To the Editor:

The immediate "problem" of communication Prof. Westcott leaves us with ("Creative Communication: Constructs, Associations, and Metaphors," Et cetera, Vol. 34, No. 4) is the extent to which his presentation has encouraged any "creative" communication to take place between himself and his readers. On at least two counts Prof. Westcott has done George Kelly a disservice: (1) we are never really given any "objective correlatives" for the stream of abstractions, (2) Kelly's keen sense of humor and play is masked completely as is the fact that his system is strongly rooted in drama and the playing out of scripts and roles.

Ironically, however, being able to discover these shortcomings in Prof. Westcott's article has allowed me to "construe" the problem of George Kelly's reception in academia in a new light, for I too have wondered why his work continues to be neglected. (My conclusions here are, of course, totally unrelated to Prof. Westcott's intentions for his article, but then this is yet another instance of the mysterious way in which minds and messages converge.) For the most part, the followers of George Kelly have missed his essential nature by taking his abstract writings too literally and too seriously. Kelly's "Personal Construct Theory" provides us, for instance, with a systematic explanation of why things strike us as being funny: humor results from the incongruous clash between competing "constructions" of events and values. This, of course, makes metaphors enormously funny, but today, unfortunately, both poetry and science have become rather serious and ponderous affairs, and thus the kind of free play and "the emperor has no clothes" attitude that is represented in George Kelly's wide-ranging and humanistic approaches to man's condition is somehow out of vogue.

When we think of Kelly, our first touchstone is the rather direct and dry presentation of his theory as it appears in the first three chapters of The Psychology of Personal Constructs, not the second volume of this work with its many examples of client-therapist encounters, nor with those entertaining but wise speeches he used to give, such as the one on "Sin and Psychotherapy":
What about this knowledge of good and evil, this fruit that Adam and Eve ate? And what does it have to do with psychotherapy? Was—is—the exile that Adam and Eve—and my patient—experienced to be regarded as a petulant retaliation for their dabbling in matters reserved for a superhuman being? Or do we face here a basic principle of human life, as true for the individual now as it was for the most ancient progenitors of the human race: that with knowledge come responsibilities and with responsibilities comes trouble? Adam and Eve, in this remarkably insightful story, sought the knowledge of good and evil, and that is precisely what they got, for they lived to see one of their sons grow to be a good man, and the other his murderer.

Modern man, no less tragic in his plight, has also sought the knowledge of many things that have proved too much for him. Some have sought sexual knowledge—not too difficult an achievement. But they have usually found out more than they wanted to know. Others, somewhat more intellectually inclined, no doubt, have searched for the secret of nuclear fission. That was harder, but they found it. And, like the sons of Adam, they found there was a lot more wrapped up in that tiny little affair than they had any intention of being responsible for.

This passage is contained in Clinical Psychology and Personality: The Selected Papers of George Kelly and how differently the writing here engages the mind. I keep being surprised at the resistance most of my doctoral students show toward the Kelly reading I assign each semester (A Theory of Personality which contains only the first three chapters mentioned above). They complain of its jargon and its abstract matter-of-factness devoid seemingly of even one concrete example of what he is talking about. At last I see that I have been assigning the wrong book, and it is significant that the right book, The Selected Papers, does not even appear in one of Prof. Westcott's footnotes.

What I infer from all this is that Kelly's followers are ensnared in certain dichotomous constructions when they practice psychology and communication: concrete vs. abstract, ironic vs. serious, transparent vs. opaque, subjective vs. objective. These followers seem content to reside on the right of each dichotomy; it was Kelly's unique contribution that he could move in both directions even while leaning strongly to the left.

The task of "creative" communication is surely what Prof. Westcott says it is, namely, inducing a long-term change in another person's construct system, or literally altering the way he views the world. The trick remains, however: how actually to accomplish this, how to choose those points of reference (Commonality Corollary) which allow you to share a meaning with another person before you distort the interpretation or significance of the reference in order to force a new meaning on the other person and thus urge the task of reconstruction on him. Were Prof. Westcott to have given us some examples of this
process, perhaps his argument would have begun to have had some effect on us.

As I mentioned earlier, one key to understanding Kelly is the importance of drama. In our "life roles," our "identity themes," we enact and thus reveal the abstractions of our construct systems. Significantly, when Prof. Westcott describes Kelly's "Sociality Corollary" he translates "He may play a role in a social process involving the other person" into "he may participate in the interpersonal world of the second." All drama, sharing and conflict, is removed once "play a role" becomes "participate in" because Prof. Westcott seemingly would prefer not to risk sliding over to the left of his constructs. This might have involved really getting into the mess that results when you try to have "creative" communication in a human relationship. What about equals changing each other?—two friends, a husband and wife (friends or not), or two co-workers? How does this process change when the relationship is not equal: teacher-student, boss-employee, or doctor-patient? Kelly's system does give us a way of looking at these events, but it must be pinned down.

One interesting example might have been collaboration in science. James Watson and Francis Crick, for instance, brought their individual and contrasting constructs to the problem of DNA, but were able to play a "creative" communication role in each other's thinking. Partly because they were not totally wedded to the guiding paradigms (or blinders) in the field, they were able to shake each other loose from a dependency on interesting but false solutions until the marvel of the double helix emerged. (It should not embarrass us so much that scientists can actually be on the left of their constructs, actually be human while they are practicing science—this should in fact be their goal.) Surely such a case study exploration would have helped Prof. Westcott's argument, time and space permitting. If he had done this the specifics and the humor of Kelly's contribution would have been preserved (not ossified), but then I might never have discovered how I was shortchanging my students in our study of "Personal Construct Theory."

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