

THE EXPERIENCE OF LOVE AND ROMANTIC CHOICES

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*They knew each other.
He knew her and so himself,
for in truth he had never known himself.
And she knew him and so herself,
for although she had always known herself
she had never yet been able to recognize it as now.
(Italo Calvino, *The baron in the tree*)*

We have found ourselves quite often involved in conversations with our clients about romantic love. Considering how crucially important love choices are in people's lives, we try to approach and comprehend the theme of romantic love within the perspective of hermeneutic constructivism, focusing on the relational aspect inherent in our way of experiencing and transcending the 'I-you' dichotomy. Thus, referring to the theoretical framework of Kelly's Psychology of Personal Constructs according to which subjectivity is essentially 'relational', we will be able to explore the love experience in romantic relationships in terms of elaborative choice.

Key words: *hermeneutic constructivism, romantic love, romantic relationships, elaborative choice*

In our experience, psychotherapy often provides an opportunity to speak about romantic experiences and the question 'what is romantic love?' often lingers over the conversation we have with our clients. Being careful to move away from those truths offered by common sense, we consider that an explanation is not related to a discovery, but it is a generative process, belonging to the specific practice in which we are operating and from which 'things' come to light. Therefore, every time we talk about love, this idea of love arises as a result of a particular experience inside a specific universe of meaning, so the question 'what is romantic love' may remain open and unsolved.

In order to understand how the romantic question may be reinterpreted so that we can make informed professional choices, we ask ourselves: from what assumptions should we start when we approach the theme of romantic love in therapy?

Taking for granted that any interpretation implies a perspective, both explicit or implicit, when we talk with our clients about their love

affairs or their being in love, we are oriented, inevitably by our own idea of love. In order to look for clarity in our professional assumptions, and to elaborate a way of understanding, valid and useful for our work, we are going to approach the theme of romantic love within the theoretical framework of Personal Construct Psychotherapy (PCP) by (Kelly, 1955), referring in particular to the hermeneutic approach (Chiari, 2016b and Chiari and Nuzzo, 2000; 2010).

THEORETICAL ASSUMPTIONS

In talking about romantic love, no one is surprised on reading Calvino's words (1998): "He knew her and so himself" (p. 228). Indeed, in terms of PCP, we comprehend that at the same time as each partner attempts to understand the other's behavior by putting oneself in their position, each of the partners knows him/herself.

Using this statement as our starting point, we will look at some theoretical assumptions in

order to understand how this process occurs. However, we must first deviate slightly from the theme of romantic love in order to examine the construct of 'person' that Kelly essentially defines as a 'form of motion' (1955), as a process always underway. To consider our kinetic nature as essential to personhood implies taking into account that the person is constitutively part of a dynamic and operational relation with the world and when we approach the theme of experience, we cannot refer to a subject unrelated to the experience itself. From the point of view of hermeneutic constructivism (Chiari & Nuzzo, 2006) the relation has a primary role in which 'oneself' and 'other' are not to be considered as things, substances or realities in themselves, but originary relations. So, referring to the 'thought of the practices' of Italian philosopher Carlo Sini, nobody is alone and from their origin a 'self' because the self and the other play originally the same mutual role (Sini, 2002/2003). The profound sense for anybody is that of being in a relation, as a meeting point where, in a relationship of mutual exchange, one emerges mainly because it is 'something' *for* the other (Sini, 2004). From this perspective, in a more specific psychological context, the personality is not merely a question of individuality, nor simply a social product, but a function of the relation that takes place, as Chiari and Nuzzo underline, referring to Buber (1923/1937), in the 'sphere of between' (Chiari & Nuzzo, 2006); 'between' in the sense that, quoting Ricoeur (1990/1992), we deal with an "otherness of a kind that can be constitutive of selfhood as such" (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 3). As the philosopher points out, selfhood implies otherness not in the sense "of comparison (oneself similar to another) but indeed that of an implication (oneself inasmuch as being other)" (ibid., p. 3).

An experience of romantic love occurs always in the light of a 'we', whether realizable or not. Establishing that the relationship comes first allows us to reflect upon the process and the circumstances under which we participate in a shared experience and construe a 'we' in our daily life. Relying on Maturana's analysis (1988) of the process of construction of social phenomena, according to which love is the emotion that specifies the domain of actions in which living systems co-ordinate their actions in

a manner that entails mutual acceptance, we can say that we recognize a 'we' when we see two or more persons in recurrent interactions that follow an operational course of mutual acceptance. Thus, interactions between people occur within social practices. Each of them brings to existence a universe of meaning since, as Butt (2004) highlights, we make sense of our action by reading it in the context in which it occurs. As a result, we recognize ourselves as members of a particular social system when we participate with one another in the co-ordinations of actions that constitute such a social system. Membership is not an intrinsic property of each member but a feature of our participation in the constitution of the system. The experience of being together originates in the acceptance of the other as a legitimate other with whom to coexist and occurs in a sort of asynchronous and asymmetric play: since we view the other person as a 'construer', who therefore construes us, we can see our reflection and recognize ourselves through the construing process performed by the other.

Hence, "They knew each other" (Calvino, 1998, p. 228) but no matter how broadly, intimately and profoundly this knowledge of the other may be felt within a romantic experience, it never entirely coincides, since, as Kelly cautions, it is impossible to "crawl into another person's skin and peer out at the world through his/her eyes" (Kelly, 1955, p. 42). Instead, it could be seen as a sort of harmonization, dance or game, comprising an attempt at understanding which occurs always to a certain degree and at certain distance. In a relationship, a mutual adjustment of point of view occurs to some extent, that is that one's construction system subsumes the construction system of the other and vice versa. PCP claims that the ability to relate is based on the capacity to construe the other's construction processes and, as highlighted in Kelly's (1955) remarks concerning the Sociality Corollary, there are different levels at which we can construe the other person's outlook.

On the grounds of these considerations we can say that romantic practice calls lovers into action in a process that constitutes them as members of a romantic experience. Let us now attempt to clarify the processes and the particular network of meanings in which this happens.

ROMANTIC LOVE ACCORDING TO HERMENEUTIC CONSTRUCTIVISM

Falling in love: the choice to live in a ‘two scene’

Here we draw on some reflections by the French philosopher Badiou, attempting to reinterpret them within the theoretical framework of PCP. As Badiou (2009/2012) suggested, romantic experience begins with an encounter which calls us into action in its particular universe of meanings which “leads to the idea that you can experience the world from the perspective of difference” (p. 17) as “a re-invention of life” (ibid., p. 33). If we consider, as Badiou did, that romantic love deals with the opportunity to choose to experience the world from the point of view of *two* and not one, in PCP terms we can affirm that we can be involved in an interpersonal venture, where one individual construes the construction processes of another and we look at the world and at ourselves in the light of this construction. When we are deeply involved in a romantic experience, we participate to a sense in which we ‘re-recognize’ ourselves and ‘re-view’ our world, through our taking part in the relationship.

The encounter becomes the place where one falls in love and from this occurrence we can choose to live in a “two scene” (Badiou, 2012, p. 29) in which ‘we two together’ gives a specific meaning, a sort of gateway to the world, to the other and to oneself. We can treat the loving relationship as something happening in the *sphere of between*, an encounter which generates opportunities out and inside the relationship itself. As Ortu (2010) affirms:

The relationship with the other expands our perspectives towards possible changes which inevitably cause some aspects of the self to be called into question. Being in love makes us feel we have the chance to be everything we are and even more than that, everything we could potentially become.

In this understanding, romantic love, rather than being seen as something that comes to us, can be considered as a chance taken and an experience we choose and, in Kelly’s terms, an “elaborative choice” (Kelly, 1955, p. 65) made in order to

evolve the anticipatory system. In romantic love, the choice concerns the possibility of widening our experience in construing a world from a “decentred” (Badiou, 2012, p. 25) point of view (different from re-affirming our own), that could make our own meaning system more predictive. Romantic love is a perturbing experience that displaces us in another world and places us in the dilemma between the certainty of what we know and the uncertainty of the unknown.

Let us now explore the romantic experience, looking at it as a creative and recursive process in which partners are recognizable in their being actively and mutually engaged in the continuously evolving process.

Validation and invalidation in the experience of romantic love

Within the PCP perspective a person’s construction system supports the ‘anticipation of events’ (Kelly, 1955) and every choice is taken for what one person anticipates as more meaningful according to his/her own experiential world. The choice is controlled by the principle of the ‘elaborative choice’ (Kelly, 1955), recognizable in its aiming towards a greater opportunity of elaboration of the system, for its further extension (enabling us to enlarge our viewpoints) and/or definition (enabling us to live with more certainty and self-confidence).

So, in romantic relationships, as after all in any other significant relationship, we experience anticipating a self-elaboration, extending the system’s predictive capacity (Kelly, 1955).

From this established point, different authors, starting from a comparison with McCoy’s definition of love as “awareness of validation of one’s comprehensive core structure” (1977, p. 109), argue about love as an experience of validation of the self, pointing out the active role of invalidation too.

As underlined by Winter, Duncan, & Summerfield (2008), in loving relationships it is possible to experiment and to elaborate our self-construing and this implies both validation and invalidation. In this analysis the authors point out that invalidations that are provided are not necessarily destructive but can lead to a helpful elaboration of one’s construction system.

According to this, we can identify the partner, as Stella (2017) asserts, as “an important validating/invalidating source” (p. 94) or in Ortu’s words (2010), an “understanding and accepting validating person, but also a potential threat, a perturbing person, causing anxiety.” The love experience, quoting Epting: “Is a process of validation and invalidation which leads to the best elaboration of ourselves as complete persons” (1977, p. 52) and it is an experience that, as Bourne affirms, (2017) in its being receptive to new events can generate validation as well as ‘havoc’.

As we have pointed out so far, quoting Badiou (2009/2012), romantic love is a reconstructive experience where personal meanings and their relations are reinterpreted in a ‘two scene’. In a PCP perspective we may say that the possibility to revise our system through the tension between two dissimilar but profoundly interwoven points of view is the elaborative choice, made in order to evolve our anticipatory system. It is a process which involves large areas of our construction system, where becoming involved in the life and the meanings of a particular other person entails the consolidation of some aspects of our outlook, the revision and abandonment of others in order to foster a more comprehensive validity to our anticipations. So we may say that we choose to pair with a specific partner since we anticipate a possibility to co-construe a network of meanings and to co-ordinate our actions in a relationship where, by reciprocally perturbing each other, we ‘identify oneself’ in such a way that leads us to expand our perspectives and causes some aspects of the self to be called into question.

Within this framework we can therefore understand how in a romantic context, partners validate their own construction systems, expansively and specifically on core constructs, but at the same time this validation can become a precondition for making revisions and elaborations on large areas of the system itself. More specifically, validations of more superordinate dimensions of construction may permit our going through some invalidations in subordinate love constructions, without impacting too much on our self-definition.

Thus, in love relationships, we can experience an overall climate of validation, in which invalidations may also promote a

constructive revision but, as Stella (2017), points out: “The constructs invalidated should not be superordinate to those validated, i.e. to those constructs from validation of which comes the transition of love” (p. 96).

For example, if my partner fails to appreciate my efforts and outcomes in an occupation which is, in his opinion ‘useless’, so that my prediction of doing something interesting is disconfirmed, this invalidation threatens my role construct of ‘interesting person’. At the same time, the possibility this provides to comprehend my partner as interested in my ‘personal fulfilment’ acting as if my life really concerns him, confirms my relevance in his world. This awareness steers me towards re-viewing my construing from a decentred point of view, stabilizing the superordinate implications of a construct concerning my ‘value’. I realize that I can take myself to be a capable person and I may undergo constructive revision generated by the invalidation, thus I aggressively elaborate my construing concerning my occupation.

What we have intended to highlight thus far is that in extending the system’s predictive efficiency by construing the world in a ‘two scene’ a new meaningful perspective involves the organization of the self that offers an anchorage in the area of self-elaborations. This allows us to move the boundaries of our willingness to revise that would inevitably impact core construct dimensions. In a constructive revision, as Walker, Oades, Caputi, Stevens and Crittenden (2000) suggest, “given such a superordinate construal of the validity of one’s construing processes, however, loosening one’s construing may provide periods of nonvalidation in which new elements, and new combinations of elements, may enable us to see things in new ways” (p.111).

Certainly, we can make different choices inside the same relationship at different moments, or with regard to different areas of our construction system, but taking a more global view we can affirm that we may live in romantic relationships where our choice leads to experimentation, adventure, and transformation, or we may have relationships in which the choice leads towards confirmation and stabilization of our personal system. That is, referring to the differentiation noted by Winter et al.’s (2008) (quoting Hatfield & Walster, 1978),

between 'passionate' and 'companionate' love, that the choice process one makes may go towards an experience that implies a higher or lower risk of core role invalidation. In any case, when we choose to pair with a specific person we anticipate that the love affair with him/her will enrich our experience of life and that in a life created from the perspective of two, however that evolves, we become 'necessary' to each other.

Let us try to clarify with an example.

THE STORY OF EMMA AND ALBERTO

Emma and Alberto started therapy because they found themselves in a very painful impasse phase, in which it seemed difficult to decide whether to carry on their relationship in its current state or to break up. They recall their first encounter which for them both was born from a strong attraction, 'unsettling' in their words, made of fear and joy at the same time. They say that they felt 'unique' and 'special' to each other, with a strong desire to share and exchange.

What meanings open the encounter?

In a period characterized for both by a strong dissatisfaction with their previous love affairs, Emma and Alberto met and instantly 'fell in love'. Their way of being a couple, of loving each other, became such a 'desire' to 'break the rules', or rather an 'upheaval' of their lives characterized by Emma as 'wonder' like she 'never expected' meanwhile for Alberto it was something 'that takes you' as it had 'come effortlessly.' A new meaningful perspective involves Emma-plus-Alberto and offers new possibilities in the area of their self-elaborations. In this relationship with Alberto, Emma says she felt 'vital', and a 'resource for the other', but also much more 'womanly' than she had ever felt in the past. Alberto says that Emma, unlike the others, had 'captivated' him to make him feel as if his heart was beating so strongly that he could feel a knot in his throat.

What elaborative choice occurs in the 'two scene'?

From the intersubjective space between them arises the possibility for Emma to experience validation of her personal role as a 'vital', 'incisive' and a 'resource for the other'. A role that becomes meaningful and playable as Emma anticipates corresponding to Alberto's will to 'resume living', 'feel pleasure', and 'enjoy life'. At the same time this meeting allows Emma to dilate in an area that until now she rarely experienced that has to do with feeling 'seen' even in her 'femininity'. The intensity and involvement that Alberto shows in their intimacy makes her feel 'desired' and this confirmation gives her anchorage in the area of her femininity allowing her to explore new ways of living within the couple's relationship.

Conversely Alberto anticipates that the intensity of his emotions raises Emma from the pain of not feeling 'seen' for some time, recovering his role, which until that moment was difficult for him to play, of a man 'capable' of keeping his partner 'feeling good'. In carrying out the role of the 'righteous' man who lives 'in sacrifice' and in 'duty', Alberto has so far constricted everything that has to do with 'emotions' ('I do not feel').

It is in the encounter with Emma that Alberto, faced with those emotions, experiences that Emma again feels that she is 'appreciated' and 'full of the will to live'. In his relationship with Emma, Alberto reinterprets his 'feeling', in a 'two scene' and dilates aspects of himself (related to the dimension of construct 'pleasure/duty') that he had long constricted. In a love that makes you 'break the rules', so different from all the rest, he tries to look at the world through Emma's eyes, which Alberto knows is 'being inside the emotions without getting lost' and cultivating his 'interest in life.' From a 'decentred' point of view, emotions can be reinterpreted as an opportunity (to be 'authentic with life') and not just as a risk (to find oneself 'betraying one's commitment to life') so that going back to feeling becomes for Alberto a new possibility of elaboration of his system.

The experience expressed through their love has allowed them both to evolve their core constructs in a broader and propositional way and, in their words, 'go beyond' where it is not normally allowed, because it is a 'thing that you get only once in your life' (for Emma) or

because ‘normally life does not grant you the opportunity’ (for Alberto). To the extent that both see the possibility to evolve and sustain their identity within a shared meaningful framework and in reciprocity of roles, their love relationship becomes a greater opportunity for extension of the personal system: their choice moves in the direction of a renewal.

Then another phase of the relationship opens:

When the idea of living together opens up the possibility of living their relationship in such a way as to impact vast areas of their lives, the joy that characterizes them as a couple is lessened and they both exhibit this crisis through ‘fear’ - for Alberto to ‘lose control and depend on a woman’ leads him more and more frequently to move away and shut down. At the same time, Emma’s ‘powerlessness’ becomes ever more relevant, up to the point that where she had represented for Alberto the possibility of ‘renewal’, she now reports that she ‘no longer knows what to do’ and is having difficulty with Alberto’s continuous ‘halts’. Alberto, when explaining the meaning of his fears, speaks of wanting to be a ‘righteous’ person and not ‘at the mercy of emotions and pleasures’ because you must live ‘with your feet on the ground’, since ‘real life is something else’.

For the two of them it now seems to be threatening both to aggressively elaborate the core construct dimensions through which they play a role in the experience of being a couple, and to break their connection. In the ongoing experience of their relationship we can see the passage from recursive to repetitive processes (Chiari, 2016a). They’ve chosen to continue living as a ‘couple in crisis’ in order to maintain an adaptation and preserve the organization of their personal identities.

The relationship in this phase becomes the source of mutual invalidations of their anticipations which they face through constriction or hostility. With a certain amount of hostility, Alberto can carry on the role of a person who lives ‘with his feet on the ground’ without ‘getting carried away by emotions’, since ‘real life is different’ and Emma can continue to ‘fight’ Alberto’s limits and be able to continue to think of herself as a ‘resource for the other’ albeit not used. In this phase their

choice of evolution moves in the direction of system stabilization.

BECOMING OURSELVES WITH THE OTHER

We have been trying thus far to highlight that our identity as a member of a ‘two scene’ arises from our participation in it, and that this process implies that each member takes into account the ‘gaze’ of the other. In order to understand in what manner the process through which partners ‘identify themselves’ is performed, we will now refer to Chiari’s (2016b; 2017a; 2017b) elaboration on processes of recognition.

Considering the constitutively relational and intersubjective structure of the person, Chiari (2016b) points out that “the recognition of one’s own identity must necessarily come from a social recognition. This mutuality consists in the willingness to recognize each other as dependent on one another but at the same time as fully individualized” (p. 157, translation by authors). According to Ricoeur and Honneth (quoted by Chiari, 2016b), recognition is an intersubjective balance between two poles: that of ‘fusion’ on one hand, and that of ‘self-affirmation in solitude’ on the other (Chiari 2017a, p. 19), and this balance can shift and be at times closer to one pole or to the other. The development of one’s own identity occurs in a dialogic structure through a dynamic balance between these two polarities. In terms of PCP we could say that this balance is related to a more or less expansive dispersion of dependency and, consequently, to the possibility of establishing role relationships with others (Walker, 1997; Chiari, 2017b).

Chiari hypothesizes different paths of recognition, based on the experience in one’s relationship with parents in which the process of mutual recognition can be more or less completed. As he explains, a child’s anticipations may have been more or less extensively validated so that the child’s experience may foster a more or less expansive chance to aggressively elaborate their own constructions system, construing him/herself and the others in various possible ways, establishing role relationships with several different people and by doing so dispersing his/her dependency on a large number of people.

When the narrative deals with an experience in which the child was scarcely recognized, in which the process of mutual understanding and acceptance was not extensively experienced, we will likely move within relationships trying to obtain the missed recognition, to be seen or taken into consideration, always attempting to have our anticipations validated. The other becomes an 'object' more or less able to satisfy our needs. Chiari (2016b) gives a very clear definition, describing it as "the feeling of being among others, rather than being with others" (p. 160, translation by authors).

As Ognibeni and Zoppi (2015) affirm, when the relationship is channelised by 'roles of dependence', the effort in which we are involved is that of looking for continual validations. Thus, in order to preserve the integrity and coherence of their overall system of understanding, the person may tend towards a stabilization of their personal system, becoming unwilling to accept invalidations or construe a partially different experience of self and others as reinterpreted through shared meanings.

When the narrative deals with an experience of relatively extensive recognition, we are more willing to construe the construction processes of the others, creating Role relationships. We will experience something that is more like 'being with others', in that sort of mutual sharing, which does not exclude our own individuality. When we play a Role in the relationship with the other, as Ognibeni and Zoppi (2015) underline, 'the focus is the relationship formed, in which it will be difficult to separate who is doing what' (p. 211) and the possible invalidations of core construct dimensions 'would be seen more as a limit of the relationship itself rather than as a personal deficiency' (ibid., p. 211).

Returning to the story of Emma and Alberto, in the first phase of their relationship, we can assume that their recurrent interactions integrate a network of meanings that rule over their actions. In a shared experience which 'breaks the rules' they act accordingly and thus they can feel their own presence confirmed in the other's world. This feeling of 'being-with' the partner allows each of them to aggressively elaborate their core dimensions of construing and in so doing to extend their system of constructs.

When their new anticipations start to be verified and partially invalidated they make a

non-validated choice, (Walker, 2002; Chiari & Nuzzo, 2010). To maintain an adaptation in their love affair, they move within the relationship choosing not to verify those anticipations, which, if invalidated, would damage their relationship. Alberto expresses his own fears and in so doing chooses not to verify the validity of some core aspects of his construction within the relationship. Emma is trapped in a logic that forces her to test Alberto constantly in order to be considered a 'resource for him'. The preservation of an adaptation in their relationship is dependent on their attempting to have their anticipations (concerning the kind of person they want to be in their engagement in the relationship) validated.

It should be possible to identify specific aspects in a person's narrative which are involved in the recognition process and to hypothesize how a partner moves within the romantic relationship. On the basis of core construct dimensions through which partners play a role in the relationship, a particular network of meaning comes to be construed in the space of 'between' and certain actions rather than others are construed as 'acts of love'. This means that within each individual romantic relationship, interactions must have particular characteristics in order to be confirmatory of the partners' membership in it.

CONCLUSION

In this paper we have presumed that romantic love concerns the construction of the world on the basis of difference by construing the world in a 'two scene'. Romantic experience begins with an encounter which calls us into action in its particular universe of meanings and when we are involved in such an experience, we create a particular network of shared meanings in which we 're-recognize' ourselves through our taking part in the relationship. It is an experience that legitimizes, that leads to a constitution of our identity through the recurrent co-ordinations of actions with the partner. Through being involved in the relationship we may expand our perspectives by a displacement of point of view from our personal position so we can look at the world, others and ourselves in a new way, from a decentred point of view, and inevitably call into

question some core aspects of our construct system.

In a romantic relationship the creation of a new meaningful perspective involves the organization of the self and we can experience an overall climate of validation which facilitates an elaboration on large areas of the system itself. Romantic relationships can become opportunities for transformation and arouse 'wonder' but also provide possibilities for the confirmation and stabilization of our personal way of seeing the world.

Various choices are made in love that involve a higher or lower risk of core role invalidation, but to embrace the principle of the 'elaborative choice' means adopting the attitude of understanding the client's choices (including the choice *not* to act since this in itself is still acting) as it is always taken to be what one person anticipates as more meaningful according to his/her own experiential world.

When we fall in love with a specific person, and when we experience a romantic relationship, we make by definition an 'elaborative choice'. Therefore, this working towards a greater opportunity of elaboration of the system should be analyzed within a process in which we reset the boundaries of our willingness to revise lesser or greater areas of the system, operating in the light of the possibility to evolve the system's predictive capacity in a 'two scene' and under conditions of preservation of the adaptation and conservation of self-organization.

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