Accepting the Invitational

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My introduction to the constructivist perspective of George Kelly came in the form of a story that profoundly influenced my personal and professional life. I particularly value its reflexive emphasis on the personal application of the theory, the central theme of this article. The current support for narrative approaches in constructivist thought (Howard, 1988, 1989, 1991, 1993; Mair 1988, 1989) encouraged me to approach this subject by employing some aspects of a narrative psychology. I found that I can best convey these ideas within the context of the overall development of my work and my ideas about the human predicament, and using the story of my own calling and the evolution of my career and life (McWilliams, 1994).

A Story of George Kelly

My longer story begins with a shorter story about a man who lived his theory by applying it in his own life. Like many stories that provide a "myth" by which we might guide our lives, I do not know whether the events it describes actually occurred. I recently confirmed the
details of the story with the person who told it to me. I have not heard the story from anyone else and have not independently verified the actual occurrence of the events the story describes. I feel comfortable considering this story as an apocryphal tale with uncertain validity. In the most important sense, it does not matter. The story has influenced my life and my thinking about psychology for over 25 years.

I heard this story in about 1968 when, as a graduate student at the University of Rochester, I took a course taught by Professor Jay Efran. Jay did his graduate work at Ohio State University in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and relayed the story to the class as he had heard it told by fellow graduate students. He did not know whether the events told in the story truly occurred, and assumed that the version he heard included some embellishment. This story, presented as an example of a psychotherapeutic technique, comprised the sole mention of George Kelly or personal construct psychology in this course on theories of personality and psychotherapy. I know that I will not tell the story exactly as I heard it, and my personal revisions likely reflect its influence on my own explorations.

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 “counselling” them out of the clinical program, suggesting that they consider their specialty as developmental, social, experimental, and so on. 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.
My Story

This story made a vivid impression on me because it described a psychologist who not only had developed a coherent theory of human processes but actually applied that theory to his own behaviour. This struck me as somewhat revolutionary, and different from other theorists we studied who did not clearly appear to connect their own behaviour and their theories. Although I did not at that time learn anything about Kelly's theory, the story remained in my consciousness as I pursued my doctorate in clinical psychology and assumed a faculty position. A few years later, when I taught a course in theories of personality, I decided to read this theorist whose personal application of his theory had haunted me for so long. I assigned as a text A Theory of Personality (Kelly, 1963), which consists of the first three chapters of Kelly's two-volume work, The Psychology of Personal Constructs (Kelly, 1955).

Students who took that first class in personality theory reminded me for some years of my passionate response to my first reading of these chapters. In my experience, which I found somewhat parallel to that of other Kellians I have met, I felt something of a revelation. It seemed as if I had "come home" to a theory that effectively articulated an orientation to understanding the human situation that corresponded with my tacitly held views about psychology. As I read section after section, I strongly, positively, and enthusiastically relished the breakthrough I found in Kelly's ideas. Following this initial reading, I went to the library and checked out the entire two-volume work (Kelly, 1955) as well as the edited collection of Kelly's later writing (Kelly, 1979) and other published materials on the theory. Several of the concepts raised in Kelly's writings seemed to present a powerful approach to human liberation and freedom. I had thought for many years, in my own inarticulate fashion, that we humans need not confine ourselves to the particular interpretations or understandings of events that we inherit from our personal or social context. It seemed to me that we could invent fresh new ways of perceiving the world around us. Naturally, I appreciated Kelly's suggestion that the universe does not tell us what we should make of it, and that we can revise or replace our current understandings. This proposition connected deeply and strongly with my tacit understanding.
I also identified with Kelly’s concept of *reflexivity*. He proposed that “any psychological theory is ... somewhat reflexive; it must ... account for itself as a product of psychological processes” (Kelly, 1955, pp. 38–39). In addition to accounting for the development of the theory, reflexivity also encourages us to continuously apply our theory to our own psychological processes. I responded very positively to this suggestion. I had come to believe that even if I regarded a theory of personality as intellectually compelling and based on solid research, if I could not apply it directly to my own psychological processes and see myself reflected in the theory, then I could not ultimately accept it as useful. The concept of reflexivity placed this perspective centrally in the theory, and seems to me a crucial component of personal construct psychology (PCP). Kelly’s alleged application of this reflexive approach served as the element to which I responded so strongly in the story that introduced me to his work.

Several of Kelly’s other propositions, taken from his later (1979) writings, influenced me greatly. His notion that we need not disprove one proposition in order to entertain another, and his endorsement of the central role of human audacity in the evolution of reality, provided me with compelling support for the possibilities inherent in human freedom and liberation. In exploring how we can shape our understanding of the unknown, Kelly (1977) emphasised how commitment to our incipient awareness can lead to powerful new knowledge.

Perhaps the most stimulating argument I encountered came in the form of his suggestion that we might regard our language as hypothetical and see our behaviour as a way of posing a question. In his article “The Language of Hypothesis”, Kelly (1964) proposed an alternative to the indicative mood of English that attributes qualities to events. He suggested that we consider taking responsibility for our interpretations by casting them in an invitational mood, and proposed that we see language as dimensions of appraisal rather than attributes. 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, in various forms of the verb *to be*, 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 in “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.

I came to see deep implications in these Kellian propositions for maximising human development, and I continue to see PCP as a forceful vehicle for enhancing human evolution and liberation. I believe that we can best fulfil this promise by applying the theory reflexively to our own processes. I find it easy to embrace the theory intellectually, and to understand its clinical and research applications. I experience greater difficulty, however, in finding ways to implement it as fully as possible in my daily life. I do not just wish to believe that my ideas and interpretations consist of human inventions that I can revise and replace. I want to manifest this proposition, on a moment-to-moment basis, and directly experience awareness of my active participation in creating this reality. I believe that we could more completely fulfil the future promise of PCP if we could practice an immediate, direct, and sustained awareness, in moment-to-moment consciousness, of our active participation in creating meaning. This theme, which builds on reflexivity as the major focus of this presentation, will recur in the context of my story, to which I now return.

After reading Kelly's works and sharing my understanding of them with my students for several years, I felt a desire to engage in conversation about the theory with other Kellyans, although I did not know of the existence of any other adherents to this approach. From a chance conversation with Rue Cromwell in 1977, I learned of the strong PCP contingent in Great Britain. I wrote to several of our colleagues there regarding the possibility of coming to England to study PCP on a sabbatical leave. I felt honoured that Fay Fransella invited me to come and spend a year with her at the Royal Free Hospital School of Medicine, her base at the time. This Kellian sojourn began with the Third International Congress on PCP in the Netherlands, in 1979. The conference opened with small discussion groups; random assignment, quite fortunately, placed me in the same group as Don Bannister, who played such an important role in advancing PCP. Of course, this experience presented the possibility
that I might discover that I had completely misunderstood Kelly's ideas and had a totally mistaken view of the implications of the theory. I found, however, and much to my delight, that my perspective accorded reasonably well with that of Don and the others in the group, and my sabbatical exploration began very positively. I spent the year working with Fay in London, assisting her in teaching an introductory course in PCP, attending an advanced course, and learning administration and interpretation of the repertory grid technique. I also visited other colleagues in England and Scotland. I benefited greatly from conversations with Don Bannister, Miller Mair, Mildred Shaw, Philip Boxer, and many other colleagues. I attended a conference on the future of the theory organised by Peter Stringer, and had many additional opportunities to further and broaden my knowledge of PCP.

**Stalking the Personal Scientist**

I took advantage of the sabbatical opportunity to study a number of authors to whom my interest in PCP had directed me. My attraction to Kelly's *personal scientist* metaphor led me to pursue a greater understanding of the actual behaviour of scientists. I also appreciated Kelly's (1964) suggestion, again from "The Language of Hypothesis", that scientists may often proceed in personally imaginative ways that depart from scientific orthodoxy long before they develop the evidence to support their propositions. I discovered a strong and recurrent theme in works by Kuhn (1970), Feyerabend (1978), Bakan (1967), and Mahoney (1976): that the individual scientist participates deeply and personally in generating and affirming knowledge, and that the most convincing work does not always evolve from following a strict methodology.

Michael Polanyi (1958, 1969) expressed these ideas in the most compelling form, and his postcritical philosophy of knowledge accords very well with many of the Kellian concepts that most engaged me (McWilliams, 1993b). The root metaphors of Kelly's and Polanyi's theories have much in common. Kelly described people as personal scientists, while Polanyi described scientific inquiry as *personal knowledge*. Both emphasised the personally constructed character of human understanding and urged caution in drawing connections between our ideas and the reality we suppose they represent.
Kelly and Polanyi also shared some important assumptions about the relationship between knowledge and reality. They both believed in the existence of an inherently orderly universe that humans work to know, and they described how knowledge derives from a personal process in which we perceive recurrent themes or patterns among particular elements or events. Like Kelly, Polanyi (1958) emphasised the deeply personal and passionate nature of scientific discovery, and the extent to which it derives from a profound commitment on the part of the scientist to a sense of contact with the universe and a desire to articulate and elaborate this understanding. Further, because we construe the universe as real, Polanyi (1958) asked us to remember that it may reveal itself as quite different from our original anticipations.

I felt particularly drawn to Polanyi's (1969) explication of how we can develop a comprehensive understanding through awareness of coherence among elements that we previously saw as independent. Comprehensive construing enables us to transcend the obvious, an activity Kelly regularly emphasised. From the PCP perspective, we can see comprehensive construing as occurring when we incorporate events previously subsumed under a variety of constructs into a more comprehensive construct (McWilliams, 1988a). This process requires that we broaden our perceptual field, and leads us toward a more integrated and universal understanding. In viewing an eclectic array of events, we can usefully distinguish between a truly comprehensive understanding, in which we subsume recurrent themes within a comprehensive construct, and the alternative of seeing these events merely as a miscellaneous collection (McWilliams, 1981). We can also consider higher education as helping students to develop a comprehensive and integrated understanding of the subjects they study (McWilliams, 1987). I felt increasingly that we should apply a reflexive analysis to exploring our active role in creating comprehensive construing. It might help us to develop a clearer awareness of our most superordinate assumptions and to transform our most fundamental understanding.

These various speculations directed me toward exploring ways in which we can gain greater awareness of our personal involvement in producing our interpretations. During my explorations in England, I felt strongly drawn to Philip Boxer's (1979, 1980) reflective learning approach, in which he calls attention to the processes we use in devel-
oping our constructs. In addition to learning from Fay Fransella (Fransella & Bannister, 1977) how to use the principal components analysis as a reflexive technique to assess and interpret the repertory grid, I discovered interactive computerised repertory grid techniques from Mildred Shaw (1980) and from colleagues I visited at Brunel University. These approaches (Sewell, Adams-Webber, Mitterer, & Cromwell, 1992) provide wonderful ways of gaining understanding of how we organise our constructs. They can also assist us in developing greater awareness of our personal participation in their creation, the way we use them, and our tendency to project our construct dimensions onto events.

**Possibility, Plurality, and Play**

Again responding to the call of “The Language of Hypothesis”, I explored Kelly’s notion of *make believe* as an important approach to generating knowledge. Kelly (1979) had cited Vaihinger’s (1924) book *Philosophy of “As If”*, which emphasised the generation of various *possibilities* rather than a final certainty, as an important influence on his hypothetical approach to understanding. The as-if perspective takes a consciously *fictional* approach, based on the view of human thought as a tool for adapting to the world. This perspective sees ideas as having utility for furthering the pursuit of knowledge, rather as accurate representations of the universe. This approach accords well with Barfield’s (1988) view of the origin of human hypotheses as ways to account for our observations but having no direct bearing on “reality”, which remains inaccessible to human understanding (McWilliams, 1993a). Like Barfield and many others, Vaihinger assumed that we have no direct access to objective reality. The value of ideas lies in their ability to expedite anticipation of events. By building inquiry around a deliberately fictional approach, we may avoid prematurely objectifying our beliefs. We might find it useful to actively apply known fictions in the process of inquiry, because we then consciously conceive our ideas as artificial and false, with no claim to ultimate accuracy. We can thus more easily abandon them over time, as new ideas come into play, and we can use them consciously as means toward furthering inquiry, rather than as truths.
Application of the as-if approach, along with acceptance of the notion that we need not disprove one proposition in order to entertain another (Kelly, 1979), suggests a culture of possibility as a framework for supporting and encouraging human inquiry. When we leave many possibilities open to consideration, we enhance the opportunity for creativity. We have no obligation to remain within the confines of any particular perspective or point of view, or to make our knowledge consistent with other knowledge. We replace ultimate truth as the goal of inquiry with the goal of generating possibilities that may survive for as long as we find them useful in furthering more inquiry. As in evolution, the generation of "mutations" can lead to hypotheses that will then confront the pressures of survival. If an hypothesis proves useless or we refute it, we may easily eliminate it (see it as extinct). We need not necessarily see surviving ideas as justified or true, but may continue to use them because we have not yet refuted them (Bartley, 1987; Mahoney, 1988). Using the liberating qualities of exploring a range of ideas for their as-if possibilities, we might usefully explore and elaborate the notion of the invented, ad hoc nature of our constructs through the metaphoric application of concepts drawn from other fields. For example, I have shown how the philosophy of anarchism might help us address our tendency to create "institutions" of our beliefs (McWilliams, 1988b, 1989), and I used the concept of idolatry, borrowed from religion, as a way to discuss how we tend to affirm a particular interpretation as a final truth (McWilliams, 1993a, 1993c).

If we find use in considering many possibilities, and if we do not necessarily have to disprove one hypothesis or interpretation in order to entertain another, we may consider a plurality of points of view. Adoption of the consciously fictional approach of Vaihinger, and the concomitant release from the necessity of seeing ourselves as right, provides an opportunity to approach the pursuit of knowledge, whether scientific or otherwise, from a wide range of perspectives. Peter Elbow (1986) proposed that we pair the more typical critical approach to knowledge (methodological doubt) with a contrary approach which he called methodological belief. Referring to Polanyi's observation that we actually base our learning on existing beliefs, and often on confidence in the beliefs of others, Elbow proposed methodological belief as a conscious process of dwelling within the models, images, and narratives of others, and behaving as-if they rep-
resent truth. He suggested that active believing can serve as a methodological game in which learners artificially stand outside of their personal points of view. It appears to me that Kelly might have used this approach in the story with which I began this presentation. In fixed-role therapy (Kelly, 1955), he invited his clients to take on the role of someone else for a fixed period of time and to pretend to behave as that person might. These techniques require willingness to suspend disbelief and assent to an alternative point of view that differs from one's own.

We might view pretending as a form of play, and we might generate new knowledge from the relaxed openness of a playful approach. The late Nobel Prize winning physicist Richard Feynman (1983) described the freedom he found in his research in physics when he decided to stop worrying about whether he would accomplish anything practical and do research for fun. One day in the university dining hall, during a food fight, a student threw a plate and Feynman noticed that as the plate wobbled, the college medallion on the plate seemed to revolve faster than the wobble. He wondered about the relationship between the two and, just having fun with no concern about the practical importance of it, played with the equations on rotation. This play led him to consider some similar problems regarding the spin of the electron. In short order, this led him to the work for which he won the Nobel Prize.

The Mating of East and West

When I returned to the United States in 1980, I had greatly increased my understanding of PCP and had a better sense of its implications. But my personal desire for greater direct application of constructive alternativism eventually led me to incorporate some eastern approaches to human understanding that address these themes within my increasingly comprehensive model. Krishnamurti (1969) described the freedom that we can experience in the release from the expected and gaining comfort with the unknown. Watts (1952), writing from the Zen perspective, echoed this theme when he described the wisdom that accompanies accepting the insecurity of not knowing. Suzuki (1970), in a modern classic Zen text, suggested that expert knowledge limits the possibilities which we might consider, and championed a beginner's mind from which we can con-
sider many possibilities. In comparing eastern and western approaches to liberation, Watts (1961) proposed that we regard the rules of social interaction and communication as a kind of game. When we choose to play this game we can free ourselves from the excessive veracity we often attribute to conventional, socially constructed reality. In 1981, drawn initially by a desire to integrate my intellectual life with my physical experience, I began to practice Buddhist meditation. I found great compatibility between my Kellian foundations and these eastern approaches.

From a theoretical standpoint, both Kellian (1955, 1979) and Buddhist (McWilliams, 1983, 1984) psychologies emphasise a coherent universe that functions as an ever-changing process. Kelly (1955) expressed this point by saying that each event relates to every other event, that the universe always changes "with respect to itself" (p. 7) and that we construe events rather than things. Buddhist psychology, likewise, emphasises the essential impermanence of all phenomena (Tendzin, 1982). Both approaches see human beliefs as imposing a dualistic, and essentially transparent, interpretation on this seamless flow. They also call into question our cherished notion of the permanent existence of a fixed "self" (Kelly, 1979; Maezumi & Glassman, 1978). We can see implicit in both of these views an understanding that people and events have no inherent self or fixed nature.

Despite these important similarities, the two approaches differ in the way we view construing. While the Kellian approach emphasises using knowledge of our constructs to enhance our effectiveness in anticipating events, Buddhist approaches address their techniques to "seeing through" the essentially transparent and hence delusional nature of constructs. This process occurs most dramatically in instances in which the usual flow of discursive thought, which depends on bipolar construing, ceases, even if only momentarily. In such instances, the meditator may experience a direct and immediate apprehension of existence, providing a perspective that appears to transcend ordinary construing.

Many forms of meditation share the Kellian assumption that we construct our sense of reality (Delmonte & Kenny, 1985). Most meditation techniques emphasise developing awareness of this process through attending to immediate physical experience and observing thoughts without acting on them (Walsh, Goleman,
Kornfeld, Pensa, & Shapiro, 1978). Kelly's personal scientist metaphor emphasises our practical experimentation with the world of events. We might view the meditator as a kind of fixed role, a personal mystic to use Delmonte and Kenny's (1985) term, that involves stepping out of the applied process for a specific time. The practice of observing construing calls attention to our personal processes and gives us a "holiday" from the more normal use of our invented interpretations as a tool for anticipating specific events. We could view the task of meditation as suspending this usual process of dichotomous thinking and instead see our task as observing or witnessing the process of how we construe.

Kenny and Delmonte (1986) provided a useful description of the relationship between meditation and a number of Kellian constructs, including suspension, loosening, the C-P-C and creativity cycles, and dilation versus constriction. They emphasised the extent to which meditators attempt to explore their unconscious processes through what they saw as the elaboration of preverbal constructs. While I agree with much of their PCP interpretation of meditation, I suggest that we consider an alternative to their view of the suspension of bipolar construing as exclusively preverbal. Kelly (1955) defined a preverbal construct as one which the individual uses "even though it has no consistent word symbol" (p. 459). He further indicated that such constructs ordinarily arise prior to the development of language and thus typically apply to "elements of which an infant could be aware" (p. 461). An adult develops a more elaborate construct system, embracing a wider range of elements and including verbal symbols. The experience of meditation may lead to use of constructs that have no ready verbal symbol because they transcend the capability of language. We might usefully regard use of such "postverbal" constructs as significantly different from a preverbal mode of functioning.

I believe that we can best construe these meditational insights in a developmental context. In both western developmental psychology (Kegan, 1982; Piaget, 1972) and eastern approaches to consciousness development (McDermott, 1987; Wilber, 1980) we see a recurrent pattern of ever-increasing levels that incorporate previous modes of functioning within the next, more comprehensive, mode. Wilber (1983) described the pre-trans fallacy, a tendency to see all nondualistic modes of functioning as identical when they may have quite dif-
different origins. We can easily confuse prepersonal and preverbal modes (that develop early in life prior to language) with transpersonal or transverbal modes, in which we no longer identify our self with a particular construction — yet we may continue to use these interpretations. This process operates similarly to how we evolve our sense of identity from our body, to our social group, to our self-concept, to a more spiritual sense of oneness. We may continue to use our bodies, or participate in a family or culture, or express our beliefs and opinions, but we no longer think of them as our total self. Meditative practices may lead to a postverbal awareness, through a greater sense of our personal role in using bipolar constructs. We may then continue to use constructs without confusing them with our total self or a universe that we may more usefully see as whole and undivided.

In more than 10 years of daily Zen practice, intensive meditation retreats, and regular study with a Zen master (Beck, 1989, 1993), I have found a powerful approach to developing greater awareness of my active role in creating my constructs. I have also come to see how I create suffering and dissatisfaction by separating myself from experiences, particularly when events in the universe fail to correspond to my original anticipations, which seem to happen quite frequently when my anticipations derive from my self-centred desires. I have learned to direct my attention to the rise and fall of my thoughts, to recognise recurrent patterns in my construction processes, and to observe the self-centred and ultimately delusional nature of most my personal construing. With its emphasis on developing observational skills, or “listening” to my own processes, this approach helped me to gain a deeper understanding of the nature of my personal participation in construing, even as thoughts arise involuntarily while I attempt to attend to my immediate physical experience. Let me say, just to place this process in proper perspective, that although I maintain this daily meditation practice, and occasionally have glimpses into the insights I have described, I still find in much of my everyday life that I continue to treat the world of events as if they do actually possess the qualities I assign to them through my construing.
I Accept, with Pleasure, the Invitational

Thus far I have suggested that we might more completely fulfil the promise of PCP by assuming greater responsibility for our participation in creating knowledge. Or, if you prefer, I have told you a story about how I have felt drawn to that proposition. I described a range of ways to approach this process and discussed some potential implications of pursuing this approach. I also admitted my failure to fully exemplify these ideas in my own behaviour. I continue to search for ways to realise more fully the implications of this understanding and to implement it more immediately in my moment-to-moment thinking and my communication with others.

I believe that to acknowledge further our active role in construing we must use a language that requires us to take conscious responsibility for our personal participation in creating meaning. I frequently consider Kelly’s (1979) invitational mood. Although I have attempted the practice of thinking in invitational terms, I experience difficulty incorporating this approach into my daily speech. It feels very awkward to me to introduce each proposition with “Suppose we regard”. I would like to find a more genial way to speak in a manner that requires me to recognise the hypothetical nature of my interpretations and helps me avoid attributing permanent qualities to events that continually change. I would also like to encourage an ethos of conversation that embraces this understanding, and that helps us to entertain the propositions of our fellow construers when they differ from our own.

I recently learned about a technique from general semantics that may provide such a method. General semanticists claim that language can distort our perceptions, and that our failure to acknowledge this potential leads to misunderstanding of our own and other people’s words and thinking. In particular, semanticists have raised concern about our use of forms of the verb to be. When we use the verb is, we attribute a fixed nature to a person or event, or speak of qualities as inherent characteristics. A technique called E-prime (Bourland & Johnston, 1991) attempts to address these problems by excluding all forms of the verb to be (is, are, was, were, am, be, been, being) from English usage.

Use of E-prime helps avoid unconscious preemptive labelling (“Bill is a dunce”) or constellatory construing (“Left-handed people
are clumsy). It discourages the coupling of terms of vastly different levels of abstraction ("Tom is a father", "Jane is an extrovert"), which equate a particular event (or subordinate element) with a more general concept (or superordinate construct). It particularly restricts our use of the passive voice ("It is well known that ..."), which enables us to avoid responsibility for our constructions. It also tends to prevent us from making permanent qualities out of experiences of a particular moment ("I am a failure if I don't convince you of the value of E-prime").

Using E-prime, we can make clear attributions for propositions. We can see more clearly that they do not arise from the ether or lie under rocks awaiting our discovery; a human constructed them as a schema for interpreting recurrent patterns among events. Kelly (1977, 1979) wanted us to acknowledge our active role in "creating the universe", and he invited us to avoid, or seriously reduce, use of the indicative mood. Use of E-prime can sensitise us to our overuse of the indicative mood of to be. It can help us to gain greater awareness of our tendencies to project our constructions onto the environment and then to objectify them.

The development of E-prime follows from problems with the verb to be noted by a number of philosophers over the past four centuries (Murphy, 1992). It received renewed emphasis by Korzybski (1933), who founded general semantics. He described the development of the verb to be in Indo-European languages and cautioned against its use. Kelly (1979) read Korzybski's work and found general semantics in accordance with his experience of the way we invest meaning in the names we use and how that leads to a constant sense of the fixed identity of events. Bourland (Bourland & Johnston, 1991) first attempted to apply Korzybski's suggestion to omit forms of to be in an article he wrote in 1949, and reported experiencing a recurrent headache for a week following the attempt. He did not reveal the approach at the time, although he continued to use it in his writing. He first described his efforts in two articles published in the mid-1960s (Bourland & Johnston, 1991), in which he defined E-prime as English minus all forms of the verb to be. He suggested that by using E-prime certain troublesome questions vanished from consideration (e.g., "What is a human?", "Is it art?", "Is President Clinton a moderate or a radical?"). He found he had to recast some of his usual abbreviated assumptions. For example, instead of saying
"We believe in democracy because it is right", we might say something like "We support democracy because it leads to certain outcomes that we desire". E-prime further requires us to bring back into awareness the construing role-player, whether ourselves or a historical character. We can no longer say "It is known that...". We now have to say who claims to know it. In cognitively oriented psychotherapy, E-prime provides a way of calling attention to undesirable preemptory self-statements ("I am no good", etc.). Recognising this, Albert Ellis translated several of his books based on his rational-emotive model into E-prime in their revised editions (e.g., Ellis, 1975, 1976, 1977).

Kellogg (1987) described how an intellectual understanding of the principles of general semantics did not necessarily provide him with a method for practice. He attempted to train himself to think in non-Aristotelian logic, but found he reverted to thinking in habitual ways. When he discovered Bourland’s work on E-prime, he began to use it in his writing, and found it helped him to clarify many aspects of his research and bring many underlying assumptions to his awareness. After he developed skill in writing in E-prime, he began the task of speaking in it. He found that it tended to focus his speech, and his understanding, on first person experience, and led him to speak more propositionally (Kelly, 1955), in a way that leaves other possibilities open.

For example, if you saw a man, reeking of whisky, stagger down the street and then collapse, you might think (in ordinary English) "He is drunk." In [E-prime] one would think instead "He acts drunk," or "He looks drunk," both... statements obviously coming closer to an accurate description of the actual experience, and involving fewer covert assumptions than the English original. After all, one might have encountered an actor (practising the part of a drunken man), a man who had spilled alcohol on himself undergoing a seizure of some kind, etc., etc. The [E-prime] statement still leaves these possibilities open, whereas the "is" statement does not. (Kellogg, 1987, p. 120)

Kellogg also described the utility of translating other people’s speech into E-prime and then responding to the E-prime version, as a way of clarifying personal constructions and avoiding arguments. For example, if someone said "E-prime is a stupid idea", rather than saying "It is not!", I might respond, using E-prime, "What don’t you like about it?". Kellogg stated that, although he has engaged in a number of heated discussions by using this approach, he avoids true arguments.
In fairness, I should indicate that not all general semanticists support E-prime. Menafée (1991) questioned whether we could expect widespread abandonment of usages so deeply rooted in the language, and, along with Dallman (1992), suggested that we might not exclude all forms of the verb to be, but instead concentrate only on avoiding the is of identity (“Beverly is a psychologist”), the is of predication (“George is an introvert”), and the passive voice (“Errors were made”), and continue to use forms of to be that involve existence or location (e.g., “I am now in this room and am reading this book”). Other authors have suggested that use of E-prime would not necessarily guarantee clear thinking and communication. Lakoff (1992), for example, reminded us that some languages do not use to be forms extensively, yet we have no reason to believe that members of these cultures take clear responsibility for their attributions. Additionally, although the literature of general semantics contains many articles on the use of E-prime, I could not locate many well-designed empirical studies that plainly demonstrate its efficacy.

We cannot, of course, guarantee that robotic use of E-prime will automatically lead to propositional thinking and invitational communication. We probably will not take complete responsibility for our construing simply by using the Search function of our word processors to purge all forms of the verb to be from our writing or our speech in a purely mechanical way. If we wish, we can find ways to avoid these forms and continue to think in the indicative mood. For example, instead of saying “Spence is an idiot for thinking E-prime is so wonderful”, we could easily say “Spence, that idiot, thinks E-prime makes sense”, without truly changing our indicative usage. Of course, we might very well find validating evidence for the point of view expressed in either of these statements. We can also find many ways to use avoid responsibility by using ambiguous or evasive words such as “probably”, “the data suggest”, “in the author’s opinion”, and “etc”. (Menafée, 1991 p. 139). In using E-prime, as with fixed role therapy or Zen meditation, the formality of a practice does not in itself guarantee a valuable result. To gain any benefit, we must adopt the spirit as well as the letter of the rule (Kenyon, 1992), by a sustained acceptance of the value of questioning our use of the indicative form and, more importantly, by seeing our tendency to project “fixedness” onto the stream of events.
Kellogg (cited in Murphy, 1992) has addressed this intention through further refining the approach beyond just eliminating forms of *to be*. He also attempts to eliminate absolutes that imply permanence (e.g., *always, never*); nouns made from verbs, particularly those using the suffix -*tion* (e.g., *construction, perception*); reliance on the verb *to have*, which we can easily use as a substitute for *is* ("This patient has borderline personality"); and ambiguous "crutches" such as *seem*.

Let me address a concern that people often express when they first learn about E-prime. It may seem awkward to introduce what appears as such a dramatic change in our language. After hearing the idea described, you might imagine that E-prime would render the language incomprehensible. To most listeners, however, E-prime typically reads, and sounds, like standard English, and Bourland (Bourland & Johnston, 1991) reported using it in his writing for years without raising comment. You can judge for yourself: except for quotes or specific reference to a form of *to be*, this entire article appears in E-prime. Although it required some self-consciousness when I began to use it, I now write in E-prime almost exclusively, and quite comfortably. Although I have yet to develop full oral fluency in E-prime, I find that my attempts to speak E-prime have increased my sensitivity to use of the verb *to be* and awareness of my tendency to project my constructions onto events. Use of E-prime also helps me to express attributions or interpretations more propositionally.

**A Psychology for the Future**

As I understand Kelly’s invitational mood, he wished to emphasise the value of considering language hypothetical, only supposing that we regard an event in a particular way. Through this approach, we may explore the future with an understanding that, even if we confirm an hypothesis, we may later regard the event differently. Use of E-prime would not guarantee that we treat events in a make-believe way, or that we consider alternative constructions just to see where they might take us. However, if used with care and thought, E-prime may provide a useful tool for accepting the invitational mood. Through this approach, we could use our language of hypothesis as an instrument for probing the future, while taking responsibil-
itim for our interpretations. If we accept this invitation, I believe we can move another step toward fully realising the promise of constructivist psychology.

References


