A Community of Voices

Abstract

Miller Mair's 'Community of Selves' idea is adapted as a useful way of helping people make sense of and change their relationships with their voices.

Citation

Harding, K. (2015). 'A Community of Voices', *The Journal of Critical Psychology, Counselling and Psychotherapy,* 15 (3), pp. 180-189.

Full-Text

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SUMMARY: Miller Mair's 'Community of Selves' idea is adapted as a useful way of helping people make sense of and change their relationships with their voices.

KEYWORDS: Personal Construct Psychology, voices, community.

Personal Construct Psychology (PCP) can be useful for helping each one of us make sense of ourselves, other people, and our surroundings in the constant flow of what we call life (Kelly, 1955). It is a theory that does not claim 'truth' but can be thought of as a series of propositions which can help us make sense of our lives from the conclusions we have drawn from our experiences. These conclusions/interpretations form the 'lenses' from which we anticipate our present and future. Our conclusions drawn from our experiences make up our unique 'personal construct system' or 'worldview' (Button, 1985), made up of numerous inter-connected 'constructs'. A construct is a discrimination we use to make sense of something relevant to us. For example, one person might define a friend by contrasting with an enemy, so we have a construct of 'friend – enemy'. Another person might conclude they've never had an enemy so when asked how they define a friend could contrast with an acquaintance, so forming the construct of 'friend – acquaintance' and so on. Much of our personal construct system flows unconsciously and can be restrictive or elaborative in different times and/or contexts (Butt, 2008). In a nutshell, it is what we use to make our 'best guesses' about what confronts us in our ongoing experiences in life. An excellent introductory chapter to PCP can be found in Button (1985).

  The founder of PCP, Dr George A. Kelly, assumed that 'all of our present interpretations of the universe are subject to revision or replacement' (Kelly,

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1955) which can be potentially threatening but also potentially liberating. Such a possibility could be thought of as a 'construct' of 'threatening – liberating' that makes up one part of a person's 'personal construct system'. If we imagine two people who did partly make sense of their worlds by implicitly using such a construct then we can guess that the implications for their worlds would be hugely different. The person who identified with the 'threatening' pole of the construct might live a more constricted life than the person who identified with the 'liberating' pole in this context. Such a person might also be more likely to hold on to beliefs they think 'keep them safe' even if there is evidence to the contrary (see Harding, 2015) such can be the need to anticipate our world consistent with our own biases and prejudices. The above example of a construct can of course have gradations inbetween and is not intended to 'judge' whether identifying with 'threatening' or 'liberating' is a 'good' or a 'bad' thing. Either pole of the construct can be a 'good' or 'bad' thing depending on the situation and the context. PCP is just one way of looking at things as Bannister (1968) eloquently stated:

> If we contemplate a young lady crossing a bridge (a lay construction) then we may equally construe her as a 'series of moments of force about a point' (engineer's construing), as 'a poor credit risk' (banker's construing), as 'a mass of whirling electrons about nuclei' (physicist's construing), as 'a soul in peril of mortal sin' (theological construing) or as 'a likely dish' (young man's construing). We do not have to assume that she is really any of these. We can accept that they are all constructions which have some explanatory value and predictive utility depending on the networks of constructs from which they stem.

The 'network of constructs' represents each particular person's 'lenses' from which they view and anticipate their world. I would also like to add the further examples that a young lady crossing a bridge could be construed as 'a balance or imbalance of chemicals' (psychiatrist's construing), or as 'the sum of environmental antecedents' (psychologist's construing). On a similar theme, the (guessed) effects of psychiatric medication can be viewed as 'correcting an underlying disease process' or 'creating an intoxicated state' (disease centred model – drug centred model; Moncrieff, 2008). Furthermore, the reported experience of 'hearing voices' is construed by some as being a 'symptom of a major psychiatric illness' called 'schizophrenia' (see any psychiatric manual) that needs 'managing like diabetes' (see Whitaker, 2010 for a critique of such views), but others use an alternative construction that such experiences are a 'manifestation of distress' (see for example Rowe, 2006). It is not hard to imagine the possibility of a person reading such contrasting views on the internet and forming an implicit propositional construct of 'schizophrenia – manifestation of distress/confusion' as they try and make sense of the phenomenon

of 'hearing voices' that someone might have reported to them, but that they have no direct experience of themselves.

The author of this paper would firstly offer such a person a view that would subsume a construct of 'schizophrenia – manifestation of distress/confusion' under another construct of 'restrictive – expansive'. One way the author would try and convince the person that the concept of 'schizophrenia' is restrictive and unhelpful in making sense of why people 'hear voices' would be by explaining Miller Mair's metaphorical concept of 'a community of selves' (Mair, 1977) and how he has used it as a way of making sense of voices (aka 'auditory hallucinations' in psychiatric literature and once deemed as 'a first rank symptom of schizophrenia', Rowe, 2007). The author would further hope that such a person might eventually subsume 'hearing voices' under a possible 'normal experience' pole of a construct they might have of 'normal experience – abnormal experience'.

Of course, conceiving voices as a 'manifestation of distress/confusion' is only one possible contrast and not everyone experiences their voices as distressing (see Romme et al, 2009). However, this paper is focusing on the clinical experience of the author and the possibility that adapting Mair's metaphor as a 'community of voices' is a useful way of making sense of and reducing the confusion and distress that some people experience as a result of hearing voices. The author will now refer to himself in the first person and attempt a brief sketch of Mair's (1977) idea that we are all 'a community of selves'.

A Community of Selves

The idea that we are 'a certain type of person' seems to be pervasive (Butt & Burr, 2004) and is typified by the appeal of 'personality' questionnaire's that are found in popular magazines etc. Working as a clinical psychologist over the years I've found that some people are disappointed when I can't tell them 'what type of person' they are. In the clinic room, the particular version of 'personal construct informed' psychotherapy that I claim to 'practice' gives rise to common themes such as 'I'm not the person I used to be … I'm not myself anymore … I want to be my old self again', and sometimes these ideas can be helpfully used when plotting a repertory grid (see Fransella, Bell & Bannister, 2004) to clarify a person's view of who they 'were', who they 'are', and who they would 'like to be'. I think that such distinctions can sometimes be useful, especially if someone has suffered the kinds of traumas that have shattered their view of 'who they are', who other people may or may not be, and the world around them. However, the common theme is the idea and implicit assumption of being a particular 'type' of person i.e., I'm a positive/negative/light-hearted/serious person etc., the implications of which could become conclusions of 'I'm not the type of person to study and go to University' etc. Kelly (1955) suggested that 'no-one needs to paint themselves into

a corner', and yet does thinking of ourselves as 'a particular type of person' not run the possibility of doing exactly that?

Mair (1977) highlighted that 'when we attempt to understand anything unfamiliar, unknown, mysterious or beyond our present comprehension we seem to resort to the use of metaphor … consider for instance how we make sense of our 'feelings' … we talk of feeling 'heavy or light' … and so on.' Mair's metaphorical response to the observation that Western culture is oriented towards individuality (of which the saturation of popular psychology books and cognitive-behavioural therapy is one consequence) was to consider the idea that 'instead of viewing any particular person as an individual unit, I would like you to entertain, for the time being, the 'mistaken' view of any person as if he or she were a 'community of selves.' Mair's hope was that such a metaphor might be useful to help a person 'grasp some of its possibilities for understanding and action'. Does a quick reflection on this metaphor not make intuitive sense? For example, how many times do we experience an 'inner battle' between 'what my head says' as opposed to 'what my heart says'?; this can be as 'significant' as a decision about whether to stay in or leave a relationship or as 'insignificant' as to whether your favourite football team should re-sign a former great player or manager. Of course, whatever is deemed significant or insignificant depends on each particular person's perspective. As Mair (1977) suggests we might think of the above scenarios as being simply forms of expression, but it does open up the possibility to metaphorically consider two different viewpoints as being two different people, from which we can consider and attend to both points of view as if they were two separate people within the same 'community'.

A football metaphor could be conceived as listening to two different players with different views on tactics and yet both play for the same team so are within the same 'community'. Of course, using such a metaphor could incorporate at least three different viewpoints/selves within the same community i.e., defence, midfield, strikers, and maybe at different times the defence's viewpoint might be more credible than the strikers etc. Such a metaphor could be extended further by including perhaps more distant figures such as the Chairman and Board of Directors views. As Mair said:

> The notion of oneself as a 'community of selves' can readily be elaborated further by some people to incorporate three, four or any number of 'selves'. Some of these 'selves' will be found to persist and others may be more transitory … some will 'appear' in many circumstances and others only on a few special kinds of occasions, some will be 'more powerful' and others will give way to them.

The above quote from Mair (1977) put me in mind of the conversations I've had over the years with people who report hearing voices. I wondered if 'the community of selves' metaphor could be usefully adapted for the exploration of a person's 'community of voices' and whether it might provide a helpful framework for people (often labelled 'schizophrenic') to make sense of and clarify the sense of fear/distress/confusion that I've often observed when working with people so labelled in a clinical setting (of course the clinical setting and the mental health 'system' itself can be a big part of a person's fear/distress/confusion!) and I will describe how I've used Mair's ideas after clarifying the 'community of selves' idea via an example from Mair's (1977) paper, which he recounted in more detail in a later book (Mair, 2014).

Mair (1977) provided several examples of the elaborated and creative accounts that people who found the metaphor useful conceived when considering their own 'community of selves'. One of the examples describes 'John' as a heavy smoker who had been unable to stop. He was seeing Mair to try and make sense of why he smoked so heavily. Mair proposed to John that he seemed as if he was 'a number of different people, each with their own interests and concerns'. He asked John if it made sense to him to consider himself as if he was 'a community of selves rather than a single unitary figure'. Mair goes on to describe how John grasped this concept enthusiastically and used the metaphor of a Government to describe the functioning of these different selves.

John reported recognising that his 'Foreign Secretary' had excessive influence over his 'Government', whereas his 'Home Secretary' had not been as assertive as he needed to be. John understood his 'Foreign Secretary' as the 'self' that visits other communities (other people) to serve their needs in the form of requests for aid. However, he realised that he didn't check with the situation at 'home' to see if his 'Government' had the resources to enable his 'Foreign Secretary' to make such never ending commitments. He found that as he repeatedly answered requests for aid, his 'Home Secretary' was 'drowning' in the attempt to fulfil so many demands that his 'Government' then found unable to meet. The usefulness of Mair's metaphor for John was highlighted when John reported his realisation that there was hardly any discussion 'in Cabinet' about the 'Foreign Secretary's' dealings. John concluded that the rest of his Government was being dominated by this one 'Minister'.

Mair (2014) reported that John returned a week later with the startling news that he had sacked his weak 'Home Secretary' and 'replaced him with a stronger one … who trimmed the excessive freedom of action of the 'Foreign Secretary!'. The new 'Home Secretary' was able to persuade his 'Government' that all requests from other 'communities (people)' had to be discussed 'in Cabinet' to ensure he considered the wellbeing of his Government (and Country!) as a whole. This

resulted in John reporting that he'd been able to turn down a request because he'd considered his other commitments 'in Cabinet'. He reflected that previously he'd have agreed to a 'foreign request' without delay and contributed to his growing list of commitments (and stress!). However, he now found he could take any requests to a 'Cabinet meeting' and make a more balanced decision with authority. John also found that he was able to tolerate being on his own for longer periods of time due to the realisation that he couldn't feel lonely with so many different people to consult within his 'Government'. Over time he was delighted to report that his cigarette smoking had decreased dramatically and that he felt more in control of himself and his life. Mair (1977) summarised the impact the 'community of selves' metaphor had had upon John by stating that:

> It seemed to provide him with the beginning of a personal 'language' within which to conceive and begin to control aspects of his ways of dealing with himself, others and the world.

John's use of a political metaphor reflected his particular interests and worked well for him.

Another person might use a 'football club' metaphor as touched on before. For example, maybe the 'Strikers' have too much influence over the 'The Manager' at a particular 'Club' which results in a certain recklessness (a metaphor for impulsivity perhaps) in games when maybe the 'Defenders" views might have led to a better 'result'. Maybe 'The Manager' could be sacked by 'The Chairman' (or moved upstairs to a Director's role if feeling compassionate!) and replaced by a more assertive 'Manager' who will consider all views before making a decision, in a similar way as to when John 'sacked' and replaced his 'Home Secretary'. In PCP terms this football club metaphor would be analogous to using the C-P-C cycle (Kelly, 1955) of moving thorough *c*ircumspection (considering all views including how the other team might play) before *p*re-empting (deciding on tactics) and making a *c*hoice (putting the tactics into action on the pitch). The possibilities of metaphorical 'communities of selves' are seemingly endless and I have found can also provide a useful structure to help people make sense of and live with their voices.

A Community of Voices

Mair's 'community of selves' metaphor is one I have consistently found useful both personally and when working with other people in a clinical setting. It's an idea that I've found can help people rebuild how they see themselves, others, and their world after experiences of significant personal trauma rather than fixate on 'getting back to being my old self again'. Mair's (1977) example of 'John' and how the 'community

of selves' metaphor seemed to help him develop '*a personal 'language' within which to conceive and begin to control aspects of his ways of dealing with himself, others and the world*' put me in mind of my clinical work with people who hear voices, and stories I had read from people involved with the Hearing Voices Network (HVN). Over the years, I've engaged in collaborative work with people who hear voices in terms of exploring the possibilities of understanding and changing a distressing relationship with their voices to a relationship that might at least be less distressing and easier to live with (see Chadwick, 2006 and Romme et al, 2009 for more detail about this type of work in clinical and non-clinical settings). There is a growing evidence base demonstrating the value of making sense of and accepting voices (Romme et al, 2009), so adapting Mair's metaphor and thinking of a person's voices as a 'community' seemed to have potential for normalising and giving a certain structure which some people might also find useful.

The process I've used when offering a propositional metaphor of a 'community of voices' when working one to one with people firstly involves using a repertory grid to list and explore the constructs of each voice. Sometimes the person has names for some or all of the voices, sometimes none. It doesn't necessarily matter. The important thing is to clarify what the voices represent to the person who hears them. For this specific purpose the voices would represent the 'elements' of the grid. The constructs of the voices can be elicited in a number of different ways. A popular method is the 'triadic method' where similarities between two voices (elements) would be contrasted with a third voice. For example two voices might be 'nasty' as opposed to a third voice who is 'supportive', which would elicit the construct 'nasty – supportive' on a supposed grid. There are no rigid rules when designing a repertory grid; elements and constructs can be elicited in as many ways as a particular person or persons working together can think of.

Figure 1 shows a simplistic fictitious example of 'Jane's' repertory grid that is loosely based on the themes of my clinical experience using this method with a number of people over the years.

1 – 7	Voice 1	Voice 2	Voice 3	Me now	Ideal me	Friend
Power – Weak	2	2	5	7	3	2
Confident – Timid	1	2	4	6	2	1
Cruel – Kind	1	1	6	6	7	7
Harsh – Caring	1	1	6	5	6	7
Critical – Supportive	1	1	7	1	7	7
Credible – Untrustworthy	2	2	5	6	1	1

Figure 1: Example of a Repertory Grid

The above grid uses a graded rating system of 1–7 where, to take the construct of *'Powerful – Weak'*, 1 would be the most powerful anyone could be and 7 would be the weakest anyone could be according to the person in question's view. The above elements represent two critical voices, one kinder voice, the person's personal ratings of themselves as they are now and how they'd ideally like to be, and a friend. The friend could be a living person, a representation of a non-living person, or even a created friend based on a film star etc. As long as the friend is supportive it needn't matter. What matters is imagining how such a friend might support the person.

There are a number of ways to analyse a repertory grid (see Fransella, Bell & Bannister, 2004) but for the purposes of exploring a person's 'community of voices' a lot of information can be gleaned, links made, and strategies created by just 'eyeballing' it (Button, 1985). Eyeballing the above grid shows that Voices 1 and 2 are similarly powerful and significantly more powerful than the kinder but much weaker Voice 3, and much more credible than either Voice 3 or 'Me now'. One particular avenue to explore in therapy is that Jane rates herself as being as extremely critical as Voices 1 and 2 yet sees them both as being more credible than she currently is.

Let's suppose that Jane embraces the 'community of selves' metaphor as enthusiastically as 'John' did in Mair's (1977) example, and was able to think of her voices as 'a community'. Let's further suppose that Jane also used a political example and thought of her 'community' as a 'political party'. The critical voices might then represent 'cabinet ministers' from the 'right wing', and the inner representation of a friend (not necessarily an active voice) could be asked to 'join the party' and support the kinder but weaker voice 3 and form a 'left wing'. In clinical settings, all three voices' credibility could be explored and tested. So for example if voice 1 had impossibly 'high standards' and kept telling Jane she was 'useless' and also 'a bad mother' then its credibility could be tested by acknowledging the observed affection that Jane's children demonstrate towards her (seconded by her 'left wing') in contrast to the opinion of a voice that is so critical, harsh, and cruel (many excellent examples of engaging with voices can be found in Romme et al, 2009). In such a scenario, the 'right wing' of Jane's party might eventually become less powerful and credible than her 'left wing' who could counter the 'right wing's' views that she is 'a bad mother' with ease in the future and so reduce her distress. The 'right wing' might then become a useful contrast and reminder of how Jane doesn't want to be etc. In such a scenario, Jane could become a more powerful and confident 'Prime Minister' seeing both 'wings' of her party as providing useful contrasts for helping her clarify her views and decision making after she's listened to both wings of her 'cabinet', rather than trying to ignore a 'wing'. Adapting Mair's metaphor as a 'community of voices' could help people who hear voices like 'Jane'

to 'develop *a personal 'language' within which to conceive and begin to control aspects of (her) ways of dealing with (herself), others and the world'*. This would fit the definition of recovery defined in Romme et al, (2009) as 'taking life back into your own hands' and 'living your own life, not your voices' (Coleman, 1999).

The above example of 'Jane' is a representation of how I've adapted the late Miller Mair's seminal 'community of selves' metaphor and incorporated it as part of individual psychotherapy informed by George Kelly's Personal Construct Theory (PCT) for people who hear voices. In terms of a construct of 'schizophrenia – manifestation of distress/confusion' as a way of anticipating an understanding of 'voice hearing', my view is that the latter pole of this construct is much more 'expansive' in contrast to the 'restriction' of the reductionist construct of 'schizophrenia', and has much more potential for reducing a person's distress and helping them to make sense of and live more content lives. It also helps normalise 'voice hearing'.

Mair (1977) acknowledged that the 'community of selves' metaphor is *'not a solution in itself for most problems in living, nor does it make sense or seem useable by everyone'*, and that also stands for an adaptation of his ideas into 'a community of voices'. However, it is at least a universal metaphor to offer as Mair (1977) states:

> Everyone has experiences of living in some sorts of communities whether they be family, neighbourhood groups, recreational clubs or teams, work situations in shops or factories … There is endless variety and complexity available here and also simplicity, since useful elaboration can be done within a 'community' composed of two 'people'.

I have found that Mair's metaphor has enabled me to be far more creative in my clinical work than I otherwise would have been, especially when working with those who hear distressing voices. If some people find the idea of a 'community of selves/voices' metaphor useful the possibilities for understanding and creative resolution are potentially endless. Thanks Dr Mair.

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