

“NO OTHERS, NO ME: THE PARADOX OF THE CORE ROLE” CRUSOE'S MIRROR: A CREATIVE APPROACH TO EXPLORING CORE ROLE CONSTRUCTS

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Abstract: Identifying and articulating clients' core role constructs remains a central yet often challenging task in constructivist psychotherapy, particularly when these constructs are only partially verbalized. Crusoe's Mirror is an original projective technique, developed within the framework of Kelly's relational approach, designed to support therapists in exploring these implicit dimensions of identity. By guiding clients through an imaginative exercise of relational absence, the technique facilitates the emergence of contrast poles and unspoken meanings that shape the client's anticipation of self-in-relation-to-others. This flexible method offers therapists a novel pathway for mapping the client's personal construct system, with particular emphasis on core role constructs. The technique can be integrated into various stages of therapy and is adaptable to different therapeutic formats.

Keywords: Personal Construct Psychology, Core Role Constructs, Projective technique, Relational approach, Identity, Constructivist Psychotherapy.

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1. INTRODUCTION

This paper will present a new therapeutic technique to explore who we are without the people around us and without the pressure created by the real or imagined presence of others. On the other hand, we will consider who we are now, after having formed a sense of ourselves as a particular person, within the context of our lives and the people we live with every day. Crusoe's Mirror is a technique devised to help us answer these questions, shed light on certain aspects of our core role, and give a new perspective on the psychological symptoms we may struggle with, as they are always congruent with the core role. The symptom aims to give structure and meaning to the client's understanding of the world and themselves,

which might otherwise be even more chaotic (Stojnov, 2010). Put simply, this technique is meant to help both therapists and clients in understanding how the client sees him or herself. The purpose of constructivist psychotherapy is to alleviate complaints and reduce symptoms through adjustment or possibly reconstruction of the core structure of the construct system (Stojnov, 2010). This change will also affect the person's core role constructs, which we are trying to understand better, using Crusoe's Mirror.

The technique presented here is qualitative, projective and it provides space for indirect discussion about important aspects of ourselves (through the framework of “what if” scenarios) which ensures no direct threat to the client.

Similar techniques have already been used in constructivist psychotherapy, such as personal reincarnations, personal time travel (Stojnov, 2010) and mirror time (Mahoney, 2003).

2. ROLES IN PERSONAL CONSTRUCT PSYCHOLOGY

Kelly (1955/1991, p. 68) defines a role as "a psychological process based upon the role player's construction of aspects of the construction systems of those with whom he attempts to join in a social enterprise". Leitner (2019, p. 156) expresses this differently as "a psychological process based on understanding how another person in the relationship thinks, feels, values, and acts". Core role constructs are the most important concepts for "being with others" (Leitner, 2019, p. 156). They guide our behavior in relationships. Also "to the extent that one person construes the construction processes of another, he may play a role in a social process involving the other person" (Kelly, 1955/1991, p. 66). The core role, composed of core role constructs, allows others to view us consistently. It also gives structure to our own self-experience. What are the opposite poles of the constructs we use to conceptualize our relationships with others? Could it be that the opposite poles of the constructs we use to make sense of our relationships with others lie in the position we find ourselves in - when we are alone, without anyone around us? Bateson (1972) emphasized that personality is not an isolated essence but a pattern shaped through relationships, leaving behind internalized structures that remain even when others are absent.

All constructs are bipolar and often one pole is more visible or socially reinforced than the other. Sometimes, the contrast pole of a construct is submerged, which means it is not articulated or available for use, especially when it carries personal or interpersonal threat (Kelly, 1955/1991). If someone tries to imagine themselves in total isolation using the Crusoe's Mirror technique, that should bypass the usual

social validation loops and loosen the person's habitual ways of construing. This reflective distance creates space for people to experiment with new ways of understanding themselves by engaging their creative potentials and reducing threat, shame, anxiety or guilt. The technique allows clients to explore what remains meaningful when stripped of their social roles. In doing so, it often brings the submerged contrast pole into awareness.

Loosening, as a stage of the creativity cycle (Kelly, 1955/1991), allows the person to creatively explore new ways of understanding themselves. This technique can potentially increase construct permeability, and allow the system to accommodate alternative perspectives. Crusoe's Mirror is particularly effective with clients whose construct systems exhibit high degrees of tightness or preemptive construing, as it bypasses direct confrontation and instead evokes meaning indirectly through reflective projection. Kelly (1955/1991) suggests that psychotherapy with clients whose systems of constructs are predominantly tight first need to "learn" how to loosen their constructs in order for therapy to enter a meaningful stage where change may start to actively take place.

Bannister (1983) suggests that understanding of ourselves is gained through interactions with others, rather than through self-reflection alone. Defoe (1719/2001), in *Robinson Crusoe*, portrays a character who embodies the struggle of isolation and the search for meaning in solitude. In the novel, Robinson Crusoe is shipwrecked and spends many years alone on a deserted island, accompanied only by animals, which only partly buffer the effects of total isolation. Later, he rescues a man from a group of cannibals and names him Friday, who becomes his loyal companion. The character Robinson Crusoe would experience a declining sense of self without his companion Friday, as his identity would be shaped only by his memories and his interactions with the animals on the island. It is through our relationships and interactions with other people that we truly come to understand

who we were and who we can become. Stojnov and Butt (2002) elaborate on this by stating that to truly develop a sense of self, it is essential to perceive ourselves through the perspectives of others. Without such interactions, like in the hypothetical case of Robinson Crusoe living in complete isolation, the formation of a full-fledged personal identity would be impossible.

What would we do on a deserted island that has nothing to do with others, something we do just for ourselves? When we don't have other people's perspectives of us to take into account, what is the construing that remains? What happens when there are no others, and what remains of our identity – of our core constructs?

Erikson (1968), from a psychoanalytic perspective, writes how important it is to distinguish between personal identity and ego identity. Personal identity involves the conscious recognition of one's consistency and continuity over time and space, and the acknowledgment by others of this continuity. Ego identity, on the other hand, is more about the quality of this existence. It involves an awareness of the consistency and continuity in the ego's methods of synthesizing experiences and the style of individuality, aligning this style with the recognition of significant others within one's community.

From the standpoint of personal construct theory, what Erikson calls "personal identity" could be restated as a person's maintenance of a core role structure. Kelly defines guilt as the awareness of dislodgment of the self from one's core role structure, which implies that a sense of identity and its relative stability rest upon construing oneself consistently within a recognized pattern of a role. When a person perceives that others acknowledge the continuity of this pattern, his or her constructs are validated across a span of time and in a variety of situations, making up the total range of convenience of a role. Continuity of identity, in Kelly's view, is not a fixed essence but the ongoing anticipation of events through one's established network of constructs that receive a sufficient amount of

validation over time, with others' responses serving as confirmations of that anticipation.

What Erikson terms "ego identity" could, in Kelly's language, be understood as the organization and style of the construct system itself and how one's construction processes characteristically synthesize experience. Without offering a precise theoretical elaboration, it is perhaps useful to think of "ego identity" as a separate group of core constructs that maintain the system and its structural features. This follows from the Organization Corollary, which states that each person evolves a construction system embracing ordinal relationships between constructs (Kelly, 1991). The "quality" of existence therefore may lie in the distinctive manner in which a person tightens or loosens constructions, elaborates his role repertoire, and aligns his system with those of significant others (as stated in the Sociality Corollary). To the extent that a person successfully anticipates events through such an organized, recognizable style of construing, he or she achieves what Erikson called "ego identity" but which Kelly would describe as the validation of one's construct system in ongoing social processes.

Knowing that our sense of self is built through relationships, it is valuable to explore where a "what if" scenario might take us. How far we can imagine a solitary existence, what remains of us when we are not reflected in the eyes of others, and what might we ourselves see when left alone in an isolated context? After years of shaping ourselves through relationships and roles - whether as employees, parents, partners, friends, or children - we can ask: what do we do because of others, and who are we when those roles fall away? While this technique does not claim to provide final answers, it offers a way to begin reflecting on these profound questions in the safety of the therapy room, illuminating aspects of identity that may persist beyond social contexts.

3. EXPERIENTIAL EXERCISE: CRUSOE'S MIRROR

Put in the shortest terms, Crusoe's Mirror is a guided imaginative exercise designed to help clients explore who they are when all the familiar social layers of their world are peeled away. It invites them to imagine an existence in which there are no others to observe, judge, or expect anything from them, and therefore no obvious social mirrors in which to see themselves. In doing so, the technique creates an opportunity for reflection on the constructs that persist when the eyes of others are absent, and on those that may lose their significance in solitude.

3.1 Instructions

The client is invited to close their eyes and imagine that they are living completely alone on an island. They are assured that they are safe and that eventually they will return, but for the purposes of the exercise, there is only them and the island. No one else is there - no one to watch, evaluate, demand, or expect. The therapist gently encourages the client to settle into this image of solitude and begin to notice what emerges.

To deepen the reflection, the therapist can ask the client:

- How do you imagine this scenario, and what are your first feelings as you picture it?
- Compared with your current life, what still matters to you? What suddenly no longer matters?
- What would you find yourself doing each day on the island?
- What, if anything, would you still feel ashamed of? What would you still feel proud of? What would you become indifferent to?
- Do the symptoms or problems that you currently experience still exist for you in this solitary setting?
- Do different problems or challenges emerge instead?

3.2 Exploring the Reflections

After a few minutes of guided imagination, the therapist can invite the client to share what they

noticed. The discussion can then proceed in whatever technical manner the therapist prefers, focusing on:

- Which personal constructs came to the surface during the exercise?
- What contrast poles were revealed (e.g., success vs. failure, belonging vs. isolation)?
- Which constructs carried the weight of core role constructs?
- Were there any surprising or submerged constructs that emerged unexpectedly?

3.3 Extending the Process

Clients may sometimes want to go further than conversation alone. They may choose to use creative or artistic methods, such as drawing, painting, journaling, or even movement, to elaborate the insights that arose during the exercise. Such expressive practices can stimulate what Kelly (1955/1991) called the Experience Cycle, enabling clients not only to discover new constructs but also to experiment with them, transform them, and create alternatives. In this way, Crusoe's Mirror can shift from being purely exploratory into becoming a generative technique, one that facilitates the production of new constructs and potentially supports meaningful personal change.

4. CLINICAL INTEGRATION

Crusoe's Mirror might serve as a technical device for opening a broader space of reflection with clients who appear to be excessively embedded in their roles or when their roles are fragile and highly dependent on the validation they receive from others. It can invite them to step momentarily outside the familiar confirmations and limitations of their social world, allowing them, further, to view their own constructions apart from the immediate acknowledgments of significant others. In this way, Crusoe's Mirror becomes more than merely a literal reflection of one's constructs in the eyes of others, but almost a vantage point from which the client may catch a glimpse of his or her own anticipations and the

manner in which they are sustained by the surrounding audience.

For clients whose sense of self seems tightly bound to external recognition, such a procedure can help bring into awareness the degree to which their core role structures are dependent upon those validations. By providing a reflective space, Crusoe's Mirror may enable them to consider what aspects of their construing are genuinely their own, and what aspects are continually borrowed from or imposed by the responses of others in their environment. The technique may also help peel away some layers of cultural construing that give personal constructs their particular flavor or that constrain our clients' possibilities to reconstrue (Miletić, 2024). Thus, the mirror offers an opportunity for clients to review the organization of their construct system with greater independence, while still acknowledging the role of social processes in sustaining personal identity.

For example, someone can perceive themselves as a person with a need for professional success, and the opposite pole would be a complete lack of interest in career achievement. Where would that person be, on this dimension (professional success vs lack of interest in career achievement), if they found themselves on a deserted island or in a forest cabin in the mountains, where there are no people to see them as successful or unsuccessful? Especially if something bothers them regarding career choices they made, or if this need has been created as a way for others to validate and see them as valuable being.

Considering the earlier example of a person striving for career success, we might imagine that in the wilderness this concern would fade, since "success" in its usual form no longer exists there. If others are seen as the source of pressure, always demanding recognition and productivity, this person may begin to shift, turning instead toward questions about their own desires and needs. Yet perhaps these "others" are not actual people with faces and names, but rather internalized feelings, parts of the person themselves.

This is something that can be explored through the Crusoe's Mirror technique.

5. INDICATIONS

Crusoe's Mirror is particularly suitable for clients whose functioning is strongly conditioned by external validation, as well as for those who are highly verbal and introspective yet therapeutically "stuck". It is indicated when the clinical picture suggests excessively tight construing and low permeability, and when the core role appears rigid and difficult to access. In such cases, a pattern of structural arrest is often present: the person's construct system has effectively become fixed and does not continue to develop or revise itself in response to experience. Rather than elaborating, the system consolidates into a form that resists change despite repeated invalidation; constructs are neither reconsidered nor expanded, and the person consequently continues to make the same unsuccessful predictions while disregarding evidence of error. It can be especially helpful with perfectionistic high-achievers whose sense of worth is tied to recognition, productivity, or success, as well as with clients struggling with social anxiety or excessive self-consciousness, where functioning is dominated by perceived evaluation from others and fear of negative judgment. The technique is also indicated for individuals facing burnout or workaholism, who continue to chase external validation despite repeated experiences of invalidation, and for people locked into rigid roles or identities - such as caretakers, leaders, or "the strong one" - who find it difficult to imagine themselves apart from the expectations attached to those positions. Clients experiencing identity diffusion or role confusion, whose sense of self has been shaped by external demands to the point of feeling inauthentic, can also benefit from this approach, as can those with borderline or narcissistic traits, in which the self is intensely mediated through the gaze of others. Crusoe's Mirror may also prove useful for clients facing existential crises following retirement, divorce, or migration, moments in which familiar social

mirrors are disrupted and individuals struggle to recognize who they are without them. More broadly, the technique is indicated when the clinical picture suggests excessively tight construing and low permeability, and when the core role appears rigid and difficult to access. In such cases, a pattern of structural arrest is often present: the construct system has consolidated into a fixed form that resists change despite repeated invalidation, leading the client to repeat unsuccessful predictions while disregarding evidence of error.

6. RISKS AND CAUTIONS

Imagining oneself alone and stripped of all social roles can elicit distress or temporary disorientation. Caution is warranted with clients who have a fragile sense of self or dissociative tendencies, as well as those who already live in marked social isolation. In these circumstances, the exercise carries potential to trigger heightened guilt, threat, or anxiety. Careful framing, gradual introduction of imagery, time limits, and prompt reorientation to the here and now are advised. Psychotherapist should pay attention to individuals who are showing a hostility transition, and who might therefore use the technique as a further attempt to extort validation from the therapist, as well as to those who are going through an anger transition, who might experience the exercise as a challenge on the part of the therapist.

7. CLINICAL VIGNETTE

M. is a 35 year old senior graphic designer, self-referred to therapy due to persistent exhaustion, insomnia, and a growing fear of falling behind professionally. She describes her experience as living "under the gaze of others" including colleagues, clients, and online audiences, and reports compulsive monitoring of feedback. Her developmental history is marked by early family praise that was closely tied to achievement and emotional composure, while the expression of

negative affect was implicitly discouraged. In this context, she frames seeking help as a potential indicator of failure.

Her spontaneous self-descriptions consistently emphasize being reliable, visible, and high-performing. In interpersonal situations, she anticipates others as demanding and easily disappointed. The initial formulation suggests a pattern of tight construing with low permeability. Attempts at direct inquiry into alternative ways of construing self and situations tend to evoke a sense of threat. Her language indicates a core role organized around being "the steady high achiever who validates others' standards" with current symptoms, such as overwork and ruminative insomnia, serving to stabilize anticipation within this role.

Given her difficulty in articulating contrast poles and the repeated generation of the same unsuccessful predictions despite ongoing invalidation, the technique of Crusoe's Mirror was introduced. The aim was to loosen habitual loops of social appraisal by simulating relational absence within a time-limited and safety-framed exercise.

During the exercise, M. imagines herself living alone on a safe, uninhabited island. In the absence of observers, she describes how she takes long morning walks, paying attention to the terrain and light, sorting shells "by function and beauty", reading books, or simply doing nothing. When asked to consider experiences of pride or shame in this imagined setting, she reports a sense of "quiet satisfaction" and notes the absence of urgency. If asked whether her current difficulties are present in this context, she responds: "I still organize, but not to prove anything. I sleep when I'm tired and walk for my own pleasure".

Verbalizations reveal:

- Intrinsic usefulness/beauty - Externally scored performance
- Worth through making what works - Worth through applause

- Performing for yourself - Performing for others

M. recognizes these as familiar but rarely allowed. Affect shifts from tense to reflective and posture relaxes.

Overall, the exercise differentiates two coherent role trajectories. The first is the prevailing role of the “steady high achiever upholding standards”, while the second is an alternative role of a “maker who organizes for usefulness and beauty”. The latter locates valuation intrinsically and remains intelligible even in conditions of isolation. The client’s symptoms appear to have functioned to maintain predictability within a tight external-validation loop. Introducing a frame of relational absence increased permeability, allowing for safe sampling of contrast poles without requiring immediate adoption. These observations suggest that the client’s sense of identity is less contingent on audiences than initially anticipated. What persists in imagined isolation are organizing, crafting, and perceiving patterns, notably without the accompanying urgency to display or perform.

8. CONCLUSIONS

As we know, rather than being defined by specific techniques, constructivist practice rests on a wider understanding of human beings and the ways they interpret their lives. My attempt to design a new technique was motivated by a wish to introduce creativity and open space for imagination in the psychotherapy room. Helping others cannot be reduced to the careful selection of words or the repetition of therapeutic methods unless these are rooted in something deeper and carried within a genuine human relationship. Nevertheless, there are many ways of arriving at the same point in the psychotherapeutic process, so why not sometimes try to reach it through imagination as well?

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