A PRELUDE TO AN INQUIRY INTO THE INTERPLAY OF PERSONAL AND SOCIAL MEANINGS: FREUD, KELLY & BAUMAN

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George Kelly introduced the notion of public construction systems in volume 1 of his Psychology of Personal Constructs, but he did not elaborate extensively on the subject because his focus was on psychotherapy and possibilities of reconstruction of personal meanings. Since Kelly, theory has largely shifted its emphasis to the study of social production of meaning. Even though they share epistemological common ground, personal construct theory and social constructionist theories provide incommensurable descriptions of human meaning-making processes. To extend Kelly's theory's range of convenience there is a need to bridge the theoretical gap between the personal and social meaning-making processes. In this article I will outline possible ways of doing this by providing bridges between Kelly and other important thinkers such as Freud and Zygmunt Bauman, and by outlining a possible way of looking at the relationship between personal and social meanings based on personal construct theory.

Keywords: *meaning-making, sociality, commonality, personal construct theory*

INTRODUCTION

The notion of public construing processes as opposed to personal construing was introduced by Kelly using diverse terminology – *public construction systems* (Kelly, 1955, p. 7), *public construct system* (Kelly, 1955, p. 102) and also *public system* (Kelly, 1955, p. 76), but it was not sufficiently explored in *The Psychology of Personal Constructs* (Kelly, 1955) as Kelly's focus remained on personal meanings. In this article I will draw on a number of disparate theories in order to try and elaborate public construing and its complex interplay with personal meanings. Since Kelly was usually meticulous in his use of terminology and references to public construing processes are sparse and passing, in this paper I will use the term *public construct* as it is general enough to incorporate all sorts of public construing processes and at the same time does not impose new meanings on theoretical terms already used by Kelly.

I don't intend to provide definitive answers or even build coherently on Kelly's psychology, but to provide a platform for further elaboration of the theory, to open up a dialogical space where social and personal aspects of constructivist theorizing can be brought together. Since social and personal constructivism are in many ways incommensurable views on meaning-making processes, the space between them will have to be loose, perhaps excessively. But in order to come out with tight constructs, one must bravely dive into this fog of looseness. Without promising to get out of it alive, I invite you to join me in this exercise.

THE MODERN TRADE-OFF

In one of his most celebrated works, *Civilization and Its Discontents* (Freud, 1930), Freud posits that civilization makes a demand for conformity which requires a level of instinctual repression; possibilities for obtaining pleasure and satisfying our needs are restricted by social conventions, customs and laws, in the broadest sense, while some are entirely prohibited.

In the third part of the essay, Freud formulates a paradox: civilization was created to protect us from unhappiness and insecurity, yet it has now become the main source of the very things it was supposed to vanquish. Freedom and safety are not mutually inclusive. If we are to be protected and safe, then we have to give up some of our freedom by accepting rules of the society

we are in. On the other hand, if we are to take back our freedom and embrace that which society asks us to repress, the price is ostracism. Neurosis, Freud asserts, is the price we pay for civilization.

Zygmunt Bauman, the renowned Polish sociologist, follows Freud's line of thinking from *Civilization and Its Discontents*. Bauman is one of the foremost sociological theorists of the Holocaust and postmodernity. In his works he tackles difficult subjects such as the postmodern self, consumerism, and production of emotion in contemporary society. His major contribution is the differentiation between solid modernism in Europe (before the Holocaust) and the ensuing postwar changes resulting in what he calls the liquid modernity. Bauman sees the 20th century as movement between two poles of the construct implied by Freud (1930): safety-freedom. In order to obtain safety and certainty, we have to forgo a certain amount of freedom. This is done by voluntary submission of individuals to an organized society; no matter how liberal they may be or whether we can participate in the creation of these social structures, by their very definition they are restrictive and require repression of undesirable needs: rules always limit freedom. Bauman is largely concerned with liquid modernity and the many troubles its emphasis on freedom poses to our sense of self as well as to the way we structure society and the way the society, in turn, structures us.

INTRODUCING KELLY TO FREUD

In the first volume of *The Psychology of Personal Constructs*, Kelly (1955) discusses Freud's concerns from the personal construct point of view in a similar, yet profoundly liberating way. Kelly sees our construing of the world as subject to revision or replacement by, theoretically at least, an infinite number of alternative constructions. This implies that we have freedom of choice in regards to how we see the world. Once we create a construct, we become determined by it. A similar choice is made by the Freudian subject, except that it doesn't have the freedom to create his constructions of the world, but accepts that which society demands of him.

The world in which psychotherapy was born, that of Freud's Vienna, the world of great artistic,

scientific and industrial development is, according to Bauman, the world of solid modernism (Bauman, 2005). In this world, Bauman's pendulum swings closer to safety than to freedom. Freud insists that most people are too frightened of responsibility that comes with freedom and that freedom and responsibility are a cause of fear and anxiety (Freud, 1930). In the solid world, rules are clear, society stratified in a tight way; it has established symbolism and social norms. It is clear what can be done and in what way, which of our desires are acceptable, which are not. Freud (Freud, 1930, p. 103) insists that rules are too clear-cut and a little too tight:

The commandment, 'Love thy neighbour as thyself', is the strongest defense against human aggressiveness and an excellent example of the unpsychological [expectations] of the cultural super-ego. The commandment *is impossible to fulfil; such an enormous inflation of love can only lower its value, not get rid of the difficulty. Civilization pays no attention to all this; it merely admonishes us that the harder it is to obey the precept the more meritorious it is to do so. But anyone who follows such a precept in present-day civilization only puts himself at a disadvantage vis-a-vis the person who disregards it. What a potent obstacle to civilization aggressiveness must be, if the defense against it can cause as much unhappiness as aggressiveness itself!*

In the preceding passage, Freud summarized the high cost of the modern trade-off.

Another parallel to Kelly's thinking looms in the shadows. In a lesser known essay from *Clinical Psychology and Personality* (Kelly, 1969) called *Sin and Psychotherapy*, Kelly addresses issues of guilt, morality, sin, social control and attempts to extend personal construct psychology into the field of social psychology and perhaps anthropology, in a way not dissimilar to Freud's. Freud explicitly identifies the *super-ego* as a mechanism of social control, and as we shall see, Kelly will make a similar point.

As is characteristic of Kelly, his point of view is that of the individual and the choices we make. In personal construct theory, choice is of fundamental importance, as emphasized by Kelly with the Choice Corollary:

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A person chooses for himself that alternative in a dichotomized construct through which he anticipates the greater possibility for extension and definition of his system (Kelly, 1955, p. 45).

In his analysis of the Biblical story of Eden, Kelly identifies three important constructs. First is that of loneliness and companionship. The first choice the man makes is companionship. It is with this first choice that Kelly's Man-the-Scientist is already aligned with Freud's distressed subject who chooses safety over freedom, in order to rid himself of the unbearable anxiety and fear of absolute responsibility.

After making the choice to become a social animal, one must confront the second construct: innocence-knowledge. As hard as this choice may have been, our choice is knowledge. Then comes the third choice – between good and evil, and the jury is still deliberating on it. Values such as good and evil are too elusive for men to solve once and for all in order to "return to Eden and not have to face the issue any longer" (Kelly, 1969, p. 170). If he is to live with other human beings, a way of differentiating between the two must exist. According to Kelly, mankind employs four coping strategies: law, authority, conscience, and purpose.

In discussing law, Kelly anticipates Bauman. For now, let us simply address this quote, wrought with Kelly's usual subtle irony:

'No man is above the law'? It sounds like the epitaph of an unsuccessful gangster. Indeed, for those who deign to accept this as the guiding principle of their lives, I suspect it is – even more appropriately so an incriminating epitaph; it is their own! And for how many more of us, those of us who are certainly not the visible Eichmann's of this world and who have only tacitly accepted legalized power as the sufficient embodiment of good and evil, might not this well be the concluding statement: "Here lies a man, long since deceased, whose spirit, in its quest to separate the evil from the good, never thought to rise above the law!" (Kelly 1969, p. 173)

Kelly goes a step further from Freud, perhaps echoing Hannah Arendt (1963), warning us of ethical pitfalls of the modern trade-off, or any such trade-off that is not revised or questioned by the individual, perhaps even at the price of

social ostracism. Seeking to resolve the problem of good and evil, Kelly reduces the issue to the problem of (dis)obedience. Conscience is what Kelly, perhaps too reductively, equates to *super-ego* and assigns it the job of making the kinds of distinctions between good and evil that parents make for their children with a vision of how the world ought to be in the future, which then justifies all actions that lead to such a world. Kelly associates this with religious and ideological systems. When Freud (1930) uses the term *cultural super-ego* in the quote above, we may assume that he encompasses all of the mechanisms that Kelly discusses.

For Kelly, guilt stands behind these societal coping mechanisms, as the underlying psychological *modus operandi*. In *Sin and Psychotherapy,* Kelly himself takes a small step in the direction of bridging personal and social construing: "I do not see one's personal construct system as wholly private, nor do I see it as free to regenerate itself into some monstrosity completely oblivious to external reality" (Kelly, 1969, p. 177). To experience guilt we must construe ourselves in a role, and roles are always relational in origin. Precisely because of the relational nature of role constructs, because they are conjoint enterprises between the individual and his (social) environment, mechanisms of social control that operate in this environment become parts of our identities as well. This means that we are not capable of endlessly reconstruing our system without taking into account the social fabric in which the system is situated, and also that some of this fabric's constructs penetrate our system with public meanings. Both Freud and Kelly assert that some public meanings must be inserted into an individual's system, so that he or she can be a part of the community. By proposing this view, Kelly effectively blurs the line between personal and public construing, making it possible to understand public construing as both public and personal at the same time.

Freud's assertion that civilization itself requires repression follows logically from Kelly's relational construing of roles. Our socially constructed aspects of identity may create implicative dilemmas when integrated with some of our preverbal constructs, and these can be temporarily resolved with submergence or suspension, as Kelly discusses in Volume 1, drawing parallels

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to the psychoanalytic concept of repression (Kelly, 1955, p. 348).

REVERSING THE TRADE-OFF

In *Modernity and Ambivalence* (1991) and *Modernity and the Holocaust* (1989)*,* Bauman describes what can be seen as the paroxysm of solid modernity, a violent expression of its nature, a consequence of the trade-off described above. The ultimate expression of organization and structure utilized to bring safety was an attempt to rid the world of its perceived enemies, thus attempting to eliminate uncertainty and secure safety. Viewed in this way, the Holocaust is not a form of regression to violent barbarism nor is it an eclipse of the Western civilization. According to Bauman it is in fact the final expression of a certain kind of civilization, a logical consequence of the desire for order and safety that characterized solid modernity. After the horrors of the Holocaust, the pendulum gradually began to swing the other way, closer to freedom, and the reversal of Freud's modern trade-off took place.

If we are to look at this turning point from the perspective of personal construct theory, the events surrounding the Holocaust fall within what Kelly terms hostility and they go a step further into disorder – a construction that fails to fulfill its purpose. The cost of hostility was perhaps the highest cost Europe has paid in its long history full of turmoil and unrest. The realization of this enormous price made change the only acceptable choice, and this change manifested itself in the reversal of the trade-off.

Though Bauman argues that some of the order-making efforts of solid modernity still persist, the reversal of the trade-off manifests itself in giving up the safety of solid modernism in favor of freedom. Like the solid modernism, the liquid form comes with a price. The closest companions of freedom are uncertainty and responsibility, the latter being more of a burden than a companion.

HOMO ELIGENS

Before I turn to further constructivist reading of Bauman's theory, it would be useful to take a look at how liquid modernity shapes the self. The usefulness of this line of inquiry lies in the fact that liquid selves participate in liquid societies: a liquid self is writing this article, other liquid selves will, hopefully, be reading it.

Man in liquid modernity becomes *Homo eligens*, the Choosing Man (Bauman, 2005). One can choose nearly everything; one's own identity included. The ability to choose should not come with anxiety, it should come with satisfaction – we can be what we want to be! Choosing an identity means choosing our own solidity, our own internal structure. What then generates the permeating anxiety of *Homo eligens*?

Regardless of the "state" of the world, solid or liquid, in order to live in it, one must adapt to its conditions. Adaptation requires action, and for action we need a construction of the world we are in. Liquid world is a world in the constant state of flux. For Bauman (2005, p. 24) this flux is embodied in the consumer economy, "an economy of fast-ageing objects, almost instant obsolescence and the rapid rotation of goods, and so also of excess and waste." Adaption is easier in the world of solidity, where rules are clear and stable. In a dynamic world of liquidity, adaption is always temporary – a person may adapt to one set of conditions, but by the time he or she adapts, the world has already changed, and a new adaption is needed. The self that needs to reinvent itself over and over again is a fragile and always a temporary self.

Bauman sees the modern person as having a hybrid identity. This hybridization is reflected in the possibility to adopt many identities, none of which have to be compatible with others, because they are never fully integrated and never permanent. There is no time and no need to integrate them as their longevity is not guaranteed, so the investment in integration is not a worthwhile investment. The liquid self is always an incomplete self, always fragmented and always already obsolete from the very moment it was created. Bauman (2005) sees identities as spots of crust hardening on the top of volcanic lava which then melt down and morph into something else before they have time to cool.

As it follows from the Fundamental Postulate, our processes are channelized by our anticipations, which implies that safety comes from being able to predict the events that a person will face (Kelly, 1955). A fragmented self in a world

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that never stands still is unable to anticipate. To put it in terms of Kelly's theory, the world that is happening is always just outside of the range of convenience of a person's construct system. Elements keep changing and multiplying, old constructs are rapidly becoming waste (Bauman, 2005), hence the chronic anxiety of *Homo eligens* – his anticipations are always insufficient. Core constructs that can withstand this speed of change are likely to be too loose. Without functional constructs and useful anticipations, there is anxiety. In such a state, responsibility for our choices becomes almost a nightmare. One must carry the burden of responsibility all the while not knowing what he will be responsible for, as world can change while choosing. The liquid self never quite knows what consequences he or she will face for the choices he or she makes, hence the constant uncertainty, the anxiety of the liquid world.

Another thing worth mentioning is the lack of reflexivity in the liquid self. Bauman (Bauman & Yakimova, 2002) cautions against the use of the term:

I suspected that in coining this term we are projecting our own, the professional thinkers', cognitive uncertainty upon the social world at large, or reforge our (quite real) professional puzzlement into (imaginary) popular prudence – whereas that world out there is marked, on the contrary, by the fading and wilting of the art of reflection (ours is the culture of forgetting and short-termism – of the two arch-enemies of reflection).

There is something particularly worrying about the liquid self's inability for reflexivity. The need to change at an alarmingly fast pace, the fragmentation that a multitude of identities necessitates in the practice of living makes reflexivity almost impossible, or at least an unnecessary burden. The type of knowledge that it brings quickly becomes outdated because the self that is being reflexive in a world that is fast-changing is not an adapted self.

CREATIVITY

From a personal construct perspective, it would be interesting to construe the transition from

solid to liquid modernism as parts of a creativity cycle. According to Kelly, the creativity cycle is one which starts with a loosened construction and ends with a tight, validated construction (Kelly, 1955).

Bauman formulated his thesis around the beginning of a new creativity cycle initiated after the ending of that greatest of disorders Europe has seen. Postmodernism is about liquefaction, but not so that we get rid of solids altogether, but to clear the site for new solids, which ought to make the world predictable and manageable again. Bauman insists that we should not be misled by the words. Liquidity implies a kind of fluidity or lightness. However, for Bauman what distinguishes liquid modernism is not lightness, but the frailty of bonds between the self and others and also within the self, not the lack of gravity as linguistic usage implies (Bauman & Yakimova, 2002).

Within personal construct theory, we can make a similar point – in spite of the varying predictions that loose constructs make and the apparent irrationality of looseness, perhaps most visible in dream content, loose constructs retain their identity and they are not irrational, but in possession of an *ad interim* logic. They take up positions within a system of constructs, and therefore have meaning that can be of vital significance for the system. Where there are core constructs, there is threat, guilt and anxiety. In the world of solid modernity, these were much easier to predict and control because of stability of bonds (Bauman, 2002, 2005). In the world of liquid modernity, guilt and threat can be found everywhere and they can come about suddenly. There is nothing "light" about liquid modernism.

What is it that's undergoing the process of change via creativity cycle? Since Bauman uses concepts of solid/liquid to describe social processes, we assume that he is speaking about constructs that belong to a group of constructs called public constructs and that indeed these constructs are undergoing the creativity cycle much like personal constructs.

The notion of public construing has been poorly elaborated in Kelly's 1955 book, and has since been largely neglected in theoretical considerations, even though its elaboration could extend personal construct theory's range of convenience. Bauman's work gives a good descriptive account of the creativity cycle of a public

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construct that concerns matters of freedom and safety. Bauman tells a convincing tale of how subjects in the state of liquidity (looseness) must become fragmented and decentred, by being themselves liquid, able to change form to adapt to a construct whose meaning is undergoing a tectonic shift. A liquid public construct creates, in Bauman's words, lava-like subjects, with alternating and rapidly altering meanings.

There is an important lesson to be learned from Bauman's theory: not only do we create meanings on the individual level and not only do we participate in social processes that generate public constructs, we are in turn constituted by them in a recursive process. Once a creativity cycle is initiated, and a construct is loosened, a change is set in motion and when the cycle is completed, the construct will never be the same again, just like the subjects whose meanings are tied to them.

If we recall corollaries of sociality and commonality (Kelly, 1955) and interpret them through Kelly's construct of loneliness-companionship, we can easily see that personal meanings must be adapted and some public meanings adopted. In building commonality and sociality, we are agreeing to share sets of constructs with others. Shared constructs then limit the ways in which we can construe ourselves if we are to keep our much desired companionship. A dark side of such a deal is that guilt is indeed a powerful form of social control because it threatens us with ostracism should we exercise too much freedom in ways in which we construe ourselves. Some of our needs must operate only within very low levels of cognitive awareness or must be submerged if companionship is not to be lost. At this point, all three men, Kelly, Bauman and Freud, meet.

Public constructs may determine the content of our core constructs, they may operate on tacit levels and "speak through us" and such is the case with constructs concerning gender, over which we have very little agency. They may also work in subtler ways by determining the organization of our core constructs, rather than their content. Bauman makes an eloquent case for this. Liquid modernity provides us with a feeling of freedom to construe and reconstrue ourselves in as many ways as we can possibly desire. We are more or less free to hold on to any ethical belief within very loose constraints, we may

reinvent ourselves on daily basis, but we are limited on a meta level. However, even though we are free to choose the content, liquidity mandates that our selves be fragmented if we are to keep the companionship and without companionship and the possibility of relationality it provides, there is so little opportunity to construe ourselves as complex human beings. Bauman's theory shows us that not only did society change after the Holocaust, but also the fundamental structure of our being suffered a tremendous change, from a monolithic, tightly organized structure, to a fragmented, loose web of often contradictory identities.

THE SYSTEM OF PUBLIC CONSTRUCTS

Bauman shies away from predicting, in fact, in an interview (Bauman & Yakimova, 2002) he had *clearly* stated that a good sociologist does not make predictions, only describes and explains the current state of things. There are no anticipations to be found in his works, no predictions as to what will become of our safety-freedom construct.

Personal construct theory emphasizes anticipation and may give some room for speculation. The creativity cycle upon its completion provides a new tight construction. When we look at such constructs on a personal level, what follows next is the experience cycle, a series of steps in which a new construct is tested through its use in different contexts. Based on its (in)validation, the construct is established in a specific range of convenience, applied with certain formal characteristics and then re-tested each time when it is used.

A public construct is also a dichotomous structure like a personal construct, it is a boundary set forth in the very foundation of the theory. However, a public construct must operate in a different way than a personal one. For one thing, it would make no sense for a public construct to undergo an experience cycle, as it cannot be tested or evaluated in the same way as individual constructs can be. There is no one individual which can test, accept or reject them based on subjectively construed criteria, because they are shared, and this implies that our ability to change or emancipate ourselves from such constructs is limited.

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Much like personal constructs, public constructs, I propose, operate on different levels of awareness. Some we are able to put into words, such as a construct that Bauman examines in his work, some we are able to represent in images, others are almost entirely inaccessible to symbolization, but nonetheless their effects can be dramatic. Public constructs on very low levels of awareness influence our body, its movements and its shape, as demonstrated by Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* (1975) and later by Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* (1999). I would not like to engage in such questions as compatibilities of these theories with personal construct theory, merely to point to the elements that they provide – gender, for Butler, is a series of repeated stylizations of the body. From Kelly's perspective these stylizations are at once constructs that operate on such tacit levels that are completely outside of our sense of agency, and they come along with more verbalized public constructs such as those concerning the possible spectrum of gender identities, and at the same time they are also elements to be construed by other constructs. The fact that our body movements, those subtle stylizations are outside of our sense of agency, makes us rather prone to explaining them in biological terms, but Butler provides a way of de-essentialising them, by observing them as bodily iterations formed by certain discourses.

It may be feasible to speak about systems of public constructs, as they are interwoven on different levels of awareness and also connected in a very complex way. One thing that is particularly important is that they are inescapable. Once our body becomes gendered, the process is irreversible (perhaps possible to subvert, but still irreversible). Once we enter the shared symbolic system of the interpersonal realm, certain things become fixed and this fixation is not an essentialist one, but it is hardly one that we can reject and retain commonality with others. At this point, there is no way to reconstrue gender. We may position ourselves on different parts of the spectrum between male or female, including the middle of the spectrum – we may, that is, loosely construe our gender identity – but we are not able to reconstrue it outside of the fundamental male-female dichotomy. Gender is therefore not a single construct, but an entire system of public constructs that are at the same time personal

constructs as well. They are a necessity, one that may cause a variety of implicative dilemmas but one that we are not able to transcend, simply because a fundamental rift would be torn between the subject who attempts to escape from such fundamental public constructs and those that do not. What follows in PCT terms is loss of commonality and sociality, an inability to be subsumed by others.

If there are many of these constructs and if they operate on different levels of cognitive awareness, how are they structured, and how do they change? A standard hierarchical model for organizing constructs, a pyramid-like structure that Kelly proposed for personal systems may not be applicable for public constructs. Since Kelly makes no mention of this in his works, what follows is my proposal, by no means a complete solution. Much like the structure of this text, I see public constructs as branching out in different directions in space, creating a complex rhizome-like structure, its strands intersecting, overlapping, possibly even contradicting each other by giving opposing guides for action, thus inherently constituting us with unsolvable implicative dilemmas.

If we go back to the content of this text, we can elaborate it in several directions at the same time: one can take the strand about Kelly and Freud and examine how guilt and public constructs serve as means of social control by becoming parts of personal systems, one that builds on the connection between Bauman and Freud, one that implies the impact of historical contingency on our selfhood, one that proposes that formal properties of certain important public constructs constitute the basic structure of individual systems of personal constructs, or an attempt to blur the lines between the social and the personal, drawing on Kelly's few ideas in this direction. It is also possible to understand this text as a demonstration of the branched structure of public constructs, but if one is not inclined to read in such a manner, then one could possibly read it as inarticulate theorizing of a liquid subject. Each of these directions can be further branched to create seemingly independent theories, but they would all originate from the same structure of this text and at some point in the branching process, one would stop construing similarities of small branches in comparison to the main one, but the small one would still be

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determined by the permeability of the main one (Kelly, 1955), albeit in a way we could only construe as tacit if all the in-between branches are not carefully studied.

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