraged him to move away from orthodoxies and to consider the awe and open-mindedness that may come from crossing theoretical boundaries. He bridges the legacies of three intellectual thinkers that he considered most influential for his understanding, teaching, and practicing of professional psychology: George Kelly, his main mentor; Carl Rogers, one of Franz's main references in humanist psychology; and Karen Horney, an early feminist psychologist and psychoanalyst who Franz appreciated for her holistic focus on subjective negotiations of power, agency, and socio-cultural pressures to perform.

Franz's integration of these three scholars contributed to the originality and innovation of his thought, especially in psychotherapy. He found constructs to be "fascinating," a word he wants to do X even though logically you're drawn to Y? Instead of an internal conflict being a source

of heaviness and negativity, it became an opportunity to gain insights and even more a sense of awe at the system afoot. The goal was not to resolve conflicts and dissociations, but to embrace the inevitability of tensions and to understand them in their context and as functional to the person, instead of being pathological symptoms to be eliminated. To Franz personal constructs were archeological artefacts primed for excavation to understand the ways in which they channeled the person's becoming. He rolled his sleeves, eager to explore and delve deeper.

As a good Kellian, Franz never liked dichotomies: he considered them too set in stone or too "serious". For him, seriousness was a key concept to interpret the everyday life. He enjoyed translating the constructivist jargon into lay language, a practice in which he was a true master and which he showcased in his famous "philo-café". He frequently told us that psychological problems would start in the moment in which people took themselves too seriously. When people lose their ability to playfully experiment with life, their construct system becomes too tight or too loose to be really useful. In his practice of psychology and consultation as well as his teaching, Franz creatively applied this wisdom of his with sharp humor to avoid *a priori* understandings that would miss the wonder and fun of being surprised.

Franz took great care to treat others without any preconceived notions. He taught us not to ask clients any questions that we already had answers to because that violates the naive approach of asking questions out of pure curiosity and of believing in the client's world. "If you already know the answer to a question, just state it as your view", Franz advised. "Only ask about what you don't know" and "bear in mind that questions are actions", as Kelly used to say: they do something, they channel the person's reflexivity toward certain directions. Franz's recipe for inquiry created authenticity.

And even though Franz held strongly to his Southern charm and elegance, he wasn't afraid to espouse radical constructivist notions. "How dare you," Franz quoted R.D. Laing, "to be sane in an insane society?". His main book, "*Personal Construct Counseling and Psychotherapy*" (1984), was translated in Italian and has been used in numerous courses and trainings on Personal Construct Psychology across the globe.

And now that he's gone, a very genuine and authentic and sane part of our lives is a part of the past. But just as with the constructs that he loved to elicit and experiment with, Franz's love and wisdom are always here for us to connect with. He is survived by his loving husband and long-term partner, as well as co-author, Mark Paris.



*Professor Franz Epting (1937-2023) participating remotely in Dr. Gemignani's seminar in Cultural Psychology at the Institute of Constructivist Psychology, Padova, Italy, in May 2018.*

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Rom has dedicated his career to working and empowering psychotherapy clients and interns from a humanistic perspective. He also enjoys writing and he has recently started playing volleyball with a Division 1 player, of which he is extremely proud.

**REFERENCE**

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