

STUDIES IN MEANING 2:  
BRIDGING THE PERSONAL AND  
SOCIAL IN CONSTRUCTIVIST  
PSYCHOLOGY

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## CHAPTER 13

### Constructive Alternatism and the Self

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*So one's epistemology does make a difference, whether in science or in one's personal life. (Kelly, 1964/1969c, p. 127)*

From my initial exposure more than 25 years ago to the psychology of personal constructs (Kelly, 1955/1991a, 1955/1991b), the philosophy of constructive alternatism has fascinated me. In discovering Kelly's philosophy I had the sense that I had "come home" to a well-articulated perspective that meshed with my own tacit and as yet unformed way of thinking (McWilliams, 1996). Over the course of my PCP work, I have examined some of the implications of constructive alternatism: the importance of comprehensive construing, the use of anarchism and idolatry as metaphors for holding our ideas tentatively, methods of speech that require that we take personal responsibility for creating meaning, and the use of meditation to gain awareness of our personal role in construing (McWilliams, 1988a, 1988b, 1993, 1996, 2000, 2003).

As I continue to explore the implications of the philosophy, I keep returning to a theme that has bedeviled me from the outset. I responded strongly to Kelly's concept of "reflexivity." He proposed that a psychological theory must "account for itself as a product of psychological processes" (Kelly, 1955/1991a, pp. 39/27). In addition, and perhaps more importantly, reflexivity encourages, or perhaps even requires, that we apply the theory to our own psychological processes. I believe that if I wish to consider a theory of person-ality as valid or useful, I should be able to apply the theory to my own psychological processes and see myself reflected in the theory.

<sup>1</sup> A version of this paper was presented at the Tenth Biennial Conference of the North American Personal Construct Network, Vancouver, BC, July 2002.

The concept of reflexivity and the notion that we might apply the theory to our own lives has thus always struck me as a crucial component of Personal Construct Psychology.

When I discovered in Personal Construct Psychology a well-developed theory that fit so well with my tacitly held understanding of the human situation, I saw its relevance not only to my professional role as a psychology professor but also to my personal perspective on how to understand and live my life. I perennially engaged in a struggle to actively apply the theory in my daily life. I have returned to the philosophy many times over the years and in re-reading Kelly's original writings I detect deeper and more profound implications to the philosophy. I find myself drawn toward a renewed investigation of constructive alternativism in order to seek deeper understanding of its practical implications.

This investigation occurs within the context of two other intriguing areas of inquiry that have attracted my interest. My exploration of these themes led me to Buddhist teachings and practices, and for the past twenty years I have studied and practiced with the founding teacher of the Ordinary Mind School of Zen meditation (Beck, 1993). More recently, my perspective has been enhanced through an exploration of perspectives on social constructionism (e.g., Burr, 1995; Gergen, 1994; Raskin, 2002; Shotter, 1993) and the convivial insights that this approach brings to the issues that have intrigued me for so long. This chapter focuses on the potential utility of constructive alternativism as a life-philosophy that we might apply to our way of construing our "selves," by explicating some of the general implications of constructive alternativism and their relationship to Zen teachings and social constructionism.

In welcoming you to join me on this journey, I suggest that in addition to its value as a stimulant to research and its use in psychotherapy, we may consider the potential of the philosophy of constructive alternativism as a means for facilitating human development and liberation by applying the philosophy actively to our own lives. I extend this invitation propositionally, following Kelly's spirit of adventure:

The adventure in which I have invited you to join me for a little while does not...require you to deny anything, you now believe or to destroy anything you now find useful. That is why I have said that you are free to return whenever you find the voyage discouragingly unproductive. You need not scuttle your present ships in order to embark on this one. Nor need you wait until you are discouraged before you quit my vessel for another.

er. (Kelly, 1969b, p. 96)

### CORE CONSTRUCTION AND THE SENSE OF SELF

In considering how to practically apply constructive alternativism in the conduct of our daily lives, I would like to explore how we might gain awareness of our constructed interpretations of daily life events, particularly how we view ourselves. Applied constructive alternativism might enable us to expand our consciousness of our active role in constructing events not only in the "external" environment but also in what we might regard as the "internal" environment of "self" and how we describe self, either publicly or privately.

The Kellian perspective views "self" within the context of core constructing, the ways that we anticipate our own maintenance processes and our survival in the world—our identity and existence. Kelly defined "self" as a construct:

It refers to a group of events which are alike in a certain way and, in that same way, necessarily different from other events. The way in which the events are alike is the self. That also makes the self an individual, differentiated from other individuals. The self, having been thus conceptualized, can now be used as a thing, a datum, or an item in the context of a superordinate construct (Kelly, 1955/1991a, p. 131/91).

In order to provide some stability along with flexibility, Kelly suggested that core constructs—our sense of self—should be rather comprehensive and not overly permeable.

Social constructionist perspectives also describe self as a product of human construction and emphasize how our picture of self evolves through language and our communications and interactions with others (Burr, 1995). In order to explain and account for our actions within the social context we develop a narrative account of our self, a story of the kind of person that we imagine ourselves to be, and that justifies our actions to others (Gergen, 1994). This account usually describes self in terms of an inner entity that we see as unified and responsible for our actions (Shotter, 1993).

Once we have created our sense of self as an object or a "thing," we tend to identify with beliefs about our self, and as we elaborate our narrative we develop a strong sense of the way that we must behave and have others behave toward us in order to survive, as well as to maintain a consistent narrative. Ordinary Mind Zen teachings (Bayda, 2002; Beck, 1993) describe this thought-based

account in terms of core decisions that include a set of beliefs about our lives that function as a substitute for immediate living and direct experience. These beliefs might include identities, images, opinions, judgments, expectations, and requirements, all of which we tend to see as reality. Because of our strong attachment to this self-perspective, and the strong emotional reactions that accompany any threats to our self-account, we find it hard to consider alternative ways of construing our self. I believe that if we wish to apply constructive alternativism faithfully we must apply it to construing all events, whether in the "external" environment or the "internal" environment of "self," and to our descriptions of self, regardless of whether we express them publicly or privately.

Exploring the "self" from the perspective of applied constructive alternativism raises many fascinating questions about the nature of self. What do we mean when we speak about a "true" or "real" self from the perspective of constructive alternativism? Constructivism, social constructionism, and Buddhism agree that we do not comprehend reality directly and that all interpretations result from our own active construction. From these perspectives, does it make sense to think that we can "discover" or articulate a true or real self? Additionally, if what we construe as self and identity refers to events that constantly change, would we find it useful to assume a fixed and unchangeable entity of "self" in the first place, regardless of how we construe the process? What do we see in our construction of self that we would regard as the "real" self? A quote from Kelly helps to elaborate the implications of these questions.

It might be helpful at this point to ask ourselves a question about children at Halloween. Is the little youngster who comes to your door on the night of October 30th (sic; it is actually the 31st), all dressed up in his costume and behind a mask, piping "trick or treat, trick or treat"—is that youngster *disguising* himself or is he *revealing* himself? Is he failing to be spontaneous? Is he not being himself? Who is the *real* child—the child behind the mask or the barefaced child who must stand up in front of adults and say "please" and "thank you"? (Kelly, 1964/1969a, p. 158, emphasis in original)

Although in everyday conversation we tend to talk as if we possess a "true" or "real" self, constructivism, constructionism, and Buddhism would suggest that we do not benefit from such a view but might instead better see self as a constructed narrative, a process, that should remain open to revision and embrace events that continually change. I would like to elaborate on this theme by exploring

further some of the implications of the philosophy of constructive alternativism.

#### THE PHILOSOPHY OF CONSTRUCTIVE ALTERNATIVISM

Kelly described his philosophy by stating, "*We assume that all of our present interpretations of the universe are subject to revision or replacement*" (1955/1991a, p. 15/11, italics in original). Kelly placed this assumption in the context of his proposition that each of us invents or constructs our own way of construing or interpreting the events that we experience in our lives. Kelly believed that although we may see some ways of construing the world as more useful than others, no one had yet invented a completely accurate and universal system of constructs. Additionally, Kelly suggested that we always have some alternative way of dealing with the world rather than having our understanding determined by circumstances or our biography.

In addition to defining constructive alternativism thoroughly, Kelly discussed the theory in various ways over the course of his written work. In doing so he articulated several subordinate elements to the philosophy, which elaborate on its implications. I have identified five elements that Kelly discussed that seem particularly important to me in understanding the philosophy:

- Accumulative fragmentalism as the contrast pole for constructive alternativism
- The proposition that we do not have to disprove one interpretation in order to entertain an alternative
- The infinitely far away correspondence between our beliefs or interpretations and reality
- The subject-predicate nature of our language
- The use of active methods to embrace alternative ways of construing events

In the discussion that follows, I elaborate on the implications of each of these elements for the philosophy in general. I then explore their relevance to the concept of self and how we might apply them to our personal lives. Additionally, I raise further questions about the construing of self with the hope that these questions might stimulate further exploration of the topic.

*Accumulative Fragmentalism*

Kelly described construing as an inherently bi-polar activity, which includes both comparison and contrast. A complete construct includes the ways in which the construer sees some elements as similar and others as different, along the same dimension. As Kelly frequently pointed out, we cannot fully understand a construct, which is usually labeled by the emergent pole, without considering the contrast pole of the dimension. In the case of his philosophy, we would regard "constructive alternativism" as the emergent pole of the construct. How did Kelly characterize the contrast pole? Possibly with tongue in cheek, he called the contrast pole "accumulative fragmentalism."

The accumulative fragmentalist perspective represents a more conventional view of the human enterprise that suggests that knowledge progresses as we continue to add pieces of truth to the truths that we already presume to know:

This is usually taken to mean that we discover nature a fragment at a time, that as each fragment is verified it is fitted into place—much like a piece in a jigsaw puzzle. Some day we'll get it all put together. (Kelly, 1964/1969a, p. 125)

From the accumulative fragmentalist perspective we believe in the ultimate validity of each piece of knowledge. Only the remaining fragments that we have not yet discovered stand in the way of our total and complete knowledge, and we expect to add the missing pieces in due course, by which time we will then know everything there is to know. As a major "comfort" of this perspective, accumulative fragmentalists do not expect to ever need to discard any existing knowledge, only perhaps add to it.

The accumulative fragmentalism pole of the construct dimension contrasts clearly with Kelly's constructive alternativism pole. From the constructive alternativist perspective, we assume that human beings have invented all interpretations of events and that we could construct alternative interpretations of the same events. Interpretations that seem final and clear-cut in the light of the current context may appear quite different when re-constructed in a different light. Constructive alternativism also assumes that we will revise or replace each interpretation in the light of future understandings, so we have no need to assume or expect that any interpretation represents a final truth.

Social constructionist perspectives adopt a similar and conventional stance toward the differences between seeing knowledge as

constructed and thus open to revision and seeing knowledge as final truth. For example, Gergen (1994) stated that "[t]here is no 'true' description of the nature of things" (p. 45) and that the terms that we use to account for the world arise as social products. Intriguingly, this characterization closely parallels the first verse of the *Tao te Ching*, a basic text of Taoism, which combined with Buddhism to create Zen: "The Tao that can be followed is not the eternal Tao. The name that can be named is not the eternal name. The nameless is the origin of heaven and earth while naming is the origin of the myriad things" (Muller, 1997). Gergen's perspective reflexively emphasizes the multiplicity of accounts that we might make about reality, and that our commitment to such accounts does not depend on their objective validity. Similarly to how Kelly described the implications of accumulative fragmentalism, Gergen described empiricism as a "zero sum game" in which the accuracy or utility of one theory demands the elimination of alternatives. Shotter (1993) eloquently described how we choose one description of a set of events among many alternatives, accept it as if it were true, develop a systematic account supporting that description, and then come to see it as existing independently of our construction processes; we inevitably must then interpret all new events in terms of this "true" descriptive statement. Through our naming, we create fixed "things" out of the infinite possibilities.

Because I espouse and support these constructivist views, I like to think of myself as a good practitioner of constructive alternativism, and I certainly would not wish to regard myself as an accumulative fragmentalist. However, as I look at how I behave in my daily life, I regret to see that I often act like an accumulative fragmentalist. I truly believe that I should hold my ideas tentatively and that I should remain willing to disengage from them in order to entertain alternatives. In fact, I often enjoy considering a wide range of alternatives long after it is time to make a decision, whether about which restaurant to go for dinner or which tires to buy for the car. On the other hand, I often continue to approach my ideas and interpretations as ultimate truths, and I sometimes find that this tendency gets me into quandaries that I might possibly avoid if I embodied constructive alternativism more fully.

This conundrum leads me to ask how we might apply the dimension of accumulative fragmentalism versus constructive alternativism to our notion of self and core construing. Do we act as though we believe that we have final knowledge of the "true" nature

of the self, even if only fragments? Do we believe that a time will come when we manage to "put it all together" and have a final and complete notion of our self? We certainly see that perspective in popular ideas about forging a self-identity, in which "popular psychology" urges us to generate a firm answer to the question, "Who am I?" It certainly manifests in the kind of narrative account that we provide others, which we use to give clarity to the course of our lives and establish future expectations, particularly to the extent that we develop the skill to construct a socially acceptable narrative form (Gergen, 1994). From the constructivist and constructionist approaches, however, rather than truly capturing the essence of an individual, as an accumulative fragmentalist might believe, a sense of "self identity" only reflects the result of one particular method of inquiry or set of explanations within a specific discourse, among a range of alternative methods and explanations.

*Do We Need to Disprove one Construction of Events before Considering Another?*

It is very commonly believed by people who should know better that one is obligated to disconfirm one explanation before he dares entertain seriously the possibility of any other. Scholars waste a great deal of time trying to disprove what others have claimed in order to make room for their own alternative explanations. (Kelly, 1964/1969a, p. 159)

The accumulative fragmentalist operates from the perspective that once we have verified our conclusions there is no point to further exploration of that which we have already determined to be "true." It therefore follows from this perspective that we cannot pose a new interpretation without disconfirming our previous "truth" (Kelly, 1964/1969a). By articulating the contrast pole of constructive alternativism, we can see more clearly one of the major implications of Kelly's philosophy. We do not have to disprove one hypothesis in order to entertain an alternative. If from the outset we view all of our interpretations as our inventions, designed for the purpose of helping us anticipate events, then we can consider new ways of looking at things without having to abandon or reject the convenience of our current understanding.

This perspective accords very well with the social constructionist invitation to consider a range of possible approaches to understanding, embracing variety through a multiplicity of ways to construe the world (Gergen, 1994). In our personal lives, this stance can provide us with exceptional freedom to entertain a variety of

ways of looking at the world and considering our place in it. By seeing our beliefs as our inventions rather than revealed truths, we can imagine different ways of looking at and talking about things and find fresh alternatives to our persistent conundrums.

If we understand from the outset that events do not dictate or hold allegiance to the way that we talk about them, and that our understanding derives from our social interchanges, we have no need to disconfirm our current or existing sense of self in order to entertain an alternative. Once we understand our "self" as a narrative description of a phenomenon that constantly changes, we can also view our identity as a process, continuously open to change (Burr, 1995). We might consider methods for entertaining alternative core construing, alternative ways of construing "self," without disproving or abandoning the familiar constructions that we currently use to survive. Kelly's idea of fixed-role therapy (see below) certainly describes one approach to entertaining an alternative notion of self. He based this approach on a self-characterization in which the client describes him or herself in "the third person," and then applies a new role sketch temporarily so as not to require permanent abandonment of the original identity. This approach represents one vehicle for embracing a multiplicity of narrative discourses or ways of construing "self." It does not require abandoning existing identities or the methods that we rely on to maintain our survival, but rather involves trying something new just to see what happens. As Kelly (1969b, p. 96) stated in an earlier quote, "You need not scuttle your present ships in order to embark on this one." If we approach our sense of "self" using this third person method and become skilled at entertaining a variety of identities, what effect would it have on our sense of self as a fixed entity?

#### *Correspondence Between Belief and Reality*

As constructive alternativists, we assume that we have invented all of our present interpretations and that we will revise or replace them over time. From this perspective, it stands to reason that we do not benefit from regarding any existing interpretation as a final truth that directly corresponds to static reality, as accumulative fragmentalists would. Kelly carefully explicated his view of the relationship between our beliefs and the reality of the universe, from his constructive alternativist perspective. He began by stating that "[w]e presume that the universe is really existing and that man is gradually coming to understand it" (1955/1991a, p. 6/5). However, Kelly (1969b) further stated, "the discovery of an ultimate correspon-

dence between the constructions we are able to devise and the flow of actual events is an infinitely long way off" (p. 96). He believed that we do construe a real world and that due to human audacity we continue to invent new and more effective ways of predicting that real world. Thus, he proposed that we might assume that our beliefs continue to evolve toward a closer correspondence with that real world. However, if we maintain a tentative perspective toward any current belief and disengage from one view in order to entertain another, we might avoid the arrogance of believing that we have any final truths. Kelly proposed an antidote to that arrogance through his suggestion that a correspondence between our beliefs and reality will eventually occur, but at such an infinitely distant point in the future that we can safely assume that our present interpretations have not yet attained that correspondence. Essentially, the Kellian perspective gives us permission not to concern ourselves with the ultimate truth of our interpretations and enables us to hold our ideas tentatively and revise them more easily.

How might we apply the view of "self" as a construction to Kelly's understanding that the correspondence between constructions and events will only occur at some infinite time in the future? Could we conceivably find a direct correspondence between our core constructions and the on-going flow of our personal events? How might we reconcile the single, finite lifetime of an individual with the infinitely long time frame for finding correspondence between constructions and reality? Perhaps such correspondence might never occur even within a single lifetime. Kelly once wrote that we could not understand the meaning of a person's life until it had come to an end.

The question of the correspondence between belief and reality occupies a central place in social constructionist discourse. Raskin (2002) summarized a variety of constructivist and social constructionist perspectives on the topic, emphasizing a distinction between epistemological constructivism, hermeneutic constructivism, and limited realism (Chiari & Nuzzo, 2003). These perspectives vary in their view of whether an objective reality exists independently of an observer, and whether we can come to know reality directly. Limited realists and epistemological constructivists believe that an external reality exists, while hermeneutic constructivists do not. Limited realists, perhaps including Kelly, believe in the theoretical possibility that we could come to know reality directly, while epistemological constructivists believe we can never know reality other than through our

constructions of it. I suggest that regardless of whether we believe in the existence of an independent external reality, we have no direct access to a reality and can only "know" through our invented and socially mediated constructions, which we articulate through language. When we see all products of construing, including that of "self," as socially constructed narratives that cannot correspond directly to an external "reality," we might no longer ask the question of whether our sense of "self" corresponds to a "real self." Our use of terms such as "self" or "I" in our conversations, and our construction of a coherent narrative that accounts for our behavior in a consistent manner, may give us the sense of the existence of a fixed, solid entity of self. Similarly, Buddhist psychology describes our tendency to believe in the existence of a fixed entity of self, but demonstrates that by closely examining this sense of self through meditation practice, the self naturally dissolves. Together, these perspectives encourage us to take advantage of the freedom to construe self in a variety of alternative ways, without the need to assign "truth" to any of these descriptions, or searching for a correspondence between our belief about self and a real self.

*Subject-Predicate Nature of Language*

Our use of language presents another challenge in approaching the day-to-day world from an applied constructive alternativist perspective. Social constructionists describe how we rely on the invented terms of our language and embody them with a sense of "fixedness" and truth. We construct our notion of identity and knowledge and use discourse as a way of providing a coherent representation of these ideas that take on such convincing features that we come to see them as real (Burr, 1995). Gergen (1994) described how our explanations of events gain meaning through our conversations and how cultural practices, including agreement on word usage over a long period of time, give the appearance that our words relate directly to reality, reinforcing our tendency to agree that they refer to an objective entity. Shotter (1993) likewise demonstrated how we create a sense that our words represent a fixed nature.

Kelly (1964/1969a) discussed what he called the "indicative mood" of the English language that attributes qualities to the events. He proposed an alternative, the "invitational mood," in which a speaker takes responsibility for attributing qualities to events and invites the listener to consider an interpretation of the event without precluding alternative interpretations. Casting a proposition in an invitational mood suggests that the subject remains open to a range

of possibilities. It encourages us to regard our language as hypothetical, a description of a set of dimensions of appraisal rather than as attributes of nature, and it supports viewing our behavior as a way of posing a question to test our hypotheses.

Rather than assuming that qualities inhere in objects, we might invite the listener to regard an event in a potentially novel way by construing the event "as if" this particular dimension applies. Use of the indicative mood...perpetuates the notion that things exist in a fixed form and stay the same, with a predetermined structure. They enable someone to say "This is the truth," or that an object "is what we say it is." They also enable us to avoid responsibility for our interpretations by using a passive voice, as "It is well known that the earth is flat." Use of the invitational mood could free us from seeing events, including our construction of ourselves, in this fixed form. It could help us take responsibility for our own interpretations and attribute our own passive statements to ourselves, or assign others' passive statements to a particular source. (McWilliams, 1995, pp. 60-61)

Within the general view of self as a socially constructed, language-based invention, we might view the sense of self that arises from core construing as a particular artifact of our subject-predicate language in which we give the self a name and then forget that we invented it. We might regard an individual's name as a label for a set of constructs identified as "self," and explore the consequences of such naming. Kelly particularly described the effect of a name on the definition of self: "We recall that in various cultures the establishment of new adjustment patterns has customarily been accomplished simultaneously with the assumption of a new name" (Kelly, 1955/1991a, p. 367/273).

Once we assign a word label in the construing of self, we tend to apply the indicative form of the verb "to be," attributing qualities to the "self" rather than taking responsibility for the qualities as our own construction. Thus, we can see a tendency to say, for example, that I am smart, generous, lazy, or irresponsible, attributing these qualities to this "self" that I have created through my own act of construction. Kelly described how we tend to do this with respect to attributions that we make about others; I imagine an even greater tendency for this to occur with respect to our self. If we apply the indicative form to the label for self, and the superordinate construct of self, we may also apply it to many of the subordinate implications. How might our sense of self, and the way that we talk about self, change if we fully embraced an invitational mood to language and

took personal responsibility for the use of labels of the self as a hypothetical interpretation of immediate experience?

In order to apply constructive alternativism to our speech and to actually use the invitational mood, we need a practical way to speak that regards interpretations as hypothetical and avoids attributing permanent characteristics to continually changing events (McWilliams, 1996). A general semantics technique called E-prime (Bourland & Johnston, 1991) applies the indicative mode by excluding the verb to be (*is, are, was, were, am, be, been, being*) from speaking and writing in English. Use of E-Prime can help us gain awareness of our tendency to project our interpretations onto events. It reduces use of the passive voice, which enables us to avoid personal responsibility for construing, and prevents us from making permanent qualities out of a particular interpretation. By using E-prime, we may more likely accept responsibility for making attributions. We see more clearly that we constructed the attributes as a process for interpreting recurrent patterns among events. E-prime helps focus on direct personal experience and helps us speak more propositionally, leaving other possibilities open. Effective use of E-prime requires a sustained acceptance of the value of questioning the indicative mood and our tendency to project fixedness onto events. It might increase awareness of our tendency to project personal constructions onto events and to help express attributions or interpretations more propositionally. More importantly for the purpose of self-awareness, E-prime can assist us to take more personal responsibility for our interpretations and to develop greater self-awareness of our tendencies to project our personal beliefs or interpretations onto the events we encounter in our lives. I do not find it necessary or convenient to speak in E-prime exclusively, but attempts to do so bring greater awareness of my tendency to project "fixedness" onto events. Most particularly, this technique can serve as a way to gain awareness of the tendency to make personal attributions of myself into fixed qualities rather than temporary interpretations.

#### *Taking Active Steps to Entertain Alternatives*

Kelly emphasized the importance of active, aggressive application of alternative construing as a key element of human behavior. He described what he referred to as human audacity, the active approaches by which people explore options and alternative ways of looking at things (Kelly, 1964/1969a), and he described how human behavior attempts to cast itself into the unknown by experimenting with possible alternative ways of understanding the uni-

verse and life experience (Kelly, 1977). At a practical level, Kelly invented fixed-role therapy as a conscious way to entertain alternative ways of behaving without abandoning existing beliefs.

In the form of fixed role therapy described by Kelly, the client is asked to become someone other than themselves for a period of about two weeks. One aim is to enable the client to see how it is possible to create a new person; not totally new, of course, but to see that it is indeed possible to change and to do it oneself. It was Kelly's indirect way of demonstrating his philosophy in action: how we need not be hemmed in by circumstances, how there are alternatives available for us to choose between. (Fransella, 1995, p. 97)

Accounts suggest that Kelly may very well have applied this approach in his own life when he had to find a way to deal with a situation that did not fit his "normal" account of his self. The following narrative describes a story that I had heard in the late 1960s, which was also referred to by Fransella (1995).

When George Kelly accepted a faculty position at Ohio State University in 1946, his duties included the role of directing the clinical psychology graduate program. According to the story, the program lacked records as to the status of the many graduate students enrolled in the department and particularly lacked clarity as to who belonged in the clinical program. According to the tale, Dr. Kelly initially came to his office dressed rather crudely, wearing farmers' bib overalls. He assumed a dramatically abrupt and brusque manner, calling many students into his office and promptly "counseling" them out of the clinical program, suggesting that they consider their specialty as developmental, social, experimental, etc. This process allegedly went on for a week or two, until Kelly felt he had completed the process of "cleaning up" the program. The following day he arrived at work wearing his customary suit and tie, and behaved in his characteristic cordial and polite, if somewhat formal, manner. To those familiar with Kelly's theory, the story suggests the possibility that, knowing he had some unpleasant duties to perform, he assumed a fixed role that would enable him to carry them out effectively. When he had completed these duties he then called the "real" George Kelly back from holiday. (McWilliams, 1996, p. 58)

What range of methods might we consider using to assist us to gain greater awareness of the invented nature of our core beliefs and try on alternatives as Kelly may have done? Social constructionists describe a variety of approaches that might enable us to "deconstruct" the process by which our discourse creates a sense of self as

a fixed entity and gain greater awareness of our ability to embrace new views. As Shotter (1993) suggested, we can turn our attention to recognizing how we socially construct our sense of self. Likewise, Burr (1995, pp. 92-93) described how, "[b]y challenging and resisting the representations of ourselves on offer in prevailing discourses, we have the chance to construct or claim alternative identities for ourselves." Gergen (1994) encouraged us to consider the value of alternative points of view, challenge dominant realities, and cast doubt on social constructions. We might consider applying these suggestions to the self by adopting personal practices related to Gergen's concepts of "dislodgement" and "destabilization" that can challenge and loosen the grip of conventions that we take for granted and our ways of talking about and understanding ourselves that we fail to see as our own inventions. We can take advantage of these opportunities to "see through" our current narratives of the self and to invent new narratives.

I mentioned earlier that although I embrace the constructive alternativist philosophy, I often find myself acting like an accumulative fragmentalist. I see this occurring most frequently or commonly when I gain some awareness of the conditioned nature of my own behavior. Although I would like to address each moment, each new event, or experience, with a fresh response, I tend to react to events in habitual ways. In a sense, these reactions, which do not grow out of conscious awareness, can be seen as a type of accumulative fragmentalism; I act as if this way of reacting is a piece of truth. If I want to act as a constructive alternativist, what else might I need to do?

As I have described above, I might wish to develop greater awareness of my own reactions, my thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. My experience as a student of Zen meditation over the past twenty years has provided an opportunity to practice such skills and apply them to a constructive alternativist perspective (McWilliams, 2000). Bayda (2002) described how Ordinary Mind Zen practice focuses on clarifying our tendency to believe in the "truth" of our thoughts, particularly our core beliefs about our selves, and the focusing on the direct physical experience of the present moment, including difficult emotional reactions:

As we clarify our believed thoughts, no longer taking them as truth, and as we reside in the bodily component of our experience, we begin to see that our experience of these little holes is actually nothing more than a combination of deeply believed thoughts and a complex of subtle and not-so-subtle uncomfortable bodily sensations. Seeing this—and I mean seeing it in the

way that fosters real understanding—is a taste of freedom (p. 21).

The Ordinary Mind School of Zen practice focuses on core beliefs, comparable to Kelly's notion of core constructs (McWilliams, 2000). Core beliefs bear some similarity to the constructionist notion of the narrative story of self that we create through language except that because core beliefs originate at the pre-verbal stage of development and contain negative elements, we may not have articulated them clearly to others or ourselves. However, because we develop life strategies based on core decisions that we make early in life, "we believe that this thought-based picture of reality is who we are and what life is. The more we believe in this artificial life, the more we move away from 'life as it is'" (Bayda, 2002, p.49).

Ordinary Mind Zen emphasizes how we tend to accept as real the negative self-image that we construct around these decisions and the narratives that support it. Effective Zen practice includes learning to observe the all-pervasive nature of these decisions and the expectations and requirements of our self and others that they engender. It also emphasizes developing awareness of the strategies that we use to protect ourselves, the core role structure in Kelly's terms. Once we learn to see our core decisions and interrupt our strategies we can experience directly the emotional reactions that we avoid feeling. "Only by uncovering and entering this dreaded part of ourselves can we see through the artificial construct of our substitute life and ultimately reconnect with awareness of our basic wholeness" (Bayda, 2002, p. 54). Effective practice of this approach requires careful, disciplined self-observation, which might include watching everything that is going on "within" us and around us almost as if it was happening to another person (de Mello, 1990).

Self-observation might accomplish a similar objective to Kelly's request that his clients write a self-characterization that refers to themselves in the third person. What would happen to my sense of my interpretations about myself if I could come to see my responses, thoughts, feelings, etc., as something happening to "a character in a play," to use the terminology that Kelly used in his self-characterization exercises? What might I learn about my "self" if I actively experimented with new modes of behavior, perhaps using a "fixed-role" approach in particular situations and observing my reactions?

## CLOSING COMMENTS

The personal application of constructive alternativism to daily life presents a variety of challenges along with intriguing possibilities for greater personal freedom. In particular, these notions about the sense of self may raise fascinating implications if we recognize that any construction that we have of "self" follows the same tentative, hypothetical sense as any other construction. How would we come to construe self if we could fully embody applied constructive alternativism? If we search carefully to find the self, we may find only the construing process itself taking place but "no one" there doing the construing. Perhaps if we developed the ability to acutely observe our thoughts and physical processes, and to attempt to locate the "self" who is experiencing, we might arrive, as Buddhists suggest, at a sense of "no-self."

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