

TOWARDS A MANIFESTO FOR PERSONAL CONSTRUCT PSYCHOLOGY

David A. Winter

University of Hertfordshire, U.K.

Abstract: Writings of George Kelly that are relevant to political issues are considered, and personal construct research on such issues is reviewed. The politics and ethics of personal construct psychology are discussed, before the presentation of a draft manifesto setting out the fundamental values of this psychology and their implications for the political responsibilities of personal construct psychologists. Possible reasons for the reluctance of such psychologists to take a stand on political issues are outlined, and counter-arguments are presented.

Keywords: Personal Construct Psychology, Politics, Manifesto, Ethics, Values.

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Politics is an area that was not given much explicit attention by George Kelly, although political implications are evident throughout his work. In this paper I shall outline some of his more overt political concerns, before going on to review personal construct research in relation to political issues, and then considering the politics and ethics of personal construct psychology and the political stance that might be taken by its followers.

Some of Kelly's earliest political messages involved advocating for peace, as in a speech that won him an oratory contest as a 19-year old and was later published in a pamphlet entitled 'The Messenger of Peace', in which he described how 'In America our statesmen cry for peace and at the same time spend our taxes to create the demons of destruction. Our chemists toil long hours in the laboratory, concocting new fiends of death, while maudlin demagogues devise new phrases to fan the flame of our pristine passion into martial rhapsodies. One regiment of soldiers contains more efficient organization than all the peace societies in the United States. Our super-dreadnaughts lie waiting. Our poison gas factories

are equipped' (Kelly, 1924, p. 77). He went on to conclude that 'The dawn of peace will come not on the distant horizon of national policy nor international organization, but first within our own hearts' (p. 80).

A year later, he set out what he considered to be the ingredients of 'ultimate civilization': democracy, self-determination, universal law, mutual confidence, organisation, and greatest loyalty to the largest group (Kelly, 1925). In a later, unfinished paper (Kelly, n. d.), he wrote about an avalanche of six crises that people of the twentieth century have created within themselves, and between themselves and others, considering crises in the home, the community, and the means of survival, and those of fear and ignorance. Frustratingly, he never got round to considering the sixth crisis, perhaps the most relevant to this symposium, the 'crisis of disinvolvement'. Nor does the paper go on to present the Institute for Advanced Psychological Studies that he was apparently planning to set up to address these crises.

Kelly was nothing if not complex, and this seemingly peace-loving man served as a Lieutenant Commander in the US Navy in the Second World War, albeit one who, in his introduction to an edited book of papers on military psychology, wrote that the work of such psychologists 'should prove useful in the pursuits of peace' (Kelly, 1947, p. iii). There is also, of course, his work for the CIA (Raskin, 2025), although perhaps not too much can be read into this as he was certainly not alone amongst psychologists of his day in doing such work, the others involved even including that paragon of humanistic virtue, Carl Rogers. As Raskin (2025) indicates, Kelly's involvement in this work may, in any case, be open to alternative constructions.

The world tour on which George and Gladys Kelly embarked, funded by the CIA, was designed to gain an insight into the construing of inhabitants of different parts of Europe. His paper setting out the findings of this venture (Kelly, 1962) contained remarks about perceived extreme inequality in the USA which would probably not have altogether pleased his funders, but it is clear from much of his writing that Kelly was also no great lover of communism¹. For example, he indicated that in 'the far reaches of the East...is the greatest mass enslavement the world has ever known, but it was not achieved by invading armies; it was achieved by the slaves themselves' (Kelly, n.d.), and in the same paper wrote that 'Once the world was run by men who knew how to rule others. Then it was run by people who had learned how to rule themselves. Now, all around the perimeter of the iron curtain, government is being put in the hands of peoples who have learned neither how to rule others nor how to rule themselves' (Kelly, n.d.). On the other hand, he was critical of pre-emptive negative constructions of communism, writing that 'our carefully cultivated and over-simplified versions of the Soviet outlook are recognized throughout the world as the hallmark of America's vulnerability' and that 'we know how to compete with the communist bloc by giving economic and technical

aid to underdeveloped countries. But do we know how to give anything else? Certainly the communists have found ways of giving something else, something that is often more potent than all we have to offer' (Kelly, n.d.). Also instructive is his remark that 'there are so many who espouse all the principles of "Soviet tyranny" and still represent themselves as the archenemies of "Communism"' (Kelly, 1955, p. 1175).

Kelly's writings on the dangers of hostility, in his sense of extorting validation evidence for failing constructions, highlight implications for international conflict, as well as for political leadership. In relation to the former, he wrote that 'A nation, before admitting that its long leap forward in the defense of human life has proved invalid, may destroy millions of lives when they disclose evidence of the failure of the system. A country may go to war to displace responsibility for its mistakes' and that 'if, perchance,...hostility proves destructive of others, then that, unfortunately, is the way it must be. The economy must be preserved; the fact that the elderly starve in India or on the other side of town is incidental. Heresy must be controlled; too bad that intellectual curiosity on the campus must be denied. Bombs must be dropped; to be sure children will die, but who can say it was we who put them in the target area? From our point of view, it is a precious way of life that we defend—Cadillacs and all' (Kelly, 1969, p. 287).

If much of this seems very prescient, Kelly's writings about political leaders may appear even more so, given numerous current examples. In particular, he cautioned that a combination of constriction² and hostility in someone who aspires to be a political leader may 'make him a community or even a national problem' (Kelly, 1955, p. 903) in that: 'He may try to gag those who disagree with him. He may become able to see or to express only the most limited, and therefore often misleading, portions of the truth. He may refuse to allow anything to be seen in

¹ As with other aspects of his writing, such as the occasional unfortunate portrayals of women (O'Sullivan, 1988; Winter & Reed, 2025), this should be considered in the socio-historical context of the time.

² The narrowing of one's perceptual field to minimise apparent incompatibilities in construing.

perspective. Thus he uses his constriction, not only to keep his own world shrunken to the dimensions of his mind, but he attempts, by forcing his fellow men into the same cramped quarters, to wrench from them an appeasement of an ill-conceived ambition'. (p. 904)

Does this remind the reader of anyone?

The hostility evident in political leaders' pronouncements and actions has been illustrated by Raskin (2017) in relation to Donald Trump, by Winter and Reed (2020) in relation to the handling of the COVID-19 pandemic by Trump and others, and by Winter (2022, 2025) in relation to the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, as well as Israel's actions in Palestine.

1. PERSONAL CONSTRUCT RESEARCH ON POLITICAL ISSUES

A few studies by personal construct researchers have focused on matters relating to politics. In one of the first of these, Fransella and Bannister (1967) found that repertory grids could predict voting behaviour and demonstrate the 'brand images' of different political parties, and showed that degree of interest in politics was related to the association between personal and political constructs. Another study using repertory grid technique also considered interest in politics, amongst other variables, and found that this was higher when there was greater cognitive complexity in the construing of political figures (Mihevc, 1978). Leitner (1983), again using repertory grids, demonstrated that, in voters whose self was highly meaningful (but not in those with low self-meaningfulness), similarity in construing of the self and a presidential candidate predicted intention to vote for that candidate as well as positive ratings of their policies. Other studies have also demonstrated the utility of a credulous approach to the construing of people who commit extreme violence (Winter, 2007),

repertory grid technique in exploring how political leaders and their parties are construed (Petrenko, Mitina, & Brown, 1995; Stojnov, 1999). The findings of Stojnov's study raised the question (arguably, pertinent to more recent elections elsewhere!) of why voters in Serbia chose a leader who was construed as 'dishonest', 'nationalist', 'malicious', and 'autocratic'.

There have also been some investigations of the construing of opposing political groups using non-grid methods. In ground-breaking research, du Preez (1972, 1975, 1979) examined the constructs used by different parties in the South African parliament at the time of the apartheid regime, finding a movement from the use of race-based to nation-based constructs over time. He emphasised the importance of identifying the core constructs of opposing groups, which may be found to be incompatible, and viewing conflicts within their historical context, including the 'primal myths' of the groups concerned. Theodoulou (1996) also examined the constructs used by politicians, as well as by economic experts, and, in a questionnaire study of supporters of different British political parties, found evidence that one party (Labour) was characterised by a preference for propositional³ and aggressive⁴ construing and another (Conservative) by a preference for preemptive⁵ and hostile construing. Stojnov and his colleagues (Stojnov, 1996a; Stojnov, Knežević, & Gojić, 1997) investigated the construing of different groups during the conflict in the former Yugoslavia, his findings including a demonstration that in both Serbs and Croats 'going to war was a rationally anticipated decision to save their core national interests' (Stojnov, 2003, p. 194).

My own interest in this area has been in the context of a programme of work aiming to take

ranging from the actions of individuals, such as serial killing and filicide (Sedumedi & Winter, 2022;

³ Where the application of a particular construct pole to an element of the person's experience does not determine what other construct poles may be applied to the element.

⁴ Aggression, for Kelly (1955), was 'the active elaboration of one's perceptual field' (p. 508).

⁵ Where the application of a construct pole to an element does not allow any other constructs to be applied to the element.

Winter et al., 2007), to those of groups and nations, such as warfare and genocide (Gaxherri & Winter, 2025; Winter, 2025; Winter, Brown, Goins, & Mason, 2016). This work has included the development and testing of a personal construct model of radicalisation (Winter & Feixas, 2019). It has involved analyses of the construing of the Commandant of Auschwitz concentration camp, Rudolf Hoess (Reed et al., 2014), and the right-wing Norwegian terrorist Anders Breivik (Winter & Tschudi, 2015), as well as an exploration of radicalisation and deradicalisation in Salafist Muslims in Tunisia (Winter & Muhanna-Matar, 2020), and, more recently, studies of political activists.

One of these latter studies investigated pro- and anti-Brexit⁶ activists, or leavers and remainers as they were called, in the UK (Mason, Winter, Schmeer, & Berrington, 2022). Amongst the findings of this study was that the construct systems of these groups were very similar to each other, but the ways in which their constructs were applied were mirror images, each construing the other group in extreme negative terms and their own group very positively. This would support the possibility of working to create common ground between rival groups, as in the approach taken by Mascolo (2020). The next study was on supporters of Donald Trump, including some who had been involved in the breaching of the Capitol building (Mason, Winter, Schmeer, & Bell, 2025). As in the other studies, becoming an activist allowed these individuals to construe themselves more favourably, and of particular interest was the finding that those who stormed the Capitol building had the lowest self-esteem. In both studies of activists, those whose identities were most highly fused with the groups to which they belonged were most likely to be willing to carry out extreme, including violent, actions on behalf of the group.

2. THE POLITICS AND ETHICS OF PERSONAL CONSTRUCT PSYCHOLOGY

2.1 Political Perspective

The politics of personal construct psychology were first explicitly considered by Bannister (2003) in a talk given in 1981 in which he emphasised the libertarian and egalitarian aspects of Kelly's theory. He also wrote that 'the values of personal construct theory are not consonant with the values of any political theory which prescribes the nature of reality or which makes truth, in any form, the particular possession of a group' and that 'the political and psychological intent of construct theory is the total diffusion of power' (Bannister, 1979, pp. 31-2). From this perspective, 'the explicit purpose of psychotherapy can become the destruction of the non-reciprocal power relationship which is its starting point' (Bannister, 1983, p. 149). For O'Sullivan (1988), the egalitarian nature of the therapeutic relationship in the personal construct approach is compatible with a feminist viewpoint. While Kalekin-Fishman (1995) agreed that both constructive alternativism, the philosophical assumption underlying personal construct theory, and the personal construct approach to psychotherapy promote empowerment, she considered that personal construct psychology has been weak in terms of promoting social reform.

Warren (1996), like Bannister, viewed personal construct psychology as underpinned by an egalitarian outlook, involving 'a belief that each of us should regard others as having equal worth and equal rights to ourselves; and a belief that others should be treated in a fashion that respects that worth and those rights' (Warren, 1992, p. 146). He also considered that it can be regarded as neutral, neither left nor right, in terms of socio-political orientation. In any case, for Bannister (2003) the left-right construct had a too narrow range of convenience, and he urged a 'shift change' in which a new construct is developed to apply to political issues.

⁶ The departure of the United Kingdom from the European Union.

Bannister was a member of a small political movement in the UK, the Common Wealth Party, which advocated anarcho-syndicalism, direct action by trade unions with the ultimate aim of gaining control of the means of production, and which incidentally, some 80 years ago, proposed a two-state solution to the problem of Israel and Palestine. In contrast to Bannister's overtly political stance, his frequent collaborator, Fransella, expressed great surprise that most people who read an analysis that she had written for *Der Spiegel* of the construing of British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher regarded this as political (Fransella, 1985).

2.2 Ethics

Its underlying philosophical assumption of constructive alternativism, namely that 'all of our present interpretations of the universe are subject to revision or replacement' (Kelly, 1955, p.15, italics in original), has led to a mistaken view of personal construct theory as involving an 'anything goes' moral relativism, a criticism that has also been levelled at constructivism in general (e.g., Held, 1995, 1998). Raskin and Debany (2018) have robustly dismissed this criticism as being based upon a caricature of constructivism. They have indicated that each of us develops our own personal ethical construct system, which, as Jenkin, Ellis-Caird, & Winter (2020) have demonstrated, may consist of separate subsystems relating to different areas of the person's life.

As Stojnov (1996b) noted, personal construct psychology may legitimately be regarded as relativistic in relation to the content of construing in that it does not assume the validity of any particular view of the world, but it is 'ethically universalist' in terms of the *form*, or process and structure, of construing. Thus, it favours propositional over preemptive construing and experimentation over hostile extortion of evidence for one's constructions. This is not to deny that preemptive construing and hostility are

sometimes necessary in making decisions or retaining some capacity to anticipate the world. Furthermore, although this is not a sufficient condition for ethical interpersonal behaviour, which also requires perceived commonality of construing (Winter, 2022), it encourages relationships based upon sociality (Hinkle, 1970), the construing of the other person's construction processes, or even those of the universe (Leitner & Hayes, 2016). In a later consideration of the basic assumptions of personal construct psychology (reflected in epistemologies of 'action', 'relation', 'decentration', and 'relativism'), Stojnov (2016) used the metaphor that these could be regarded as the main tenets of a 'political programme', and called for the formation of coalitions with members of the broader anti-essentialist and anti-foundationalist camps, ranging from constructivists and social constructionists to Michel Foucault.

2.3 A Personal Construct Psychology Manifesto

I shall now turn to the controversial area of the political responsibilities of personal construct psychologists. These are set out below in a possible manifesto⁷ for personal construct psychology, which, although it deliberately does not use the jargon of Kelly's theory, is very much concerned with such processes as constructive alternativism, preemptive, constellatory⁸, and propositional construing, hostility, and aggression. It begins with a statement of what I would consider to be PCP's fundamental values, some of which have been outlined in the previous discussion of the ethics of personal construct psychology.

Fundamental Values

Personal construct psychology recognises that there are many viable alternative views of events.

In general, therefore, it will celebrate the diversity, and recognise the equality, of such views.

Personal construct psychologists strive to understand the ways in which other people view the world.

⁷ The manifesto has been drafted for consideration and refinement by the committee of the George Kelly Society.

⁸ Where, as in stereotypes, the application of a construct pole to an element prescribes which other construct poles are applied to the element.

They therefore encourage the attempt to view the world through the eyes of the other person or group, taking these views seriously and trying to understand them even if one does not agree with them.

Personal construct psychologists consider all views of the world to be subject to revision.

They will therefore encourage the recognition that no view of events represents a fixed reality and that no individual is unable to change.

Personal construct psychologists strive for experimentation with different views of the world.

They therefore, in general, invite an adventurous and exploratory approach to the world.

Personal construct psychology does not consider that viewing an event in one way should prescribe the other ways in which it can or cannot be viewed.

It will therefore promote a view of particular events that does not limit the ways in which they can be seen.

Since, as we have seen, constructivist approaches have sometimes been misunderstood as morally relativist, a caveat is in order.

Caveat

Not all views of events are acceptable to personal construct psychologists. Views, and consequent actions, that are inconsistent with their fundamental values include:

- those that attempt to suppress the views of other individuals or groups (except when these latter views themselves involve the silencing of others' views)
- those that involve dismissal of the views of others and/or no attempt to understand these
- those that claim to represent a correct and fixed view of events
- attempts to manipulate events to confirm a particular view of the world

that did not begin at the end of 2023 but can be regarded as only a continuation of a long-term project. Apart from a few brave souls, such as the South African government, voices are rarely

- attempts to limit the freedom of other individuals or groups to be adventurous and to experiment with alternative views of the world (except when these latter views themselves involve the silencing of others' views)

views that involve stereotypes and prejudices. The manifesto also considers the implications for personal construct psychologists of their fundamental values, which I consider to be as follows:

Implications

It is incumbent upon personal construct psychologists to:

- engage in scholarly and professional activities that are consistent with their fundamental values
- attempt to promote these values to the wider public
- speak out against, and counter in other ways, views and actions that are contrary to these values (which may include individual episodes of abuse, political manifestos, government policies, and incidences of mass suppression of another group, including dehumanisation and genocide)
- be aware that failure to take explicit positions against such views and actions may legitimately be viewed as support of, or complicity with, them.

3. CONCLUSIONS

I was motivated to focus on the issues considered in this paper by recent world events, although the processes involved in these, such as dehumanisation and cycles of Kellyan hostility, are not substantially different from those that have characterised human conflict for centuries. Of particular concern to me is that, once again, the world is standing by and witnessing, or largely turning a blind eye to, a genocide, in this case one raised, and it is all too easy to constrict to our safe, cosy world by turning off the television and thus avoiding being upset by constant images of death, destruction, and despair.

I am, of course, aware that the reader's constructions concerning particular conflicts in the world are likely to be different in various ways from my own, but if we do share fundamental values of the sort that I have listed, surely we, of all people, should feel obliged to take every opportunity to condemn gross violations of these values. Personal construct psychology was, after all, never intended to be confined to the academic ivory tower but is inherently political, whether we like it or not. As Charles de Gaulle once said, 'Politics is too serious a matter to be left to the politicians' (Williams, 1961). Speculating on the possible political impact of personal construct psychology, Scheer (2008, p. 83) suggested that 'we might try to imagine how the world of politics (and politicians!) would look like if they were inspired and informed by the spirit and the accumulated body of knowledge – or should we say: wisdom? – of PCP'. It is often claimed that political statements should be excluded from science, but, as Stojnov (2016) has pointed out, this 'is itself a value-laden political statement' (p. 178) – or, as Kelly (1959) put it, 'While scientists may be reluctant to become embroiled in any discussion of values, even the laying down of emphatic rules about what science is to be and what it is not to be represents the imposition of a value system'. Perhaps, in any case, it is time to experiment with the notion of the person not only as a scientist but also as a politician, and what better place to start the experiment than with ourselves?

A further impediment to personal construct psychologists taking a stand on political issues may be a belief that a credulous attitude to alternative constructions of the world should preclude any condemnation of opposing views. Further, such condemnation has been discouraged, from a social constructionist perspective, because of its likelihood of foreclosing a conversation that should be 'kept going' (Raskin, 2010). However, the prolongation of a conversation may be very much in the interests of an opposing group, who, if they are engaged in oppression such as genocide, may be only too happy to continue to

purport to converse while, in the meantime, thousands more people are killed.

As for what Kelly would have thought about all of this, a clue is perhaps provided by Bannister's (2003) report of his last meal with George, where they discussed the direction in which they would like personal construct theory to be elaborated. George's preference was apparently politics, maybe in a move from the contrast pole that he had previously described as disinvolvement. We also know that he himself was not averse to a little political activism. For example, in Washington at the time of racial segregation, despite the stares of fellow passengers, he sat with his family in the section of the bus designated for Black people (Aldridge, personal communication).

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Winter is Professor Emeritus of Clinical Psychology at the University of Hertfordshire, where he was previously Programme Director of the Doctorate in Clinical Psychology as well as being Head of Clinical Psychology Services for Barnet in the English National Health Service. He is also Director of Postgraduate Studies at Colombo Institute of Research and Psychology. He has over 200 publications, and his books include *Personal and Relational Construct Psychotherapy* (with Harry Procter, 2020, Palgrave Macmillan), *Personal Construct Psychology in Clinical Practice: Theory, Research, and Applications* (1992, Routledge) and *Trauma, Survival and Resilience in War Zones: The Psychological Impact of War in Sierra Leone and Beyond* (with Rachel Brown, Stephanie Goins, and Clare Mason; 2016, Routledge). He is a Fellow of the British Psychological Society and former Chair of its Psychotherapy Section, and is President of the George Kelly Society.

Contact: d.winter@herts.ac.uk

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