

A vivid portrait of Pcp. Interview with Mary Frances

(English original version)

by

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Mary Frances is a consultant and facilitator working with individuals, groups and organisations to support change and transition. She is also a teacher of PCP and constructivist theory and practice. She specialises in work with public services, education, and the arts, and her current interests include collaborative and practitioner research, storytelling & narrative, working with images & metaphor, and exploring the conversational change processes of everyday working life. She is the Director of the ICP International Lab.

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Thank you for this interview, Mary.

Thanks to you! It's a great pleasure, and an honour to be invited.

When did you first meet PCP and what does it mean for you?

Like many other people, when I started to study psychology, I was disappointed and disillusioned with what I found. As our PCP colleague Peggy Dalton used to say, it was dominated by 'pigeons in boxes and rats in mazes', and combined with endless accounts of the cognitive responses of generations of US college students, and a massive focus on 'abnormality'. I was a part-time student, already in full-time work as a learning and development leader in social care services, and so the disconnect between my practice and the psychology theory on offer was very stark.

In a search for what might be missing, I found an additional evening class at the university called 'Approaches to Psychotherapy' which was a series of 10 week lecture cycles on a wide range of theories and approaches. I was like a tourist on a long voyage, hoping to find a place to stay. Towards the end of the journey, after two years of travel, Helen Jones arrived with 10 weeks of PCP, and a completely different approach to teaching and practising psychology. This was in 1981, and I have never looked back. I immediately found PCP to be a thoughtful, useful, and above all, respectful way of practising, and I knew I had found my professional 'home'.

Who have been your other mentors?

Helen has continued to be a great support. Peggy Dalton was a most wonderful friend and colleague. I experienced Peggy as living, not just practising, PCP. She supervised my work for years, and then we co-supervised. I still miss her keenly. Jörn Scheer has been a great supporter and encourager of my writing, which I appreciate very much from my practitioner perspective. And my dear friends Dusan Stojnov and Massimo Giliberto have been important and inspiring collaborators and co-explorers. I had previously worked in both of their schools when we founded the European Constructivist Training Network together in 2006. This led to a series of constructivist teachers' meetings, and the Racconti Mediterannei summer schools. These were immersive experiences of living and learning in residential groups where we shared leisure activities as well as workshops, with international students. The model has now been developed further by the Alpine Tales team at ICP, who have taken the experiment forward with shared housekeeping and the daily management of a temporary communal home. Alpine Tales workshop activities are based on participant offers, and no distinction is made between teachers and students.

I consider our younger colleagues to be my mentors now, which is as it should be. I'm thinking particularly of the group who organises Alpine Tales, and the team leading the ICP International Lab. I am continually inspired by their fresh ideas, their lively energy, and their openness to exploring all aspects of life through PCP.

The PCP focus of convenience is psychotherapy, but its range is increasingly much wider. What do you think about other fields of application of Kelly's theory?

It's true that Kelly worked as a therapist, and his exposition of the theory in the two volumes was focused on clinical work, but that doesn't make it a theory of psychotherapy alone. PCP is about all of us, all of the time, so I don't think of it in terms of a theory to be 'applied'. I believe its range of convenience can encompass any field. It offers a way of understanding what is happening when any person engages with another, or with the world around them, or with themselves. I experience it as a process of inquiry into meaning-making, and therefore equally relevant to any professional context.

One of the great benefits of taking PCP into organisational settings is that it doesn't impose, or categorise. It doesn't bring norms to be judged against, or standard scales to measure with. There is no list of diagnostic 'types'. It has no pre-conceived expectations of how roles or relationships should develop. The stance of PCP is inquiring, receptive, respectful, and entirely non-pathological. I believe it is still radical in all these respects. Whichever field we approach through PCP, it can help us to move and explore. I see the

theory as a hypothetical structure, at a fairly abstract level, and those we are working with, or living with, will bring the content, as we will bring our own.

What is your view of teaching and trainings in PCP? Is there a difference between teaching constructivism and a constructivist way of teaching?

Yes, I would see it as a critical difference, and this is something I've been interested in for some time. My experience of PCP education is that it often involves a lot of teaching 'about' the theory, and the formal demonstration of methods. We are often asked why students who study PCP alongside other theories don't take it further, and part of my answer is that they are likely to have been taught the 'fundamental postulate' and 'corollaries' out of any particular context, and then construct a full repertory grid and learn its uses as a statistical instrument. To be honest, if that had been my introduction to PCP I doubt that I would have been attracted to it myself! Experimenting with alternative practice is an ongoing challenge, and countercultural in many respects. Over the last 30 years, I have experienced education at all levels moving much closer to commercial values and quantitative measurement, and I see constructivist pedagogy as a form of creative resistance.

I have an advantage in mainly being involved in PCP teaching outside a prescribed syllabus, usually leading special or optional courses, which has given me a valuable and unusual platform for practice. I feel strongly that our teaching needs to be congruent with the theory, catching its spirit. This would incline towards active experimentation, open exploration, critical engagement and personal discovery. The teacher would be a co-explorer with the students, a scientist of their own teaching practice and their own learning. I believe that this is required by our commitment to reflexivity - to understand the theory as something performed through our practice, and in the living of our lives. It is something I aspire to. Without that effort and engagement, it would be just another interesting theory to talk about, a body of information to pass on.

In your experience, what are the most powerful topics of PCP in working with groups and organisations?

When I was asked to write a chapter on Consulting in Organisations for the recent International Handbook of PCP, I chose to use Kelly's original 1955 work as my sole reference. I wanted to illustrate its comprehensive relevance in the field. The practice is no different; it is the context that is particular in some interesting ways.

To illustrate, some of the most useful aspects of PCP in organisational work are the 'constructs of transition' and particularly Kelly's very specific and unusual redefining of anxiety, threat, hostility and guilt. In his definitions of these processes, he has removed all trace of pathology, disorder and shame, and has relocated these experiences in what we might see as 'everyday' ideas such as unfamiliarity, impending loss, confusion, or the feeling of having 'painted ourselves into a corner'. He normalises these things. They are not seen, or worked with, as aberrations or over-reactions. They are simply the regular and expected things we might experience when change is afoot. This is a very distinctive approach, especially in organisational life where 'resistance to change' is regularly treated as an obstacle, and as a problem to overcome. By contrast, PCP sees resistance as an interesting thing to explore and as something to respect, with its own internal logic. It is also a useful and important source of information. Groups I work with are often genuinely surprised and intrigued by this reframing, which they can instantly relate to. It can make a huge practical difference to how they manage transitions and support each other through changes.

As in all PCP practice, the place to start is in our own personal theories and understandings about what we believe we are doing, and why. I am thinking not just of how we might describe our role in general, but more importantly how we understand it from moment to moment as we work. This seems to me to be Kelly's position - not just that we define our role and purpose in general, but that we continually inquire into it, pay attention to its ongoing movement, and reflect on its appropriateness and usefulness in real time. PCP practitioners in any setting are likely to connect at that a superordinate level. We are all working

towards the facilitation of creative meaning-making, and exploring how we might help people go on constructively with the living of their lives.

What does "facilitating change" mean in the work context?

Our understanding of change processes is of course very similar, but some different considerations apply. For example, in their work setting, the individual person will often have less agency, and there are likely to be quite different constraints on what movement might be possible. With numerous work colleagues and a hierarchical structure, the web of role-relationships and responsibilities is usually complex. The person is likely to be enmeshed in many different sets of expectations and dependencies, on which their livelihood, and often their core identity, depend. This is a different and complicated context for our work.

Additionally, change at work is generally experienced as imposed. Relatively few people are involved in key decisions and choices, able to respond at their own pace, or move in their preferred direction. Changes are continually forced by decisions and demands from all directions, by the pace of political and technological change, and by the changing needs of the people who use or want the things we offer, make, or provide. As a result, our working lives can easily be out of line with our core values and aspirations. The overwhelming sense is that events are happening to us, and are out of our control. Finding alternative ways to construe change, which can help us recover meaning, and which avoid the simplistic comforts of 'positive thinking' can be a struggle, for both the workers and their consultant! It's a challenging and rewarding context to work in, but I'm pretty sure that I wouldn't be in the field at all if I hadn't found a theory as robust and creative as PCP.

How can PCP facilitate and promote creativity? And how does it work in conversational change processes you often mention?

For me, the promotion of creativity comes primarily through the theory's implicit insistence on alternatives. Most groups and systems, even though they are continually in flux (or perhaps because of this) have a strong focus on stability. Disruption is often resisted. Certainty is valued. Habit and routine become quite tightly patterned, and there are vast areas of 'taken-for-granted-ness'. Many things are left unquestioned, assumed, or barely noticed any more. The popular joke that organisational culture is what you notice for the first three months and never notice again is pretty accurate in my experience. So a gentle insistence on exploring alternatives is usually a useful and helpfully perturbing intervention in its own right. Our belief that there will always be some options can bring its own quietly hopeful creative energy into the system, and spark new questions and ideas.

A major difference between PCP and other organisational models or methods is our commitment to experimentation rather than solutions. We encourage people-as-scientists to observe carefully the consequences of their actions, and become interested in the process, and in possible alternatives. Groups who work this way can develop a kind of 'change-readiness' which helps long-term, and which contrasts with a focus on solutions which can seem to imply the end to a story. An experimental stance allows more varied movement and different kinds of relationships. It raises new topics. It is change already happening. My interest in everyday conversation is based in the hypothesis that this is where group culture is expressed, and where change happens. Not in the strategic planning charts, or the posters on the wall describing 'our values' or 'our mission', but in the way we talk, move, interact, and pass by each other every day. As John Lennon once said, 'life is what happens while you're busy making other plans'. In the everyday conversational life of a group, potential ideas emerge, alternatives are discussed, hopes and concerns are expressed, role tensions are played out, preferences and hostilities are evident, energy is generated, possible plans emerge. My practice is composed of many, varied conversations - initiating them, encouraging them, joining them, relocating them, altering them by my presence and by what I pay attention to. Through conversation, we are already on the move.

In your opinion, why is PCP not widely known and used, compared for example to cognitive theories? What is your personal view of the future of PCP?

Well, we've mentioned that it's not always taught well, and it takes a while to get to grips with it. But also, as a philosophically-based theory, it appears quite abstract, and 'empty' in a way. It is a broad approach rather than a set of techniques - there are few protocols and no manual to follow. I think we rely, more than any other approach I know, on the creativity of the practitioner improvising in-the-moment with their client/s.

I'm happy with the relative emptiness of Kelly's theory. It offers a consistent, highly-elaborated and yet somehow still minimal hypothetical framework, within which we can invent and adapt our methods. Kelly said himself that he rarely used the same method twice. I think that other theories and models tend to offer more definition and guidance, a clearer and more specific route to follow and ways to work. That's probably why I rejected them, but it's possibly why others reject PCP.

Some cognitive models are certainly much easier to learn and use. People are practising after just a few weeks training, and achieving short term behavioural results on a pre-determined scale very quickly. By contrast, we can't evidence much that way - not because we don't arrive at profound change, but because we have no pre-set expectations of right/wrong behaviours or good/bad outcomes, or what scale we would be measuring against. These things are for our clients to figure out, with our help, and their individual differences and wonderful contradictions make the notion of standardised evidence-gathering nonsensical.

I've always accepted that PCP is a small school that will attract certain kinds of practitioners, and so I'm surprised and delighted by the numbers of young PCP specialists now working in Serbia, Spain, and most particularly Italy. It's an unexpected joy, and the future looks very positive and lively in their hands.

How can we contribute in spreading PCP in the world, in your opinion?

I think we might learn to tell better stories. It strikes me that we are a bit too preoccupied with teaching people the theory, rather than describing our journeys and discoveries in ways that might attract and inspire newcomers. I'm including myself here, by the way. Trying to respond to your questions has highlighted this for sure! The new generation are stronger in this respect I think, and it shows in their lively engaging conference presentations, contrasted with the dryness of many papers.

Also, I think we could connect more variously with a wider range of interests. Some PCP colleagues work on one specialist topic for very many years, and so in terms of publications and research it can feel like there's nothing new happening. I wrote a blog for about 8 years, and tried to give a PCP perspective on anything and everything - from politics to poetry, from climate change to banking, from hiring practices to theatre production. The best moments were when people contacted me to say that they really enjoyed this unusual take on things and found it helpful and enjoyable, and by the way what is it all about and where can they find out more?

At ICP International Lab, which is one of my more recent projects, we have taken a similar path with our online 'magazine' Lab Notes. We try to feature four interesting articles or links in each issue about virtually anything that we can see through a constructivist lens. We have five editions online so far, and we have covered school rules and colour perception, photography and mapmaking, birdsong and hip hop. Our stance is that PCP is a way of approaching the world, not just a theory that needs expert 'application' to specific professional fields. This is one of our experiments, and feedback so far is good, and has come from people outside our usual contacts. PCP is the liveliest and most versatile theory to work with, and I think it helps to highlight that. If people can catch the spirit of it, they might be attracted to explore the detail. I'm not sure it has worked so well the other way round.

What are your present and future projects?

My latest new project is the International Lab, part of the Institute of Constructivist Psychology in Padua. It's designed to offer a connecting hub for people interested in PCP worldwide. We offer training programmes in English, which we try to keep true to the spirit of PCP emphasising exploration and

collaboration, dialogue and conversation, critical inquiry, and practical experimentation. The Lab team includes all of you who are leading this conversation, and your skills, energy and commitment are essential to the project. As you know, we see ourselves as connectors, willing to support and assist colleagues who would like to promote and develop PCP in their own institutions, groups and countries, and providing platforms for shared interests. We are quite new, just one year old, but already quite visible in the PCP world. It's an exciting project, full of potential.

In terms of theory, I'm currently engaged with challenging the notion of constructs as either/or binaries, reclaiming them as dimensions of inquiry, and exploring possible metaphorical approaches to understanding and mapping the complexity, interconnectedness, and everyday muddle of our personal construct systems.

I'm busy as ever with my consulting practice, and looking forward to a great reunion of friends and colleagues next summer at the EPCA conference in Edinburgh. I'm very optimistic right now - I would say that the future of PCP is looking good!