

## EXPERIENTIAL PERSONAL CONSTRUCT PSYCHOLOGY: THE PERSON BEYOND THE THEORY

Interview with Larry M. Leitner and Peter Cummins

By

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*Larry M. Leitner, Professor Emeritus, Miami University, retired to his wife's farm in Iowa in 2014. During his 35-year career at Miami, he published four books, over 100 book chapters, journal articles, and reviews, and produced over 40 Ph.D.s.*

*Peter Cummins is a retired clinical psychologist who qualified as a PCP psychotherapist in 1988, at the Centre for Personal Construct Psychology. He retired from the British NHS in 2010 after 34 years clinical practice and has continued to supervise and teach PCP. He has been involved with Personal Construct Psychology since training, from 1974-1976, at the Crichton Royal Hospital in Dumfries, Scotland, where his head of department was Miller Mair. His main therapeutic focus has been on working with anger and working with couples. He has written chapters on a range of subjects within PCP, co-written the Coventry Foundation Guide to PCP, (Cummins and Moran 2022) and A beginners guide to Personal Construct Therapy with adults and couples (Allen and Cummins 2021), edited Working with Anger (2006) and coedited: European Perspectives in PCP (1992), (with Alan Thomson), Personal Construct Psychology at 60: Papers from the 21st. International Congress (2017), (Eds) Winter D, Cummins P, Procter H & Reed N., and Experiential Personal Construct Psychology, collected papers (2019) (Eds) Cummins P. and Leitner L.*

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Professor Leitner and Professor Cummins, we are pleased to be able to talk to you after having appreciated the collection that you edited of some of Leitner's contributions relating to PCP. Would you like to tell us how your encounter with the PCP happened? And what did the publication of this volume mean for you?

L. L.: I first encountered PCP as a third year undergraduate (junior year) at the University of

Florida. I took a Theories of Personality course from Franz Epting. Franz had a graduate student doing a Master's Thesis under his direction (Seth Krieger). The next quarter, I assisted Seth in the gathering of his data on a personal construct measurement of death threat. I then did an undergraduate Honor's Thesis on this death threat measure (published in 1974 in the journal *Omega*). During this time, Al Landfield's book on premature termination in psychotherapy was

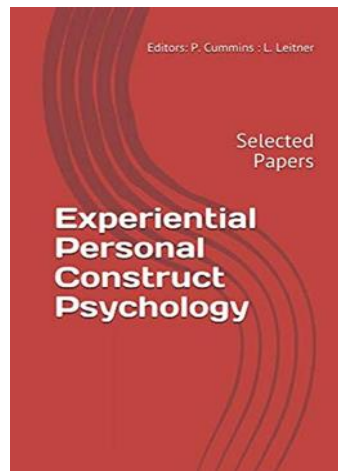
published and I decided to get my Ph.D. under his direction.

P. C.: I first encountered PCP as a third-year undergraduate in 1973, again in a Theories of Personality course, at University College, Dublin. One of the texts on the reading list was *Inquiring Man*, by Bannister and Fransella. I thought that it was an overcomplicated book which was full of jargon and was unable to answer the final exam question: "Discuss the contribution of George Kelly"! PCP became alive for me when Miller Mair came as the new Head of department at the Crichton Royal Hospital, Dumfries, in the summer of 1975. At the time the dominant psychology was that of Behaviour Therapy (the cognitive came later). Miller's encouragement, and supervision of one of my clinical placements was enough to develop my involvement with PCP in the last 46 years of my professional and personal life.

**How did you meet and what is the relationship between you and Prof Leitner? Who did the initiative for this collection start with?**

L. L.: I think I answered this in my Intro to the collected works.

P. C.: As Larry says, he answered this from his standpoint. My version is that he came to stay with me after the Cambridge conference. At Helen Jones' request I had offered a bed to one of Larry's graduate students (Reid Klion) after the Cambridge PCP conference. Reid then asked me whether I would be able to make the same offer of a bed to his professor! This meeting led to a friendship, both personal and professional. Over the years I have watched the growth of Experiential Personal Construct Psychology and found it more and more frustrating that it was quite difficult to access. I decided that it would be a good idea to collect EPCP papers into one volume.



We found Leitner's use of his perceived disappointment during the Personal Construct Psychology congress held in Cambridge in 1985 moving and enlightening. How do you see this?

L. L.: As I mentioned in the Intro, in many ways, our conversation made my career. Prior to that time, I was publishing mainly grid stuff that really wasn't meaningful to me. I would occasionally do something

more theoretical/clinical (and meaningful). I viewed the empirical stuff as something I had to do to satisfy traditional American academia. Once I had some of that done, I could turn to theory and clinical work. I think my greatest intellectual gifts were for theoretical/clinical writing.

P. C.: I had no idea that our conversation had had such an effect. I only learned this in reading Larry's introduction. As he says himself, our conversation coalesced into freeing him up, on the plane on his way home... when he was safe from any further intervention from me!!

**We realise that conferences represent an excellent opportunity to look at the state of the art of a theory. We recently seemed to notice that some contributions presented during the last PCP conferences seem to be strongly oriented to the development of computer techniques for the statistical analysis of the repertoire grids. Could you help us to anticipate from your point of view in what future direction the development of the theory of personal constructs is moving?**

L. L.: I think, personally, it is a serious mistake to continue to develop repertory grid analysis techniques. Towards the end of his life, Kelly himself regretted the emphasis on the Rep Grid. One of the problems with the grid, I think, is that it is reductionistic. It reduces life down to constructs (not construing process) and basically constructs down to words (not dimensions of meaning). I would be very interested in what

could happen to the theory if the grid was not used for 10 years.

*P. C.:* The contributions you describe have always existed within PCP. At every conference that I have attended there has always been a clear subgroup who was interested in the uses and analysis of repertory grids. Very frequently the material presented was the results of a university-based thesis. The problem comes when the grid data is presented as a set of facts that can then be analysed, and more and more complex means of analysis are developed. "Kelly envisaged the grid as a means whereby patients in psychotherapy could themselves explore aspects of their own construing which were poorly articulated" (Bannister and Mair, 1974, p. 210).

I was a member of a supervision group at the London Centre for PCP in the 1980's facilitated by the late Professor Fay Fransella who gave us a master class in using grids in therapeutic settings. The problem comes when the means of analysis are too complex for most of us to understand! This is true of most forms of complex statistical analysis. Tom Ravenette was a master at using simple forms of grid, which could be analysed along with the subject of the grid.

**If you were to retrace the brief history of PCP, would you be able to identify from your opinion the points of junction and development that this theory has already historically encountered?**

*L. L.:* I would trace three eras. There was a 15 year or so era where basically the only research being done in PCP was with the repertory grid. This was most famously illustrated with the cognitive complexity literature. I think this era was followed by scholars trying to integrate PCP with more general cognitive behavioral constructivist theories. I think there was reaction against that integration defining a third era by the time of my retirement.

*P. C.:* I think there was a distinct first stage both in the UK and the US, which was enabled by a few key figures, Landfield and Epting in the US and Bannister, Mair and Fransella in the UK. While

clearly Larry is correct about the limited nature of the literature in the UK, there was a clinical focus on PCP within certain settings in the UK which was never the source of any published work. When I joined the Psychology department at Bexley in 1976 (the year Don Bannister moved from Bexley to High Royds) there was an acceptance and sporadic use of PCP which was never the subject of any publication. This acceptance was unusual in a clinical world which was fairly rigidly behaviourist.

The second stage in the UK was the disintegration of such rigid boundaries which allowed the development of the PCP centre by Fay Fransella. Although no longer in existence the PCP centre trained the majority of UK PCP practitioners, the majority of whom do not publish.

The third and current stage is the almost complete disappearance of PCP from UK University curricula and the diminishing number of PCP registered practitioners. This is due to the fact that there is currently no formal way to gain a PCP training in the UK. There is an active group in Coventry which runs an annual internet-based foundation course and has a regular quarterly event, again on the internet.

**Why Professor Leitner collected his insights under the label "Experiential Personal Construct Psychology"? What does the additional wording "Experiential" point to? Do you think it is possible in a constructivist context to speak of a non-experiential theory?**

*L. L.:* Keep in mind that I live in the United States where there certainly were attempts to develop non-experiential constructivism. The cognitive behaviorists here certainly did not care about experience. To give you one concrete example, cognitive behaviorists would agree with me that the therapist needs a good relationship with the client. However, for them, the relationship allowed them to do something to the client where, for me, the client, as a human being, deserved respect. That makes the "good relationship" very different, in my opinion. I kept

trying to emphasize that sort of distinction in my writing.

*P. C.:* I think that there can be a difference between theory and practice. The necessity of working via the internet for the last two years has emphasised the importance of experiencing the experiential. It is very difficult to be truly experiential in the two-dimensional internet world. From my own experience and that of people I supervise, it is quite possible to work well via the internet. However, what is missing is the co- experiential experience of being in the same space. This forces the therapist to be more cognitive than experiential... if someone bursts into tears who is thousands of miles away... it is very difficult to “Hold that experience”, and for safety’s sake you return to the cognitive. There is also at least one book titled “Constructivist Psychotherapy” which was published within the “CBT Distinctive features series”!

**Through Leitner's works we can see a development of PCP that emphasises and highlights some specific aspects of the basic theory formulated by Kelly, in particular we would say that the pivot of his perspective is on the corollary of sociability. What do you think of this choice? And how do you think the kellian formulation was not already strong enough on this aspect?**

*L. L.:* Kelly described the Sociality Corollary as his most important. He mentioned almost calling his theory “role theory” because of its importance. I think, in essence, all I did was try to explore some implications of the corollary more concretely than Kelly wrote about it. I also believe that other theorists could develop totally different implications for the corollary. I believe the implications I laid out have a focus of convenience in the psychotherapy of severe disturbances.

*P. C.:* I think EPCP has a wider focus of convenience than Larry implies above. At the heart of EPCP is the development of the Sociality corollary into a way of understanding a broad framework of meaning making. This is

summarised in the Diagnostic Axes of Human Meaning Making (Leitner, Faidley and Celentana, 2000). These facilitate the clinician in understanding the issues of sociality that the person is confronting. The three headings used... of Developmental structural issues; Interpersonal components and Experiential components deepen our understanding of the struggle to achieve interpersonal relationships. For example, the idea of self- other constancy and self -other permanence are key examples of how EPCP enriches an understanding of sociality.

**In Leitner's theoretical reflection, in particular with respect to the diagnosis, we speak of "aspects of structural development" and often the term "trauma" is used. In your opinion, how can we better understand this aspect, limiting the risk of considering the person a “victim of one's own biography”?**

*L. L.:* This raises points I tried to keep making throughout my career. First, there certainly are many different ways we can construe traumas that do not make us a victim of our own biography. However, I think that, in the dynamic interplay between the person and the world, the meanings we create have at least two major tasks. First, they must honor the experiences that have happened to us. (Keep in mind that Kelly was quite clear that there is a real world happening to us). Second, they must point the way towards meaning and relational intimacy in the future. I think the meanings that we develop when we are very young often are both extremely creative ways of construing traumatic events and limiting in terms of future intimacies.

*P. C.:* By the time many people are referred to therapists they have already been labelled with a diagnosis of PTSD. The idea of trauma seems to have become widened to the extent that it covers a wide range of events. In my experience the first task on meeting a new client was to try to “detraumatise them”... i. e. to get them to the stage of discovering that they did not have to be the victim of their own biography, and to begin the process of constructing a different future.

The first step in this is to reconstrue the meaning of the word trauma... in a similar way to Kelly's redefinition of Anxiety, Guilt etc.

**In your opinion, how does Leitner's definition of "Terror" fit into the kellian formulation of transitions? Could we consider it a new transition?**

*L. L.:* I see terror as a conglomeration of all of the transitions Kelly laid out. I chose it to elicit an experiential reaction from readers as well as clients.

*P. C.:* Yes, I think it could be understood as a new transition. Leitner used the expression "Conglomeration" to explain Terror as the interaction of threat, fear, anxiety, hostility, and guilt. A conglomeration is "a large group or mass of different things all collected together in an untidy or unusual way" (Cambridge Dictionary). Within terror the precise contribution of the 5 transitions identified by Kelly can vary. This set of possible interactions justifies calling it a new transition.

**In many articles of the collection, Leitner cites and refers to the principle of the integral universe, as a perhaps less known philosophical presupposition than Kelly's thought. We would be interested in understanding with you why it can be useful for a therapist to keep this aspect in mind when working with their patients and what we are likely to lose if we do not have it particularly in mind?**

*L. L.:* Notions around an integral universe also speak to the tasks the person has when reconstruing the past. New ways of making meaning need to honor our being interconnected with others as well as the greater universe. Otherwise, those new ways limit the person or even damage him or her. Let me illustrate this concretely with an example here in America. There are many people who want to follow a former president and wreck our environment. These people's meaning systems are limited because they cannot see the ways that we are all interconnected to the planet. As such, they are

not living life as richly as they could. And, yes, because Kelly emphasized the fact that the universe is integral, their ways of construing fail to anticipate the world as it is.

*P. C.:* There is always a strong temptation in clinical work to focus on the person in front of you and to diminish the importance of the world that the person lives in. As a trainee I witnessed a person being given a diagnosis of paranoia: he "believed that the person in the apartment above his was pouring urine through his ceiling". It transpired that this person was pouring urine! "The very nature of reality is affected by my thoughts, feelings and actions" (Leitner, 2009b, p. 371). If I modify this slightly to say that the very nature of clinical practice reality is affected by my thoughts, feelings, and actions I begin to pay more attention to the reality of my "interconnected with others as well as the greater universe." within the context of clinical practice. This interconnectedness is easily seen when working in small communities, where every action that one takes has a range of consequences which we may be only dimly aware of.

**Would there be any articles that you are mainly fond of and that in retrospect you would have preferred to have been published in this collection?**

*P. C.:* There are a significant number of articles written jointly by Leitner and his students where Leitner is not the lead author. For copyright reasons we excluded them from the first edition of the collected works. We hope to remedy this in a second edition.

**Thanks for your availability and for this precious encounter!**

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