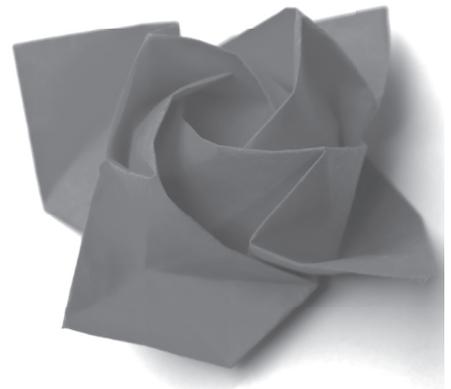# CONSTRUCTIVIST APPROACHES AND RESEARCH METHODS

A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO EXPLORING PERSONAL MEANINGS

PAM DENICOLO
TREVOR LONG
KIM BRADLEY-COLE

4

Constructing personal realities

Key Points

- Social and cultural influences on individual construing
- Main tenets of PCP in relation to research
- The experience of construing

Introduction

In the preceding chapters we have emphasised and provided some illustrations of how particular individuals might view things differently under different circumstances and of how different individuals might view things differently under similar or the same circumstances. These ideas lie at the foundation of PCP theory, as we briefly indicated in Chapter Two where we discussed the evolution of psychological thinking, because it was a reflection on how different therapists understood the source of a patient's problem and then derived approaches to solving it that stimulated George Kelly to theorise a different way of responding to and addressing his patients' problems. We will now explore Kelly's ideas further beginning by reviewing how his ideas developed as a clinician and then going into more detail about aspects of his full theory that provide researchers with a coherent structure and set of instruments with which to explore the life-worlds of all kinds of people in a plethora of situations.

Origins and orientations

To summarise, we can consider the views of therapists working in different paradigms. For instance, a behaviourist would suspect that various external reinforcing

mechanisms had impacted on the patient and thus would devise other external reinforcements to change the exhibited behaviour that was considered problematic. In contrast, a Freudian psychoanalyst would surmise the source of the same problem to be internal, unconscious forces, probably unresolved from early childhood, and suggest a suite of in-depth analysis encounters to probe the source and confront/ resolve the issue. Each of these therapists is orientated by the ideas and tools from their own branch of scientific psychology, their professional culture, in exploring and responding to the issue. If the patient is neither a behaviourist nor of a psycho-analytic persuasion, then s/he will likely have a different set of explanations, derived from experience and influenced by culture. Therefore Kelly suggested that it would be more helpful to ask the patient, exploring his/her ideas, and supporting revision or restructuring or reconstruing of these ideas. He translated that notion into his role of professor, telling his research students that they:

> should not overlook what their subjects [*sic*] have to contribute, for psychological research, as I see it, is a co-operative enterprise in which the subject joins the psy-chologist in making an enquiry. I am very sceptical of any piece of human research in which the subject's questions and contributions have not been elicited or have been ignored in the final analysis of results. (Kelly, 1969: 132)

As a researcher, then, Kelly proposed that his theory and its methods could help resolve some of the puzzles about why people do what they do, especially by focus-ing on how they understand or interpret the world they inhabit. In Activity 4.1 we invite you to begin to explore the world you inhabit.

Activity 4.1

Influences on personal construing

Consider how your personal, professional or disciplinary background influences how you respond to situations.

To help you begin to do this, we suggest that you consider *where* you are reading this. How would you describe it, and how might it appear, say, to a person interested in conditions conducive to study or to another interested in ambient light or to one concerned with access to educational resources? How might it seem to a person from another country – or another planet?

Each will have views influenced by a combination of personal experience/culture and pro-fessional experience/culture, and some perspectives might surprise you. Your own view of this location is influenced by your familiarity with it. You could be reading this in your own home, in which case a multitude of aspects surrounding you will have special significance; or you could be reading in a train travelling to or from work/study. If this is a regular commuter journey then you may well have become immune to the shakes and rattles and smells and noise around you that irritate or frighten or annoy an infrequent traveller.

Such considerations are important because how we view the world is reflected in how we act in it, and vice versa, while what response we get when we act in it in that way impacts on how we continue to act in it.

Now that you have responded to where you are reading, we can now consider that how you respond to *what* you are reading will be influenced by your previous research experience, your previous education and your professional/disciplinary background. One of us had a doctoral

student who eventually shared how disorientating he found the first few months attending a research methods course. He had come from a background that combined both a strongly religious and a 'scientific' orientation that focused on seeking truth to add to the nuggets of truth already collected by researchers – an accumulative fragmentalist (Kelly, 1955a/1991); Harrison and Leitch, 1996). He found the talk, and the general acceptance of, a relativist interpretivist philosophy a challenge to his entire worldview. He expressed it thus: 'It was as if everything that I thought was real was being challenged; at first I just couldn't take the insecurity of everything being ambiguous.' Fortunately, he became used to our strange ways and enjoyed the challenge of learning alternative perspectives, changing and extending his hypotheses about the world alongside us and providing us with new perspectives too.

As we have noted, as a clinician and as a researcher Kelly saw value in considering people as personal scientists, continuously in the process of formulating hypotheses and testing them out for utility in their lives. He called these hypotheses 'constructs' and went on to formulate a comprehensive theory about the nature of these constructs, how they relate to each other, and how they can be explored and then perhaps challenged and changed. In his various roles as clinician, researcher and educator he elaborated his theory, and encouraged others to do so, challenging many of the traditions and tenets of the dominant schools of thought at that time. His theory can be seen as an optimistic approach to human construing, one that values individual dignity yet endows people with potential to learn throughout life:

> the successive revelation of events invites the person to place new constructions upon them whenever something unexpected happens. ... The constructions one places on events are working hypotheses, which are about to be put to the test of experience. As one's anticipations are successively revised in the unfolding sequence of events, the construction system undergoes a progressive evolution. (Kelly, 1991a: 50-1)

Interpretivist approaches are now mainstream, whereas they were new and therefore required considerable defence as a paradigm in Kelly's time. Similarly, we have now imbibed so much of the interpretivist-constructivist philosophy that no proponent would use the term 'subject' to describe those people whom we now consider as 'participants' in our research. The degree of 'participation' may range from being a co-researcher, in action research for instance, to one who is prepared to share some constructs with us so that we might better understand his/her perspective on a topic. Even in the latter case, though, the resultant data – the constructs and any links we perceive between them – belong to the participant, not to the researcher who has to seek permission to use them in documents about the research. You may sense a shift in power here compared to the post-positivist approach, discussed in Chapter Three.

Further, in keeping with his personal philosophy, Kelly put forward his theory, and all its ramifications into practice, as tentative hypotheses – inviting us to try them out as if they could be useful ways of exploring human life. We hope that we are following that tradition here, introducing you to his and others' ideas and research in an invitational mode – suggesting they might be useful for you to experiment with

in your research practice. The formal tenets of PCP and our interpretations, presented next, pave the way to an explanation of the first steps in eliciting constructs (attitudes, values, beliefs, ways of approaching and dealing with their world) of your research participants.

Formal tenets and our interpretations in the field of research

Kelly wrote in the formal academic terminology of his times, initially for fellow psychologists, despite radically reinterpreting the traditional terms of that cultural group. As such, a first encounter with his theoretical position can be daunting to those new to PCP. We have therefore included his original main proposition (which he called the **fundamental postulate**) and the eleven main consequences and ramifications of this proposition (which he termed **corollaries**) as Appendix A for you to refer to in future when you have gained confidence in understanding the jargon of psychology from the 1950s. To support your growing confidence, we will describe the essence of those entities in this chapter, focusing on those most relevant to research activities and using our own words to convey what they mean to us as researchers. First, though, let us explore further some key terms that we will be using.

In Chapter Two we introduced the idea that human experience is irreducible to constituent parts (Raskin, 2012). One of Kelly's challenges to the status quo was therefore to formulate a more holistic notion about how people interact with their worlds, rejecting separation of cognition, emotion and action by combining them all into one term: 'construing'. Thus, construing means 'placing an interpretation on' something by combinations of thinking, feeling and reacting. The process of construing includes the generation, reinforcement, modification or dismissal of constructs. Constructs are personal creations which allow individuals to interpret or make discriminations between things. They allow similarities and differences between things to be recognised. We might recognise surfaces of some things as being smoother than others, for instance. So our construct of smoothness may allow us to differentiate surfaces along a dimension from 'very smooth indeed' to very 'not smooth' or 'rough'. Indeed, we cannot understand or recognise smoothness without being alert to 'what is not smooth', just as we cannot appreciate warmth without experiencing coldness and so on. With this understanding that the way we distinguish a characteristic or idea requires a reference point, a construct therefore has two facets. One facet is the primary focus of the construct, for example its smoothness. The other facet gives this primary focus a context, in this example, what not being smooth is like. A construct therefore a dimension with two poles – it is **bipolar**. Formally, the two poles are described as the **emergent pole** (the primary focus), and the **contrast pole** (the context).

The emergent pole (sometimes referred to as the **elicited pole** in research contexts) is simply the one that first comes to mind when considering an array of items.

The contrast pole is often implicit and may even be submerged or not simple to articulate. It is, according to Kelly, nevertheless there somewhere though it may not have been translated into words. We may describe our journey to work as 'difficult' (emergent pole), by which we mean that it contrasts with journeys that we experience as, to some degree, 'relaxing'. When we describe data as 'rich' (emergent pole) we are making a comparison to data that are 'superficial' (contrast pole). Because constructs are bipolar dimensions we can judge various journeys in terms of how difficult or relaxing there are, while data we encounter can be considered in terms of their degree of richness or superficiality. The journeys or data can be organised along the appropriate dimensions bounded by poles. We cannot, Kelly and common sense suggest, really understand the meaning of one **construct pole** without experience of the other. Further Explanation 4.1 elaborates on the use of verbal labels for our complex responses.

Further Explanation 4.1

Constructs and pole labels

A quick reminder with an important point – like all involved in psychology, we are trying to make sense of the complex and intangible 'goings-on' inside humans using our only means of communicating at a distance – language. Language has its limitations, a theme we will return to later, but it is the best tool available in this situation. Thus we are not suggesting that constructs are actual entities, but we are using them as a way of describing what seems to be happening during these 'goings-on'. Similarly, when we use verbal labels for the poles to describe/delineate these dimensions we must remember that these words are merely symbols, and are only the best attempt in the circumstances to describe reactions that are often hard to describe. Imagine you are late for a special event and someone just pips you to the only convenient parking spot, or the bus/train just pulls away before you can board it. That feeling is not an easy one to put into words and each of us might describe it differently – perhaps using our favoured expletive. The **contrast pole**, the feeling when we grab the last parking spot or leap on the public transport at the last second, is perhaps even harder to describe. Further, describing these reactions is not something we regularly or frequently do, during the business of our daily lives when we are just getting on with things, so we generally need help and guidance with the process of noting and articulating them. This is where the researcher, or in other circumstances a counsellor or clinician, comes in. If asked to do so, you might, for our example, use the words 'frustration versus relief', but those words are poor representations of the actual responses described above.

Thus, we construe things, events or people through a process of discrimination. We discriminate using constructs perceived as relevant in that situation and in relation to where we experience those phenomena as fitting on the dimensions between the poles of the constructs. Fransella and Bannister (1977: 5) provided a captivating example to explain this:

> When we say that Bill Bloggs is honest, we are not saying he is honest, he is not a chrysanthemum or a battleship or the square root of minus one. We are saying that Bill Bloggs is honest, he is not a crook.

Here the emergent pole is 'honest', while the contrast pole is 'a crook'. Bill Bloggs fits near the honest end of the dimension, while it may be that Jake Jepp fits nearer the crook pole. The description used in the contrast tells us more about what the label of the emergent pole really means to the construer. Another person might use the adjective 'honest' to describe a colleague but the contrast for that person might be 'beats about the bush', while for another it might be 'tries to wrap things up in kind words' or, worse, 'fiddles his data'. Each of these contrasts reveals something extra about the meaning of 'honest' for each person and the kinds of experiences that they have had. In fact, without the contrast pole, it would be extremely difficult to understand what the meaning is of a single idea, such as honesty. Try the following activity with friends, family or colleagues to get a sense of how exploring contrast poles can be illuminating.

Activity 4.2

Exploring contrast poles

Select a fairly innocuous topic (for us, the contrast to innocuous is 'tendentious' and we do not want to stimulate angry arguments!) and then devise a list of about five words to describe it. For example, you might choose a particular food dish and describe it as: pricey, good for you, readily available, like it a lot, easy to eat.

Then compile a list of the contrasts from your perspective of those descriptions. For our example, this might be: cheap as chips, junk food, hard to find, can't stand it, fussy to eat. (Note that our constructs – like our prior experience of food items – are probably not the same as yours!)

Then ask your chosen participants for each of your descriptors: 'If describing [food item] what would be a contrasting or opposite description to ––?'

Consider the alternative meanings, subtle though they may be, that they demonstrate for words you have used. Beware if you ask teenagers for contrasts to words like 'yummy', because their alternative descriptions can be quite graphic!

In the chapter that follows we will examine how we can explore personal meanings in greater depth, so keep the results of your Activity 4.2 to hand to use later, after we have got to grips with some more precepts and assumptions embedded in PCP.

Our discussion here illustrates an important precept, which we have already touched on: that people are not merely driven by instinct, nor are they at the mercy of whatever external stimuli they encounter, rather they use a representational model of the world, constructed through their experience of it, to predict future experiences. That is, they form hypotheses (constructs) about what is going on or what things are like and act in relation to those hypotheses in ways that they have previously found to be appropriate, or at least has got them through the encounter. (We know what food to buy or choose from a menu, for instance.)

Further, as we noted in Chapter Two, life is a continuous process of hypothesising and reacting – it is as if we are forever 'in motion', mentally if not always obviously physically. We are testing out our hypotheses or constructs, predicting what will happen next, and sometimes we may find that our hypothesis/construct is

challenged by unexpected reactions/happenings. (We might bite into a favoured food and find it tastes horrible.) If those challenges are small or few, we are likely to hang on to constructs that have been helpful in the past. (We put the bad taste experience down to the food being 'off'.) For constructs that are very important to us, such as seeing a close friend as trustworthy and ourselves as being a good judge of character, then it will take a lot of evidence to the contrary to make us revise our construct. Such resistant constructs, often ones that have helped us to survive for a long time, may become subconscious or implicit notions of the 'way things are' for us. These deep, resistant constructs form the **core of our construct system**. More loosely held, more readily changed constructs are said to be **peripheral** in the construct system. In many ways peripheral constructs are more experimental, ones that we are tentatively trying out based on little experience. An example of a core construct might be about whether different situations or people make you feel valued or loved, whereas a more peripheral construct example could concern whether your emails get noticed and responded to amidst the many others that people receive. Core constructs are the basis of who you are; they give some consistency to the way you are in the world. Peripheral constructs are more fluid and less central to our selves. They allow us to learn to be different without shattering the inner being completely.

In addition to being located at some point on the continuum between being core and being in a more peripheral part of a construct system, constructs form a hierarchical network. Any particular construct is likely to be **subordinate** or **superordinate** to other particular constructs, as we mentioned in Chapter Two. A construct about work colleagues held by person P could be 'dedicated to our project' in contrast to 'our project is not a main interest'. A superordinate construct that includes dedication to the project might be 'enjoy working with' (emergent pole) – 'feel distant from' (implicit pole). On the other hand, one particular very subordinate construct, probably one of several, might be 'responds quickly to my emails' as opposed to 'only responds when it suits'.

```
                        ┌─────────────────┐
                        │  Superordinate  │
                        └─────────────────┘
                                 │
Enjoy working with───────────────────────────────────Feel distant from
                                 │
Dedicated to our project─────────────────Our project is not a main interest
                                 │
Responds quickly to my emails─────────────────Only responds when it suits
                        ┌─────────────────┐
                        │  Subordinate    │
                        └─────────────────┘
```
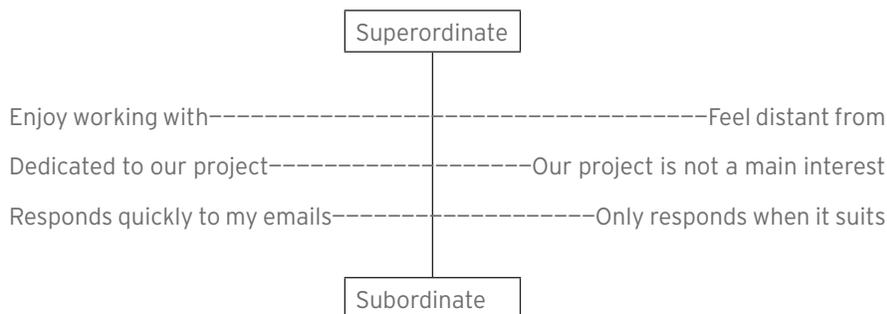
Remember that these are one person's perceptions or constructions of another within a particular situation. P may not apply these constructs to all people, only those she/he has worked with. You may not find these particular constructs relevant to your life, but you will have your own constructs about colleagues based on

your own experiences. In the example above one particular colleague, C, might well also consider the joint project to be important but demonstrates this in ways other than answering emails speedily. Because our original construer, P, takes speed of replying to emails as an indicator of dedication to the project, s/he may misunderstand C's behaviour with emails, relate this to disinterest in the project and thus find C less enjoyable to work with. Being a construct close to the core for P, this is unlikely to change readily, but there may be some hope that C could join P's favoured colleagues group if the construct related to speed of response to emails is challenged and amended. For instance, P may learn that limited availability of a computer, or a phobia about emails, or even showing dedication by spending hours working on the project's statistics, restricts speed of email response from C. This could modify P's perception of C.

How easy it is for P to change that construct will also depend to some extent on the degree to which the team culture favours rapid responses to emails and how open P is to understanding the constructs of C (such as prioritising the statistics). On the other hand, C, who values P as a colleague, could discover from P's reactions and interactions that rapid email response is important to P and therefore make an effort to respond more quickly to P's emails, if not others. This is an example of one of the corollaries in PCP, which is the sociality **corollary** (see Further Explanation 4.2).

The tale above is also an illustration of the key concept of **constructive alternativism**, as described in Chapter Two, that there is always the potential to perceive or construe things in another way. This is in contrast to the philosophy of **accumulative fragmentalism**, that facts or truths are gradually gathered about the world as it is. Either or both of our friends P and C might change their worldviews about emails and the meaning of the speed of responses to them, about what actions demonstrate commitment to a project and/or about each other as colleagues or even friends.

Now we can get to grips with some of the other key tenets of this approach: see Further Explanation 4.2. In this box we have ordered the fundamental postulate of PCP and its corollaries so that those related to an individual's ways of perceiving or construing their world form the first part while the last two relate to how we interact with others. The first part of each explanation is our interpretation of Kelly's words which are presented in brackets.

Further Explanation 4.2

Key PCP tenets translated

When George Kelly formalised his theory (Kelly 1955/1991) he postulated that we respond to situations (events, people, things) in our world in relation to the way they meet our expectations. (The **fundamental postulate**: 'A person's processes are psychologically channellized by the ways in which they anticipate events'.)

One consequence of this is that we build expectations or constructs by comparing particular situations to ones that we have experienced previously, responding in ways that were previously successful. We look for patterns in our experience and respond in ways that worked previously. (The *construction corollary*: 'A person anticipates events by construing their replication'.)

Constructs are related to each other in a hierarchical system. (The *organisation corollary*: 'Each person characteristically evolves, for their convenience in anticipating events, a construction system embracing ordinal relationships between constructs'.)

Each construct in the system has two contrasting poles that is, they are *bipolar,* much like the yin and yang of Chinese philosophy. (The *dichotomy corollary*: 'A person's construction system is composed of a finite number of dichotomous constructs'.)

When we recognise a situation as fitting one particular pole of a dichotomous construct (an elicited pole) it is likely to be the pole that gives us the best chance of confirming that construct and elaborating the construct system, helping us to understand, thus anticipate, the world more effectively, from our perspective. (The *choice corollary*: 'People choose for themselves that alternative in a dichotomised construct through which they anticipate the greater possibility for the elaboration of their system'.)

Constructs can change as we experience similar situations and responses to our actions in them. This is the fundament of learning – reconstrual and elaboration of constructs. (The *experience corollary*: 'A person's construct system varies as they successively construe the replication of events'.)

Constructs are each relevant to a particular set of situations and not to others. You may be interested in whether the people close to you, and who may share your bathroom, leave the lid on or off the toothpaste, but not interested in applying that construct to your bank manager or the bus driver – it only applies to a particular range of people. (The *range corollary*: 'A construct is convenient for the anticipation of a finite range of events only'.)

Some constructs, and construct systems, can be flexible enough to cover new situations or responses to them; others are more rigid. If you find yourself sharing a bathroom at a conference venue with a colleague, your toothpaste lid construct may be permeable enough to accommodate that person, if only temporarily, but it still will not apply to the bus driver. (The *modulation corollary*: 'The variation in a person's construction system is limited by the permeability of the constructs within whose **range of convenience** the variants lie'.)

Because the system is like a complex web with some sets of constructs being relevant only to particular circumstances, we can hold simultaneously constructs that are apparently contradictory. For instance, we may hold strong ideals about the freedom of individuals, which may well be contradicted by our parental values with regard to our young teenagers. (The *fragmentation corollary*: 'A person may successively employ a variety of construction systems which are inferentially incompatible with each other'.)

We each experience situations differently because we have had different opportunities to experience them previously and received different responses to our actions. You may not be or have been a teenager's parent, indeed you may even be a teenager, so may not appreciate the tension inherent in the example above. (The *individuality corollary*: 'People differ from each other in their construction of events'.)

When we respond in a similar way to another person in a particular situation it is likely that we share a similar way of construing it. So if you have been a teenager's parent, you may view the different aspects of individual freedom in a similar way to others like you. (The *commonality corollary*: 'To the extent that one person employs a construction of experience which is similar to that employed by another, their processes are psychologically similar to those of the other person'.)

If we can understand why someone responds in a certain way to a particular situation then we can interact with them in a beneficial way. Thus, if you can remember your own teenage years you may recognise and empathise with the contradictory constructs described previously. (The *sociality corollary*: 'To the extent that one person construes the construction process of another, they may play a role in a social process involving the other person'.)

Constructs have other facets that it is worth a researcher becoming familiar with. One particularly important one is that constructs are mental entities which only acquire verbal labels when we try to articulate them to ourselves or to others. Some may well have been formed before we could speak and may never have gained

a verbal label – the feeling when cradled by a parent, for instance. We may recognise that feeling again later in life and just know that it feels safe, or right, or secure, with or without necessarily giving it a label. We might think of it as a 'gut response'. In construct theory these are known as 'pre-verbal constructs' – and are often hard to put into words even if we try. This has implications for our practice of eliciting constructs, which we discuss Chapter Five. Pre-verbal constructs are not only generated in our early years, since we can have 'gut reactions' to new things we encounter throughout our lives. We do not need to conjure up extraordinarily nasty or wonderful things to illustrate this – a simple consideration of, say, the skin on rice pudding or a plate of tripe may draw a construct from you which may be a positive response of lip-smacking or a negative exclamation like 'ugh!', or a simple turning up or twitching of your nose! (Remember that constructs can have different proportions of cognitive, emotional and physical reactions – described as cognitive, affective and conative in some of the literature.)

A related important point to remember is that even when we do articulate our constructs, give them verbal labels, these labels are only the best symbols within our repertoires to represent our meanings. Some of us have larger vocabularies than others, or a greater facility with words or even a greater motivation to convey things as accurately as possible at any particular time, under any particular circumstance. This too has ramifications both for how we conduct our research (see Chapters Five to Seven) and how we interpret our results (see Chapter Ten).

Another feature that is worth mentioning to researchers (there are several more that clinicians might encounter or you might be interested in as you become more adept at constructivist thinking) who may encounter it when exploring participants' worlds is the notion of loose and tight construing. A tight construct is unchanging, always leading to the same response, whereas loose construing can lead to varying responses as we experiment with how we might perceive the world. As we continue to test out the construct and find more about its applicability, we tighten it up. Loose constructs allow us to be creative, whereas tight constructs make us more predictable. Kelly proposed a creativity cycle in which we loosen some constructs, perhaps through imaginative play with ideas, and then tighten them again in a new form to allow for a more structured response. You might recognise that very rigid constructs might lead to stereotyping and prejudice, whereas too loose construing might make us difficult, capricious people to live with. Nevertheless, Kelly suggests that it can be useful to loosen a construct or two occasionally to aid creativity. He describes loose constructs thus:

> The loose construction is like a rough sketch which may be preliminary to a carefully crafted design. The sketch permits flexible interpretation. This or that feature is not precisely placed. (Kelly, 1991a: 357)

If your previous forays into research have been dominated by a neo-positivist paradigm (see Chapter Three) or a particular leaning towards another theory of human behaviour then, since you have reached this far into this book, you presumably have

loosened somewhat your constructs about possible ways to conduct research. We hope that by the time you reach the end of the book and have had time to experiment with the approach and techniques, as we will urge you to do in the next and subsequent chapters, you will tighten them enough to include personal construct approaches within your repertoire of potential ways to address certain research questions.

It might help if you keep the key principles of the theory, summarised below, in mind as you read on:

- Constructivist researchers recognise that each person individually constructs a model of the world they inhabit.
- Researchers try to suspend ('bracket') their views on a topic sufficiently to allow and encourage others to describe a particular aspect of their world as they perceive it, without prompts or censure.
- Each person's model is based on their experience of results of their experiments using hypotheses about how things, events, people are.
- Researchers recognise that the template of constructs that their participants place on their worlds reflects their experience of it to date, and those experiences may be very different to their own.
- Schwandt (1994: 118) saw the essence of constructivist research as having 'the goal of understanding the complex world of lived experience from the point of view of those who live it ... as an abiding concern ... for the **emic** point of view, for understanding meaning, for grasping the actor's definition of a situation, for **Verstehen**'.
- The model can change and develop over time through further experimentation and experience, although some aspects in the core of the model are resilient to change since they have in the past been, for example, critical to survival.
- The researcher cannot assume that the construct system or particular constructs will remain constant beyond the point when they are elicited. The very act of elicitation can result in reflection and change, though some constructs may not change despite challenge.
- Lakatos (1970: 104) suggested that 'conceptual frameworks can be developed and also replaced by new, *better* ones; it is *we* who create our "prisons" and we can also critically demolish them'.
- This echoes Kelly (1991a: 11) who said: 'We assume that all of our present interpretations of the universe are subject to revision or replacement. This is a basic statement .... We take the stand that there are always some alternative constructions available to choose among in dealing with the world. No one needs to paint himself into a corner; no one needs to be completely hemmed in by circumstances; no one needs to be a victim of his biography. We call this philosophical position constructive alternativism.'
- The model can be described as a complex system of constructs, each of which is a bipolar dimension along which items can be arranged to differentiate them from each other.
- Researchers can better understand participants' constructs by having them try to articulate what the contrast is to the words used to describe something or someone (the emergent pole) and then consider how various examples fit along the dimension between the emergent and contrast poles.
- Constructs have differing proportions of thinking, feeling and doing components. They can differentiate few or a wide range of items and can be apparently contradictory when they are used in different contexts or at different times or applied to different sets of items.

- Researchers should recognise that constructs are not simply cognitive, thought-out responses but generally contain varying degrees of emotional and physical reaction. For example, dislike of something might be a conscious, rational evaluation of something, an emotional reaction to it, or a physical repulsion, or any combination of those three.
- Researchers can explore sections of the system in order to gain a better understanding of the way in which a person (alone or in a group) interacts with a specific aspect of their world (contextual in time and space).
- It is impossible to explore a person's whole construct system in all its complexity, not even our own, but small portions can be investigated using carefully selected tools as described in Chapters Five, Six and Seven.
- Researchers can seek out constructs and relationships between constructs in order to note individual differences and similarities between individuals (commonality) by trying to see the world through another's constructs (sociality).
- There is a range of analysis techniques that supports interpretation of others' worlds, and some of these are described in Chapter Ten.
- Researchers may find the way that others view the world quite challenging to their own view, so they have to loosen, temporarily at least, their constructs a little to understand that the reality for the other person is different to their own.
- Becoming a constructivist researcher can be challenging to the security of one's own beliefs and understandings about the world, each challenge to one's constructs potentially causing revision, otherwise known as learning.

Summary

We discussed the notion that perceptions of the world vary by individual and over time for the same individual. We then introduced Kelly's personal construct theory which provides a logical and integrated set of principles that explain how such perceptions or constructs influence the thinking, feeling and behaviour of individuals and groups of individuals. This theory and the methods derived from it provide a sound basis for exploring/researching one's own and others' worlds.

Suggested further reading

Dalton, P. and Dunnett, G. (1999) *A Psychology for Living: Personal Construct Theory for Professionals and Clients*. Farnborough: EPCA Publications. (Previously published in 1992 by Wiley.)

Chapters 1–4 explore the key aspects of PCP theory, relating it particularly to understanding oneself. It is a particularly accessible account with myriad examples carved into a structure based on the kinds of questions asked by students, colleagues and friends of the authors.

Fransella, F. (2005) *The Essential Practitioner's Handbook of Personal Construct Psychology*. Chichester: Wiley.

Although the major portion of the book is devoted to clinical aspects of PCP, the first three chapters provide a different articulation of some of the ideas presented in the foregoing chapter.