

THE CONTEMPORARY PSYCHOTHERAPEUTIC SUBJECT: BETWEEN CONSTRUCTIVISM AND CRITICAL THEORY

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Abstract: This paper examines the contemporary subject of psychotherapy through philosophical, psychoanalytic, and socio-critical lenses. It explores how personal construct psychology (PCP), and constructivism more broadly, can be enriched by engaging with continental critical thinkers such as Theodor Adorno, Jean Baudrillard, and Erich Fromm. Particular attention is given to George Kelly's original theory and to later developments within PCP. Contrary to some interpretations, Kelly's model acknowledges both personal agency and the systemic and cultural influences that shape construing. His concepts of superordinate organization, the Modulation and Commonality Corollaries, the freedom – determinism construct, and the non-substantial nature of the self, provide significant resources for understanding constraint, culture, and resistance. These resources are then placed in dialogue with critical theory and with recent PCP analyses of public constructs and borderline personality disorder, including Miletic's account of the unstable subject generated at specific intersections of personal and public constructions. The paper aims to articulate a more socially attuned and ethically grounded constructivist therapy, one capable of responding to the conditions of contemporary psychological life.

Keywords: Subjectivity, Constructs, Philosophy, Adorno, Baudrillard, Public constructs, Borderline.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Our construing of the psychotherapeutic subject has never been static. It shifts in response to broader transformations in psychology, philosophy and culture. Each historical moment brings with it different assumptions about what it means to be human, and psychotherapy evolves in dialogue with these shifting constructions. Understanding the contemporary situation, therefore, requires a return to the paradigmatic turns that have shaped subjectivity across the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Freud's psychoanalysis introduced a divided subject governed by unconscious forces (Freud,

1900/1955, 1910/1957). The behaviourists reacted by erasing interiority altogether, reducing human beings to organisms shaped by reinforcement (Skinner, 1953). Humanistic psychology re-centred subjectivity as autonomous, authentic and growth-oriented (Rogers, 1961; Maslow, 1954). Each of these models proposed different images of the human being, and psychotherapy adapted accordingly. It is against this backdrop that George Kelly articulated Personal Construct Psychology (1955/1991). Kelly did not reduce subjectivity to intrapsychic conflict, behaviour, nor an essential self. Instead, he posited an anticipatory, interpretive subject, a personal scientist

continually construing and reconstructing meaning. The constructivist turn retained the humanistic emphasis on agency, but anchored it in a systematic epistemology.

Today, subjectivity is increasingly formed within public, diagnostic and digital environments. A recent personal construct analysis of borderline personality disorder shows how people diagnosed as “borderline” are caught in a contradictory web of public constructs that shape their identity, expectations and relationships from birth (Miletic, 2024). An unstable subject emerges when the personal system of constructs develops within a space that is delineated by incompatible public constructs. These overlaps, which predate the individual, create the boundaries within which the subject can form. When the space is delineated with incompatible public constructs, the subject’s sense of self and personal boundaries become unstable. Unlike stable subjects, whose public constructs’ overlaps that form the subject space are firm, the unstable subject experiences points of unresolvable tension where cultural, familial, and social constructs intersect. These tensions create ambiguity in meaning, leading to a system of constructs that temporarily loses coherence, producing fluctuating self-conceptions and a fragile sense of identity. The subject’s system continuously breaks down and reassembles itself as different elements move in and out of conscious awareness, giving the appearance of “unstable stability”. This dynamic highlights that while the individual has some freedom to shape their personal constructs, the structural tensions inherited from cultural, familial, and symbolic overlaps constrain choices and perpetuate instability. In therapy, understanding these unstable overlaps can guide interventions aimed at supporting the subject in forming more coherent, resilient systems of meaning.

Critical theorists such as Adorno (Adorno, 1951/2005), Fromm (Fromm, 1955) and Baudrillard (Baudrillard, 1981/1994) remind us that individuals do not construct in a vacuum. Meaning is always shaped by culture, ideology, economics and technology. Yet Kelly’s model, properly understood, is not blind to such

influences either. His Commonality Corollary, Sociality Corollary and sensitivity to cultural factors in the process of diagnosing show that systemic influences are intrinsic to PCP (Kelly, 1955/1991). The contemporary psychotherapeutic subject therefore cannot be adequately understood through constructivism alone nor through structuralist determinism. Instead, both perspectives must be integrated.

This paper aims to situate Kelly’s epistemological model of the personal scientist within the broader critical horizon provided by continental philosophy and within contemporary PCP analyses of public constructs such as those examined by Miletic (2024). In doing so, it outlines the contours of a critical constructivist therapy built on the assumption that subjectivity is simultaneously constructed, constrained, shaped by public narratives and capable of resistance.

2. GEORGE KELLY AND THE CONSTRUCTIVIST SUBJECT

Kelly’s Psychology of Personal Constructs remains a radical departure from the dominant psychological theories of his time. Rather than grounding subjectivity in unconscious drives or environmental contingencies, Kelly proposed an anticipatory and interpretive being whose primary task is to construe events in order to predict and navigate the future (Kelly, 1955/1991). His metaphor of the person as a “personal scientist” encapsulates this epistemology; each person develops hypotheses about reality, tests them and revises them when they fail.

The Fundamental Postulate says that “a person’s processes are psychologically channelised by the ways in which he anticipates events”, which marks a profound shift from causal to teleological psychology (Kelly, 1955/1991, p. 3). Experience is organised around anticipation. Like existential and phenomenological thinkers, Kelly emphasises projection into possibilities, but he articulates this in a uniquely operational psychological framework.

The eleven corollaries unpack this model. The Construction Corollary affirms that individuals detect patterns of recurrence, allowing events to be construed as abstract replications. The Individuality Corollary emphasises that each person construes differently, resonating with existential emphasis on the singularity of each individual's existence. The Dichotomy Corollary asserts that constructs are bipolar, aligning with structuralist ideas about difference as the basis of meaning (Derrida, 1967/1976).

Crucial for the present discussion is the Choice Corollary. Freedom, for Kelly, is not absolute autonomy but the capacity to choose between alternatives that either extend or restrict a system of constructs. This aligns with his explicit treatment of the freedom–determinism construct in the opening chapters of *The Psychology of Personal Constructs* (Kelly, 1955/1991). Kelly did not advocate absolute freedom; rather, he saw freedom as an epistemic choice within systematic constraints. The person continually chooses how to interpret the world but does so within the channels provided by their construct system.

Modulation Corollary, which specifies that the capacity for change depends on the permeability of superordinate constructs. In PCP, change is always constrained by the system's superordinate organisation. Some constructs are permeable and allow entry of new elements, while others are rigid.

Equally relevant is the Commonality Corollary, which makes explicit that construing is partially socially patterned. People who adopt similar constructions will exhibit similar processes. Kelly devoted an entire diagnostic section to cultural factors (Kelly, 1955/1991). PCP conceptualises systemic influences as shared, socially distributed constructions. These include public constructs (Kelly, 1955/1991; Miletic, 2016) such as diagnostic categories, stereotypes and media-driven images, exactly the kind of socially circulating constructs that shape identities in contemporary life.

These public constructions can impose a considerable psychological cost. Miletic's (2024) analysis of borderline personality demonstrates

how clients diagnosed as "borderline" are caught between personal constructs and public discourses that portray the borderline subject as unstable, manipulative or dangerous. These public constructs are not merely external forces acting on the individual but internalised superordinate meanings that shape construing at the core level. The "price" the subject pays is a loss of trust in their own anticipations, increased vulnerability to invalidation and the destabilisation of identity through incongruent public narratives.

Kelly's theory also rejects the notion of a hidden or true self beneath layers of defence. The self, he argues, is simply the pole of a construct or an element in the range of convenience of other constructs, not an entity waiting to be revealed (Kelly, 1955/1991). Accordingly, the aim of psychotherapy is not the recovery of authenticity or restoration of a "whole self" but the psychological reconstruction of life.

This perspective on the person highlights the balance between structure and creativity in PCP. Kelly's concept of the subject is neither fully determined nor entirely free. While the system of constructs places limits on thought and action, individuals can adopt superordinate positions, reflecting on and even modifying their own constructs as well as shared cultural constructs. Kelly emphasizes that people have the capacity to resist dominant systems of thought because they are not completely controlled by external forces (Kelly, 1955/1991). Without this potential for autonomy, psychotherapy itself would be meaningless. In this way, the tension between constraint and agency is fundamental to the very architecture of PCP. This aspect of Kelly's theory lays the foundation for integrating Kelly with later constructivist authors, critical continental thinkers and PCP analyses of public constructs. Each of these, as we shall see, enriches the understanding of subjectivity and reveals dimensions of the contemporary subject that Kelly anticipated but did not fully develop.

3. FURTHER CONSTRUCTIVIST DEVELOPMENTS

The richness of George Kelly's system becomes especially evident when considering the broad range of developments it has inspired. These post-kellyan contributions do not contradict the original framework and may expand an aspect that was implicit in Kelly's epistemological stance. Michael Mahoney linked constructivism with developmental psychology, attachment theory and the affective sciences. Mahoney (2003) offered a view of the person that closely harmonises with Kelly's model while enriching it with a developmental vocabulary. He presented the person as an embodied, dynamically evolving being whose anticipations reflect both current interpretations and early relational experiences. This does not "reintroduce" emotion into a cognitive Kelly; it simply articulates what Kelly had already implied.

Robert Neimeyer's constructivism built upon Kelly by situating constructs within life narratives. In works such as *Meaning Reconstruction and the Experience of Loss* (2001), Neimeyer showed how meaning is maintained through coherence of personal stories. When loss disrupts these stories, identity is destabilised and therapy serves as a process of reconstructing meaning. This approach fits well with Kelly's emphasis on anticipation. A narrative is a temporally extended field of anticipation; constructs are its building blocks. The personal scientist does not only generate hypotheses - he lives them across time. David Winter contributed empirical precision to PCP through his extensive research and refinement of the repertory grid through various important applications and innovations. With *Personal Construct Psychology in Clinical Practice* (1992), Winter provided systematic evidence for PCP's applicability and conceptual integrity. He demonstrated that constructs can be studied rigorously, without sacrificing phenomenological nuance. Winter's work preserved Kelly's scientific ambition.

Gabriele Chiari and Maria Laura Nuzzo introduced hermeneutic constructivism, a reading that emphasises the existential and ontological

dimensions of construing. They proposed in their article that Kelly's work implicitly resonates with Heidegger's understanding of being-in-the-world. This move does not negate Kelly's model but deepens its philosophical foundation by showing how construing is inseparable from thrownness, finitude and existential choices.

Larry Leitner (2004), drawing on Martin Buber (1923/1970) and Mikhail Bakhtin (1975/1981), foregrounded the interpersonal dimensions of PCP. His experiential-interpersonal approach conceptualised construing as inherently dialogical. Meaning emerges in conversation, both literal and symbolic, with others. Kelly's Sociality Corollary already anticipated this and Leitner made it explicit and theoretically articulated.

Harry Procter expanded PCP in a systemic direction. His work on family systems and shared constructs illustrated how personal and relational constructions intertwine, making it clear that Kelly's model allows for sophisticated systemic analysis even if Kelly himself did not develop this dimension fully (Procter, 1981).

These authors collectively demonstrate that PCP is not a closed and stale epistemology but a living tradition. They also provide necessary context for integrating Kelly with contemporary analyses of public constructs. Recent PCP work has turned explicitly toward the impact of public diagnostic categories, social narratives and digital identities on personal construal.

Miletic (2016, 2024) argues that borderline personality disorder does not exist merely as an internal psychological configuration. It is also a public construct circulated in psychiatric discourse, media narratives and digital communities. The person labelled as "borderline" does not only live with private anticipations of their own making. They are continuously confronted with external anticipations of instability, manipulation, intensity, fragility, danger. These public meanings seep into the client's personal system, often becoming superordinate constructions that the person must adopt, resist or reinterpret. The "unstable subject" is not born but construed, publicly and privately at the same time, through recursive loops of anticipation, (in)validation and revision or hostility.

This phenomenon illustrates Kelly's point that construing is also socially patterned. It exemplifies how systemic influences enter at the superordinate level of a person's construction system. What looks like intrapsychic instability may in fact reflect the collision between personal constructs and socially sanctioned constructions. A constructivist therapy that does not recognise this interplay will remain blind to the lived realities of clients who suffer from public super determination.

The entire trajectory of post-kellyan PCP briefly outlined here demonstrates a central point, namely, that Kelly did not underestimate systemic influences; he provided the tools for incorporating them into his thinking, but that one man could not address everything. These developments lay the groundwork for integration with critical theory. They demonstrate that PCP, far from being naively individualistic or epistemically detached from social contexts, has a conceptual structure capable of addressing the systemic, ideological, and public discursive forces analysed by Adorno, Fromm, and Baudrillard.

4. ADORNO AND THE DAMAGED SUBJECT

Theodor Adorno's philosophy introduces a crucial counterbalance to overly voluntaristic interpretations of constructivism. While Kelly emphasises the individual's capacity for construing and reconstruing, Adorno emphasises the degree to which late-modern subjectivity is shaped, and often distorted, by systemic forces. His reflections in *Minima Moralia* (1951/2005) and *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1947/2002) reveal a portrait of the subject as profoundly mediated by commodification, instrumental rationality and the culture industry. At the heart of Adorno's critique is the idea that Enlightenment rationality, rather than freeing humanity, has turned into a tool of calculation and control. Reason has become instrumental: instead of seeking truth, it serves efficiency, domination, and predictability. What is considered "rational" is increasingly defined by economic utility. In this context, individuals

internalize patterns of thought and behaviour that reflect the broader logic of society. The outcome, which Adorno terms damaged life, is an existence shaped by alienation, conformity, and functionalisation. This diagnosis does not deny the possibility of agency but reveals the extent to which individual choices are socially conditioned. What appears as free reconstruction may in fact reflect adaptation to commodified cultural patterns. The individual anticipates not only events but the expectations of the marketplace, the institutions that govern them and the culture industry that defines their desires. Choices themselves become preformatted.

When placed in conversation with Kelly, Adorno does not negate constructive alternativism. Rather, he shows that the range of possible alternatives is often narrowed by systemic constraints. Kelly's model provides the psychological mechanisms, hierarchical organisation, permeability, choice between definition and extension, but Adorno reveals the socio-cultural conditions within which those mechanisms operate. The interplay between them offers a more realistic portrait of contemporary subjectivity: structurally pressured yet still capable of anticipatory freedom.

This becomes particularly relevant when considering public constructions of identity. As Miletic (2024) illustrates through his analysis of borderline personality disorder, the subject is not only shaped by personal constructs but by public constructs disseminated through a network of complex relations. In Adorno's terms, these public constructs often function like products of the culture industry: mass-produced, circulated, internalised.

Adorno's concept of non-identity is central to preserving the dignity of the subject under such conditions. Non-identity refers to the refusal to collapse living contradictions into pre-established categories. It resists the pressure to conform to available identities, including those circulated in diagnostic or cultural discourses. For therapy, this suggests that resisting public constructions may be a necessary aspect of psychological health. Kelly's framework already contains the mechanisms that allow such resistance,

particularly the ability to take a superordinate stance toward one's own constructs and toward shared constructions. Adorno's negative dialectics underscores why maintaining such reflective distance is not simply optional but essential for preserving subjectivity in damaged life (Adorno, 1951/2005).

Adorno's reflections on aesthetics further complement this perspective. Art, for him, creates spaces of non-identity, spaces where meaning resists instrumentalisation. In the context of psychotherapy, this insight suggests that imagination, metaphor and symbolic expression may serve as sites where the person can construct meaning that resists assimilation into the logic of commodification or the logic of public diagnostic narratives. Therapy can sustain such spaces, allowing clients to inhabit possibilities that the culture industry tends to foreclose.

The borderline subject described by Miletic (2024) embodies the very tensions Adorno analyses. The instability of a person diagnosed as "borderline" is continuously mirrored, interpreted and exhibited through public constructs that circulate through interpersonal networks, made additionally visible and fast by social media and other technological developments. Adorno provides a complementary perspective by seeing the structure of the subject as a reflection of broader contradictions in social life. Therapy that ignores these contradictions risks becoming a tool of adaptation rather than emancipation.

In sum, Adorno broadens Kelly by revealing the systemic pressures that shape the channels of anticipation. Kelly broadens Adorno by showing how even in damaged life, superordinate reconstruction and epistemic freedom remain possible. Together, they provide a deeper understanding of the contemporary subject: constrained, over-constructed and damaged, yet still capable of critical reconstruing.

5. ESCAPE FROM FREEDOM AND THE ETHICAL DIMENSION OF RECONSTRUCTION

Erich Fromm occupies a unique position at the intersection of psychoanalysis, humanism and social theory. His work grapples with a paradox intrinsic to modern subjectivity: the expansion of individual freedom has simultaneously produced new forms of anxiety, isolation and submission. In *Escape from Freedom* (1941), Fromm argues that as traditional authorities declined, individuals gained autonomy but lost the structural certainties that previously anchored their identities. This freedom, rather than being purely liberating, often produced existential insecurity.

To manage this insecurity, people adopt mechanisms of escape. Authoritarianism, destructiveness and automaton conformity represent attempts to avoid the burden of freedom by surrendering agency to external or internalised authorities. Conformity in particular plays a decisive role in contemporary society. Rather than openly submitting to authority, individuals mould themselves to the dominant patterns of thought, feeling and behaviour. They "choose" what is required by the system. Identity becomes a social product too, even when experienced as personal choice.

In *The Art of Loving* (1956), Fromm introduces love as an existential skill capable of integrating freedom and connection. Mature love, grounded in care, responsibility, respect and knowledge, resolves the tension between individuality and relatedness. It allows the person to be free *with* others, not free *from* them. For Fromm, mental health cannot be understood without this ethical and relational orientation. His concept of social character further advances a key insight. Personality tendencies are not simply personal but are shaped by economic and cultural conditions. The capitalist orientation toward competitiveness, productivity and consumption produces individuals who adapt their subjectivity to market imperatives (Fromm, 1955). These tendencies become so deeply internalised that they appear as personal desires rather than socially produced patterns of relating.

When integrated with Kelly, Fromm adds an essential ethical dimension to constructivism. Kelly's theory does not assume that all constructions are equally emancipatory. Although he evaluates them in terms of predictive validity and range of convenience, Fromm invites us to consider whether the reconstructive choices clients make foster autonomy, solidarity and productive love, or whether they represent escapes from freedom. Constructive alternativism, from this point of view, must be accompanied by reflective evaluation of the ethical directions and relational consequences of reconstruction. Therapy becomes not only a space for epistemic experimentation but also for ethical deliberation.

6. SIMULACRA, HYPERREALITY AND THE IMPLOSION OF MEANING

Jean Baudrillard presents perhaps the most unsettling challenge to any theory of subjectivity, including constructivism. While Adorno emphasises systemic domination and Fromm stresses the ethical dilemmas of freedom, Baudrillard argues that the very distinction between appearance and reality has collapsed. In *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981/1994), he contends that contemporary society is characterised not merely by representation but by simulation, signs that no longer refer to anything beyond themselves. These simulacra create hyperreality, a world in which the boundary between the real and the representational is erased. In hyperreality, subjectivity is not grounded in stable meanings or authentic selfhood. Instead, identity becomes a performance shaped by images, codes and digital feedback systems. The self appears and reappears across platforms, profiles and curated representations. Its stability is continually negotiated in public arenas where simulation has become the dominant mode of existence. Baudrillard's analysis has profound implications for psychotherapy. Approaches that rely on uncovering an authentic self or restoring genuine experience become problematic when the

distinction between authentic and simulated is itself unstable. Kelly's model avoids this problem because it does not posit a hidden self. For Kelly, the self is an element in the person's construction system, not an entity waiting to be recovered. This makes PCP particularly compatible with Baudrillard's critique: both theories avoid essentialism.

However, Baudrillard highlights a danger that Kelly does not explicitly address. If all constructs circulate in a hyperreal landscape governed by simulation, even the alternatives we choose may be pre-coded. Freedom risks becoming the selection among simulations. Constructive alternativism could devolve into what Baudrillard calls a menu of controlled options (Baudrillard, 1981/1994).

The therapist's role, in such a world, is not to guide clients toward authenticity, an increasingly untenable ideal, but to help them navigate the hyperreal, to identify simulations as simulations and to sustain meaning in the face of its potential implosion. Therapy becomes a site for reintroducing difference where simulation imposes sameness, for creating space where hyperreality compresses all distinctions, and for cultivating agency when identity becomes performative.

7. TOWARD A CRITICAL CONSTRUCTIVIST THERAPY

Bringing together Kelly, Adorno, Fromm, Baudrillard, and contemporary PCP analyses of public constructs suggests a vision of psychotherapy that can be called critical constructivist therapy. This approach preserves Kelly's emphasis on the creative, anticipatory subject while also acknowledging the social, cultural, economic, and digital pressures that shape and constrain personal construing. Critical constructivist therapy starts from the premise that personal meaning is always constructed, but never in isolation. Kelly's Commonality and Sociality Corollaries affirm that construing is inherently relational and cultural. Public constructs such as diagnostic categories,

stereotypes, or media representations shape how individuals are seen and how they see themselves. These shared meanings can act as superordinate constructs, strongly influencing personal anticipations.

At the same time, Kelly stresses that individuals are not fully determined by external forces. Constructive alternativism emphasizes the capacity to resist dominant systems of thought (Kelly, 1955/1991). This is not absolute freedom, but epistemic agency: the ability to adopt new perspectives, reinterpret shared meanings, and expand one's possibilities. Without this capacity, psychotherapy would lose its coherence.

Fromm adds that not all reconstructions of meaning are emancipatory. Some adaptations, while internally coherent, may reinforce alienation and reflect an escape from freedom. Critical constructivist therapy must therefore consider the ethical orientation of these reconstructions: do they foster autonomy, relational reciprocity, and productive love, or do they reinforce conformity to public scripts?

Adorno warns against equating mental health with social adaptation. In conditions of "damaged life," sustaining non-identity—resisting imposed identities and normative pressures—is itself a form of psychological integrity. Therapy must create spaces where contradictions are tolerated, and clients can maintain distance from commodified or stigmatized identities.

Baudrillard emphasizes that, in hyperreal environments, simulation exerts powerful pressure on the subject. Therapy cannot promise authenticity as a solution, but it can help clients adopt a reflective stance toward simulations, recognize their constructed nature, and resist being absorbed into hyperreal identities.

Miletic's analysis of the borderline subject synthesises these themes at the clinical level. Critical constructivist therapy acknowledges the entanglement of the public and the private construing, and empowers clients to break with public constructs even when they are deeply embedded in their core structures.

Together, these perspectives provide a robust framework for psychotherapy in the twenty-first century. They preserve the core of Kelly's vision

while expanding it to account for ideology, commodification, hyperreality and the power of public constructs. The contemporary psychotherapeutic subject is not a pure personal scientist nor a passive victim of structural forces but a fragile, creative being navigating a world of competing constructions.

Therapy can become a practice of critical freedom. It protects the spaces in which subjectivity can endure, reflect, resist and reimagine itself. It recognises the price subjects pay for living within public constructions and digital simulations, and seeks to lessen that cost by cultivating the superordinate freedom Kelly envisioned: the capacity to construe otherwise.

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