

CLOSENESS AND ALIENATION IN A WORLD IN CRISIS

Selected Papers from the 26th International Congress on
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Editorial

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The year 2025 marked seventy years since the publication of George Kelly's *The Psychology of Personal Constructs* (1955), and this special issue offers, in its own way, a small measure of how far personal construct psychology has travelled since then. The contributions gathered here reflect a tradition that has expanded well beyond Kelly's original formulation, while continuing to draw on Kelly's central concern with construing, anticipation, and his philosophy of constructive alternativism. The papers in this issue range across the recovery of Kelly's unpublished writings, epistemological concerns with truth, ethics and politics, contemporary subjectivity, gender and relational identity, embodiment and illness, perfectionism, boredom and meaning, as well as the development of new therapeutic practices. Their theoretical and methodological diversity is not accidental, but a testament both to the originality and solidity of the foundations Kelly established, and to the extent to which personal construct psychology (PCP) has developed into a pluralistic and evolving field, capable of entering into conversation with other traditions while continuing to reconstruct and expand its own vocabulary and concerns.

These papers grew out of presentations at the 26th International Congress on Personal Construct Psychology, held in Belgrade in June 2025 under the title *Closeness and Alienation in a World in Crisis*. The title was deliberately broad. Closeness and alienation can describe relationships between people, but also relations to one's body, one's gender, one's history, one's political community, and the theoretical vocabularies through which these experiences become intelligible. The crisis in question was similarly left without a single definition. The point was not to decide which crisis was the real one, but to ask what constructivist psychology might have to say when familiar ways of describing ourselves and our world cease to work as well as they once did and when this produces profound societal, cultural and political shifts.

That question is already implicit in Kelly's constructive alternativism. Our constructs are ways of anticipating, acting, joining with others, and may be revised when our anticipations fail. What makes a system of constructs interesting, on this view, is not its proximity to some final description of human nature or the world, but

the differences it allows us to make and avenues it opens up for exploration. The papers in this collection differ considerably in subject and method, but they share this experimental attitude.

It is appropriate, then, that the collection includes a return to Kelly himself. David Winter and Nick Reed describe the long and important process of tracing and editing Kelly's published and unpublished papers, recovering a body of work considerably wider than the theory with which his name is usually associated. The Kelly who emerges is a psychologist concerned with education, research, psychotherapy, interpersonal and international relations, professional questions, philosophy – even poetry! Their archaeological metaphor is apt. Intellectual traditions survive partly because each generation decides what to excavate, what to preserve, and what to reconstrue.

Other contributions are concerned with asking what can be done with him now. Larry Leitner takes constructive alternativism into contemporary political life, confronting the familiar objection that constructivism leaves us unable to distinguish between competing claims to truth. David Winter, in a different but related paper, makes the political implications of PCP explicit by proposing a Manifesto and asking what commitments follow from the values personal construct psychologists already profess. These questions recur in several papers concerned with ethics and politics. Massimo Giliberto asks whether an ethics compatible with constructivism might begin in experience rather than in the discovery of universal moral principles; Vladimir Miletic takes Kelly's phrase "liberalism without paternalism" as an invitation to put PCP into conversation with Dewey and Rorty, construing liberal politics rather as an unfinished practice of dialogue, pluralism, solidarity, and attention to the suffering of others. Milan Damjanac similarly asks what happens when constructivism is brought into conversation with critical theory and with the social and cultural conditions in which contemporary subjectivity is formed, inviting us to re-imagine Kelly in dialogue with the likes of

Adorno, Fromm and Baudrillard, emphasizing that people do not first acquire selves and then enter culture. They become intelligible to themselves and others within languages, relationships, institutions, economic systems and public constructions that were there before them.

Identity is an important topic addressed in several contributions. Miletic's discussion of ironic subjectivity draws on Kierkegaard and Rorty to suggest that psychotherapy may help people loosen their attachment to the idea that any particular self-description reveals what they really are, and that this greater openness to alternative self-descriptions may allow them to live with less suffering. The therapeutic aim, in this account, is not discovery of a hidden authentic self but an increased ability to redescribe oneself and to live with the contingency of those descriptions. Manuela Anna Pinducciu, Laura Maculan, and Marco Gemignani offer an approach to identity from the perspective of non-binary experience, in a timely and relevant paper showing how gender is construed relationally and how self-understanding develops in negotiation with recognition, discrimination, social expectations, and activism.

A similar concern with identity as something worked out between people appears in the paper by Chiara Lui, Elena Saggiocco, and Giulia Sandri. They examine the reciprocal constructions through which adolescents and adults come to understand one another, paying particular attention to the ways in which adults may become preoccupied with preserving their own roles as good parents, teachers, or therapists and thereby lose sight of the young person as an active construer of experience. Their paper brings the Kellyan notion of sociality into the foreground, suggesting that genuine understanding requires not simply attending to what the other says, but becoming reflexive about one's own participation in the relationship.

Tanja Rakita's *Crusoe's Mirror* uses imagined relational absence to illuminate core role constructions: who might I be if the people

through whose eyes I have learned to recognize myself were provisionally removed? Maria Giulia Panetta approaches the same problem through picture books, treating image, metaphor, and narrative as ways of entering another person's world without assuming in advance what that world must mean. Her paper was developed directly from a successful experiential workshop.

Other papers explore what happens when established self-constructions become difficult to sustain. Aleksandra Zindović examines bodily deterioration and serious illness as events that are capable of invalidating constructions that had previously provided continuity and identity. Ana Sokolović's paper on perfectionism similarly redescribes what is conventionally treated as excessive standards or dysfunctional cognition as a strategy for maintaining a threatened organization of self. Within PCP, apparently self-defeating behaviour becomes intelligible and understandable once we ask what predictions it preserves and what threat reconstruction might entail.

Marija Vujović Damjanac and Vladimir Miletić move further back in relational history, proposing dimensions through which caregiver behaviour may be understood in relation to the developing child's constructions of dependence, autonomy, and relational possibility.

Saša Vujić, meanwhile, brings constructivism into dialogue with existential thought in an exploration of boredom, emptiness, and meaning, asking what our increasingly frantic attempts to avoid emptiness may tell us about the kinds of lives and relationships we have learned to anticipate.

There is no single thesis that could contain all of these papers, and that is precisely why this collection represents contemporary PCP so well. A constructivist tradition should be suspicious of the desire to make heterogeneous voices converge too easily and should encourage, as a democratic theory, the plurality of ideas and approaches

PCP's future does not depend on treating Kelly's vocabulary as something to be protected from alteration or propagated without innovation and critique. Quite the contrary. A theory founded on constructive alternativism would betray itself if its greatest ambition were faithful preservation. The more interesting possibility is that PCP may continue to provide us with tools for making new distinctions and new predictions, forming unexpected conversations, and replacing descriptions that have ceased to help with descriptions that allow us to go somewhere else. The papers that follow are mostly attempts of that kind. They do not tell us what personal construct psychology finally is. They offer examples of what, in the present circumstances, we might still be able to do with it.

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