

Intersections between Kelly's personal construct theory  
and postmodern thought: How each contests and  
informs the other

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Abstract

In this paper, I discuss intersections between the work of George Kelly's (1970) personal construct theory and postmodern thought according to Mumby's (1997) postmodern communication conditions. After a brief summary of postmodern influences to the social sciences via Rosenau (1992), I explore the extent to which George Kelly can be considered an "affirmative postmodern" scientist according to the basic corrolaries of personal construct theory. Next, I draw on Mumby's four postmodern communication conditions -- 1) communication is (im)possible; 2) communication is political; 3) communication is for self-de(con)struction; and 4) communication is subjectless -- to offer a reformulation of some basic tenets of personal construct theory. I conclude the paper by illustrating how an interpersonal communication project by Duck (1994) -- already informed by personal construct theory -- could be re-articulated according to a postmodern(ized) Kelly.

“[The scientist] does not hold up his [or her] theoretical proposal to be judged so much in terms of whether it is the truth at last or not -- for [the scientist] assumes from the outset that ultimate truth is not so readily at hand -- but to be judged in terms of whether his [or her] proposition seems to lead toward and give way to fresh propositions; propositions which, in turn, maybe more true than anything else has been thus far.”

– Kelly (1970, p. 67)

“[Language is not] so much a means of representing reality, or shielding us from it, nor so much a means of communication between persons, but more an instrument for probing the future and, at the same time, maintaining our composure in the face of onrushing events.”

– Kelly (1969b, p. 148)

“...far from marginalizing communication as a human activity, postmodernism contributes to a more insightful understanding of the processes through which communication, identity, and power intersect.”

– Mumby (1997, p. 23)

### **Introduction**

In the first quotation above, George Kelly (1970) invites researchers to elaborate upon his personal construct approach that theorizes how people construct their worlds based on the way they anticipate events. By elaborating on this basic premise, Kelly generates corollaries concerning this constructive process, individuality, organization of constructs, the dichotomous nature of constructs, choice, range of convenience, experience, modulation within a person’s construct system, fragmentation, commonality, and sociality (Kelly, 1970). Despite the richness of his theoretical approach, however, Kelly was relatively silent about matters of language, communication, ideology, and power (Solas, 1992; Balnaves & Caputi, 1993), all facets of the social world to which postmodernists are drawn. The purpose of this paper, then, is to present complementary and contradictory intersections between Kelly’s personal construct theory and emerging insights from postmodernist thought, specifically as it relates to communication, subjectivity, and relating practices. After a brief summary of postmodernist challenges to the social sciences, and the modern subject in particular, I will address how Kelly and postmodernist thinking can productively inform one another, and then present a brief example of an interpersonal/relational research project that is sensitive to Kelly’s insights and postmodernist critiques.

### **Postmodernist challenges: A brief summary**

To begin an inquiry into postmodernism, it is important to situate this body of intellectual work relative to the historical tradition it inherits, called modernism. Authors locate modernity in different ways. For example, Rosenau (1992) notes that some people argue modernism refers to the fifteenth to nineteenth century, and that postmodernism has been evolving for the past 150 years. Other people adopt a different position, not necessarily inconsistent with the previous argument, that postmodernism is a more recent phenomenon, emerging in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Further, people disagree over whether or not postmodernism represents a clean “break” from modernism, or if it is its logical continuation. Although modernism itself is heterogeneous and complex (p. 5), the modernist “project” in its most foundational sense concerns the liberation of humanity by eradicating forms of irrationality and ignorance. Under modernity, the sovereign, rational, conscious, logical, and coherent individual is centered as the origin of all human activity (p. 42; Stewart, 1991).

Postmodernism -- itself not a unitary tradition -- represents a collection of work generated by artists, intellectuals, musicians, architects, etc., to come to terms with the condition called postmodernity. The human condition called postmodernity refers to a time when many people have become skeptical about whether these (modernist) attempts at liberation through moral claims and traditional institutions are actually liberating or if they are used to constrain and subjugate. For example, one intellectual associated with postmodernism, Jean-Francois Lyotard (1984), contended that the modernist liberatory project proceeded through political, social, and religious meta-narratives (or, global, all-encompassing worldviews) such as progress, religion, secular humanism, etc. and hence his oft-cited definition of postmodernism as an “incredulity toward metanarratives” (p. xxiv).

To the extent that postmodernists would cohere to formulate a “project,” it might entail a critique of modernist thought by reflection and deconstruction. Jacques Derrida (1981) is credited with formulating the strategy of deconstruction which is an attempt break open rigid dichotomies, such as man-woman, through a dual process of reversing the dichotomy (privileging woman over man, rather than man over woman) and then reinscribing woman as the term to formulate a critical response (Solas, 1992). Rather than seeking unity and closure (a modernist goal), the goal of deconstruction is to open up possible alternative and provisional meanings. Thus, the postmodernist goal of critiquing modernism is not to

formulate a once-and-for-all alternative to these grand metanarratives. Rather, it is to deconstruct them to illustrate why no grand metanarrative can establish any firm ground to build claims upon. Postmodernism also wants to recover those aspects that the metanarratives of modernity excluded: irrationality, intuition, emotions, tradition, personal experience, etc. which is why postmodern work emphasizes that which is marginalized, ignored, deprived of power, and “off the beaten track” (Rosenau, 1992; Wood & Duck, 1995). The goal is not to “improve and perfect” but to make explicit taken-for-granted assumptions and to undermine any foundational claims (Rosenau, 1992, p. 9).

Rather than thinking of a modernist-postmodernist dichotomy, however, Dennis Mumby (1997) encourages us to think of four distinct, yet overlapping, discourses concerning (post)modernity: a discourse of representation (positivist modernism), a discourse of understanding (interpretive modernism), a discourse of suspicion (critical modernism), and a discourse of vulnerability (postmodernism). This framework is also characteristic of the mixture and hybridity of the postmodern condition where postmodern discourses exist simultaneously among modernist discourses (Rosenau, 1992). Mumby talks specifically about an “affirmative” version of postmodernism (see below) as a discourse of vulnerability because, as discussed above, it is wary of simply reinscribing another totalizing metanarrative. Instead, postmodernism is more tentative, provisional, and local in its response to the (postmodern) world. It offers “indeterminacy rather than determinism, diversity rather than unity, difference rather than synthesis, complexity rather than simplification” as well as confidence in emotion over impartial observation, relativism over objectivity, and fragmentation over totalization (Rosenau, 1992, p. 8).

It is important to acknowledge that postmodernity -- nor modernity, for that matter -- itself is not unitary as there are many divergent and contradictory views. Rosenau (1992) argues that she can construct enough coherence, however, to articulate two broad forms of postmodernism: one moderate (affirmative and optimistic), and the second, extreme (skeptical and cynical). She acknowledges that the boundary between these two overlap and bleed, but they still may be useful to get a tentative handle on the complexity of postmodernity (and constructing her own affirmative tendencies). She argues that both agree in their critique of modernity, but differ in where they take this critique. For the skeptical postmodernist, the future is gloomy, negative, fragmented, disjointed, meaningless, chaotic, etc., in short, the “darker” side of

postmodernism (although skeptical postmodernists would not accept the light-dark dichotomy, even for provisional purposes of explanation).

In contrast, the affirmatives are oriented towards process, to local, affirmative political projects around certain issues (coalitions) that struggle and resist dominant, imposed meanings. As Mumby articulated postmodernism as a discourse of vulnerability, affirmatives tend to be nondogmatic, tentative, with some making claims that certain normative choices are superior to others -- which, of course, the skeptics would not be in favor of since they would want to deconstruct the basis on which one normative choice was deemed superior. Further, many members of the skeptical camp would argue that rather than constructing tentative grounds to formulate a provisional certainty, people should just learn to feel comfortable in a state of continual flux and relativism.

Among its many critiques, postmodern writers have gone to great lengths to criticize the modern characterization of the subject (Rosenau, 1992). Since Kelly emphasizes the construal process of individuals in his theoretical approach, a postmodern evaluation of subjectivity may prove especially beneficial to the purpose of this paper. The term subjectivity here refers to being an individual and the individual's awareness of the self (see Rosenau, 1992, p. 42). As mentioned above, a modernist version of the subject privileges the individual as sovereign, rational, conscious, logical, coherent, possessing a core self, and the origin of actions, including communicative practices.

Ball (1987) writes, however, that "human agents act in a world constituted by large-scale social structures that are not the products of anyone's plan or intention" (p. 7). It is important to note that this perspective does not deny that social actors often act with intentions in mind. However, if communicative acts are defined solely by the condition of the actor's intentions, we lose sight of the social context in which the actor is enmeshed. Further, Mumby (1997, p. 21) argues that to the extent that social actors act intentionally, these intentions emerge as a condition of being positioned by discursive practices (a point to be discussed in more detail below).

As postmodern thought is not monolithic, there are different "takes" on the subject and its place in theorizing the social condition. Skeptic postmodernists -- extending insights from the traditions of Freud and Nietzsche -- tend to be anti-subject, arguing that at best the notion of the individual is nostalgic, and at

worst it is an ideological fiction, merely a linguistic construction that occupies a position in language (p. 43). According to Rosenau, skeptical postmodernists distaste for the subject exists because 1) the subject is a remnant of modernity and skeptics are wary of the modernist project, 2) the subject is humanist, which is another logo-centric meta-narrative which positions the subject at the center of the world, in control, rational, goaded by a notion of progress and continual improvement, etc., and 3) the subject implies an object, which postmodernism sees as an unacceptable dualistic split inherited from modernism. As would be expected, the postmodernist maneuver is to deconstruct the subject, resulting in a move to “decenter” the subject. To decenter the subject means not to focus on the subject as the origin of activity, but to understand that language is what constitutes and interprets subjects (Lannamann, 1992). Some postmodern theories try to do away with the subject entirely, or to re-theorize subjects as being “multiple, contradictory, and largely irrational.” In place of the subject, discursive practices constitute “subject positions” or “sites” (p. 51).

The skeptic’s alternative to the modern subject is, in some cases, to have no modern subject at all! Rather, there are postmodern individuals whose identities are fragmented and uncertain, persons who value flexibility, while emphasizing the temporary and present, having loose affiliations with collectivities, engaging in personal searches for meaning without imposing on others claims of what is the right way to live, operating according to a relativism in terms of normative assumptions, and are wary of any general or universal claims (see Rosenau, pp. 53–55).

Of course, postmodernist theories of the subject are not monolithic. Affirmatives are of more mixed opinion concerning the subject, but do maintain that the subject is not entirely coherent or unified, and certainly does not always act in a logical, rational manner (Rosenau, 1992, p. 44). But, many affirmatives are sympathetic to the subject and, rather than renouncing it, are willing to re-work the subject. With the affirmative critique, the modern subject dies, but a new postmodern subject takes its place, characterized as decentered, emergent, and in process, living life continually at the margins and borders of daily/nightly life. Rather than investing energy into grand, totalizing collectivities and belief systems, the affirmative postmodern subjects seeks a degree of fluidity in life, connecting with temporary coalitions for specific issues, acting as a bricoleur who improvises to continually (re)fashion her or his life-in-process out

of the cultural materials at hand (Carl, 1997).

Pierre Bourdieu (1984) offers a conceptual formulation of this postmodern subject through his notion of “habitus.” Habitus can be defined as “the cumulative, durable totality of cultural and personal experiences that each human being carries around as a result of life experiences (speech, mannerism, style of dress, table etiquette, posture, body shape)” (Rosenau, 1992, p. 59). Habitus is subject-specific, meaning that it is unique to each individual, but defies (post)positivist scientific generalization.

The postmodern debates about the subject cannot be as neatly encapsulated as the above summary makes them out to be. However, this background may provide sufficient coherence to compare these ideas to insights from a Kellian tradition. To make explicit my own position, I am not willing to completely reject the skeptical postmodernist critiques as it represents a legitimate discursive position and may, at times, offer useful insights. However, I’m also not satisfied by the pessimistic conclusions it engenders, and am more persuaded by an affirmative postmodern position. It is from this affirmative position that we can begin to see connections and tensions with Kelly’s construing individual.

### **Kelly: An (affirmative) postmodern scientist?**

In some significant ways, Kelly is already postmodern, although he is not in other significant ways. Even Kelly himself acknowledged that his theory would soon be “out of date” and would require revision (Kelly, 1969a). To be sure, this is the first way that Kelly could be considered postmodern. That is, he was not laying out a theory that was going to get it “right” -- i.e., to fit the way the world was always and forever -- but he offered a new perspective to work/elaborate from that would generate fresh insights about the human psychological condition. Kelly (1970) was ahead of his (positivist) times by working from a position of “constructive alternativism” which can be contrasted with an “accumulative fragmentalism” model of construing/theorizing -- note that the juxtaposition of “construing/theorizing” implies a commitment Kelly maintained that a theory must be able to account for its own rendering in its own terms, a desire for which Kelly can be commended.

Constructive alternativism

The dominant trend Kelly was working against was an “accumulative fragmentalism” position that assumed the world is a big puzzle and we can figure it out by fitting together different aspects of it piece by piece. The assumption is that once we get one piece in place with another -- getting it “right” -- then we just need to keep adding pieces to the puzzle until it is complete. In contrast, the constructive alternative position assumes that each time a new “piece” is added, we have to reorder other aspects to integrate the new piece into the existing framework. Further, different “pieces” could be put together/construed in multiple, different, and legitimate ways. This does not imply a relativism, because a particular way of construing may be more useful given particular constraints and enablements of the situation. The particular way of construing was not a static object for Kelly; rather, he was concerned with how individuals constructed alternative ways of understanding and acting in the world.

Focus on process

The focus on a “how” question implies a concern for process, which represents a second intersection with affirmative postmodern thinking. For his purposes, Kelly viewed the person not as an object that is temporarily in a state of motion, but is herself a form of motion (see Mair, 1977, p. 141). Kelly’s basic postulate was that “a person’s processes are psychologically channelized by the ways in which [s]he anticipates events” (Kelly, 1970, p. 9). This postulate implies that Kelly was not so concerned with the construct system as a static set of dichotomous oppositional pairings, but more about how the individual construed events according to the *channeling* of these multiple, overlapping constructs.

Individuality and range corollary

This individual construal process, Kelly argues, differs from one person to another in the way [s]he anticipate events (Kelly, 1970). Although even affirmatives would be skeptical of the lack of attention that Kelly gives to sociality (a point discussed below), Bourdieu’s notion of the habitus would be consistent with this subject-specific corollary. Further, the range corollary provides for a more local -- rather than a more general, grand, and universal -- rendering of a construct since a particular construct is relevant and

convenient to only construe a finite range of events.

### Accounts for fragmentation

The individual Kelly proposes, defined primarily by the way she anticipates events, including herself, is not necessarily unitary and consistent. Rather, Kelly suggests that a person may employ various subsystems of construing which may be incompatible or contradictory with each other. Thus, Kelly allows for the possibility of a fragmented view of identity, not imposing a totalizing framework that assumes the subject is always logical, rational, and coherent. Working within the Kellian tradition, Mair (1977) employs the metaphor that self is not unitary but can be understood as a community of multiple selves.

### Dichotomous constructs and self-other relations

Mair, drawing on the dichotomy corollary, interprets Kelly to be saying that the self refers to a collection of events that are alike in particular ways, yet simultaneously and necessarily different in those same ways. The ways the events are alike is what Kelly terms the self. For Kelly, self is always self/other or self/not-self; self cannot exist in isolation because a construct is always defined in such a way that it is similar to one thing and simultaneously different from another. And as Mair (1977) eloquently states, the structure of the self “through and from which a person acts in relation to events at any time is *realised only in others or as otherness*. In this sense, we necessarily need ‘others’ to realise or become our ‘selves’” (p. 147). Further, Mair argues that what we understand to be the self and other is only a convenience that people construct based on the exigencies of the moment.

### Invitational nature of language and sociality corollary

Although there are probably many other points of productive intersection between Kelly and postmodern thinking, the purpose of this paper is not to provide an exhaustive review. Instead, the purpose is to begin a conversation about these intersections. However, there is one more intersection that also engenders a point of struggle between Kelly and postmodernist critiques and this concerns

Kelly's (lack of) emphasis concerning language and sociality. It seems that the most salient argument Kelly made concerning language was its hypothetical or invitational mood (Kelly, 1969b). For Kelly, no matter how imposing language seems to be, it is always an invitation -- thus not an imposition -- to view things in a particular way. An alternative way of articulating this point is that a person can always choose to resist or refuse to accept the invitation that another person offers through language. This has considerable implications for the affirmative postmodern project of reconstituting the subject with an active sense of agency and the ability to resist. To a skeptical postmodernist, of course, language is very much imposing and constraining in the way it positions subjects -- for the skeptic, language uses subjects more so than the subject could ever possibly use language.

Since language is a social phenomenon, not owned by any one individual, it is useful here to raise the issue of sociality as it surfaces in Kelly's corollary. The sociality corollary states that to the extent a person construes the process of an other, she or he may play a role is a social process with that other person (Kelly, 1970). Relatedly, the commonality corollary argues that to the extent a person construes experience in a similar manner to another person, their psychological processes are similar. However, Kelly does not emphasize the role that communication and language play in this social process, although his work has certainly been extended productively in this area (Duck, 1994).

### **Responding to Kelly's challenge...**

The (lack of) emphasis that Kelly places on language, communication, and sociality is understandable given his psychological orientation, but this lacuna is not well received by postmodern tendencies. Dennis Mumby (1997) offers four "postmodern communication conditions" that will be used to frame an elaboration/reformulation of personal construct theory, and thus responding to Kelly's challenge of constructive alternativism for his theory. The conditions Mumby identifies are: 1) communication is (im)possible; 2) communication is political; 3) communication is for self-de(con)struction; and 4) communication is subjectless. I will discuss these in reverse order.

Communication is subjectless

This postmodern communication condition is not a move to eradicate the subject, but a “decentering” move in that it takes us away from a subject/speaker-centered view of communication, and allows us to see how the social subject is always already constructed through discursive practices and thus open to change. Communication, then, is not simply the effect of a speaking subject, but subjectivity is more complexly the effect of communication. Mumby draws on Althusser’s (1971) notion of hailing, or interpellation, to show how subjectivity is produced through multiple discursive systems which situate people and provide interpretive frames to make sense of self-other relationships and their world. Such discursive systems include the law, family, organizations, mass-mediated systems, gender, class, etc. For example, at least in the U.S., before a baby even is delivered to “enter the world” parents may seek to discover its sex (a gendered discursive system), find out if it is healthy (a discursive system involving the institution of medicine), may give the baby a name so that the parents have a way of constructing sense out of the new social being, etc. After the baby is born, the parents refer to it by name, respond to the baby in particular ways, continuing the process of interpellation, or hailing the baby into the social world of the parents and the larger social world. This event is thoroughly a social process which may even draw back on the parents’ social imaginings growing up about what it would be like to be parents and how to raise a child.

This subjectless view of communication further argues that “meaning or reality does not reside in people’s heads but rather in the complexly articulated systems of discourse within which people are always situated” (Mumby, 1997, p. 21). Again, this position does not deny that social actors act intentionally (see Ellis, 1991 for the argument that communication and intentionally must be inseparable), but that intentionality is not privileged nor is the only interesting aspect of communicative practices. A lengthy quotation from Weedon (1987) elaborates this point:

The fixing of meaning in society and the realization of the implications of particular versions of meaning in forms of social organization and the distribution of social power rely on the discursive constitution of subject positions from which individuals actively interpret the world and by which they are themselves governed. It is the structures of discourses which determine the discursive constitution of individuals as subjects.... Individuals are both the *site* and *subjects* of discursive struggle for their identity. Yet the interpellation of

individuals as subjects within particular discourses is never final. It is always open to challenge. The individual is constantly subjected to discourse. (p. 97)

Although Kelly does not explicitly articulate this type of postmodern framework of discursive positioning, he may have not been too far from it if we understand two arguments. First, Mair's (1977) self/other discussion out of a Kellian tradition argues that we can conceptualize "self" not as the object of attention, but as a "base" from which people experience "other" events and act in the world (p. 146). He goes on to say that "each person can be considered as having as many 'selves' as [s]he has vantage points *from which* to act. Each of these possible 'selves' can be identified only as the person somehow steps away from that base of experiencing and makes it 'other' in relation to yet a further vantage point" (p. 146). The self is realized only as other in this continual slippage of positions within which persons seek to/necessarily experience themselves. "Thus when a person tries to turn around, so to speak, and experiences himself, he is engaged in treating himself as "other" in relation to, and from the perspective of, a further and now unidentified base. When we talk about 'self' or 'ourselves' we are more correctly referring to something 'other' than the experiencing centre from which our 'other selves' are being characterized" (pp. 146-147).

The "bases" from which social actors experience and act in the world can be understood as the discursively constructed subject positions that postmodernism wants to highlight. However, as Weedon argues, no positioning of the subject is final or finalizable, for this positioning process is open to challenge and resistance. Kelly accounts for this by noting the invitational mood of language as discussed above. No matter how imposing and dominating discursive systems position subjects, there is always at least some space to resist this interpellation process through awareness of the invitational mood of language. However, if we do not understand the way that discourse "speaks us" as social individuals, it becomes difficult to conceptualize "the extent to which intent is possible only because we are always already situated within systems of discourse that precede and exceed us as communicators" (p. 22).

Communication is for self-de(con)struction

Stuart Hall (1985) argues that it is only from within the discursive systems of cultural representation that social actors experience their world. It is only out of this positioning within “codes of intelligibility” and “schemes of interpretation” that “experience” is possible, and thus, it is not possible to experience social reality outside ideological categories of representation (p. 105). Mumby (1997) takes this point seriously to argue that the project for postmodern communication studies is to deconstruct the communicative and political practices through which identities or subjectivities are constructed, and whose interests are (not) served by privileging these constructions over other alternative constructions (see p. 22). Rather than focus on the constructive process, Stan Deetz (1992) argues that the purpose of communication as social practice “is to overcome one’s fixed subjectivity, one’s conceptions, one’s strategies, to be opened to the indeterminacy of people and the external environment” (p. 341), to see how our sense of identity are subject, or vulnerable, to the forces of other discursive possibilities that continually challenge who we are (see Mumby, p, 20). Again, however, this may not be too far from what Kelly (1970) was pointing to in terms of his modulation corollary. This corollary states that the variation within a person’s construing system is limited by its permeability (or lack of fixity) of the constructs. With Kelly’s therapeutic tendencies, he often encouraged his patients to construct more open, permeable alternatives to being in the world. Interestingly, however, this process was materialized through the discursive practices between patient and therapist, a process that Kelly seemed to take for granted. Again, we see that Kelly was very much “on to” various ideas that I and other authors have labelled “postmodern.”

The possibilities of alternative discursive constructions does not, however, imply that subjects are always (re)constituted in every interactional “moment,” otherwise it would be very difficult to get around in our day-to-night lives. Mumby argues that the way we tend to experience our lives as relatively stable is through a process of discursive sedimentation. That is, subjects are products of more or less sedimented and institutionalized systems of discourse that provide the frame for ongoing experience. It is this process of sedimentation that renders subjects more or less

(un)aware and (un)reflective toward their constructions of the world. Mumby goes on to say that because we are “sutured” to more dominant, institutional (or, less permeable) ways of construing, communication is often understood to be simply the expression of what is already sedimented in our heads (p. 20). Instead of this reproductive and representational view of language, the condition that communication is for self-de(con)struction highlights the productive and constitutive nature of the relationship among self-other-world. Of course, many social forms (for example, an organization, or “a relationship”) are reproduced in our everyday interactions but the key point here is that this “ain’t necessarily so,” that there are alternative ways of constructing/becoming in the world. Thus, this view centers communication as a way to construct these alternative worlding-efforts.

The language Kelly provides can also be helpful here. If, in the basic postulate, we substitute “channelizing” for sedimentation, and understand that the ways people anticipate events is, to a greater or lesser degree, the product of discursive formulations, we can arrive at a very similar point to Mumby’s postmodern perspective. The experience corollary suggests that people’s construal processes vary to the extent that they construe replications and patterns in events. Further, the modulation corollary highlights that certain ways of construing will vary based on their permeability, or openness to alternatives. With these insights, we can see that much of social life tends to be reproduced or replicated, and that to the extent that people construe their lives in routine, repetitive ways (engage in communicative practices that reproduce the social order), their processes will be less permeably channelized or sedimented.

### Communication is political

That this sedimentation or channelizing process occurs discursively is related to the argument Mumby wants to make concerning the political nature of communicative practices. Every way of articulating is simultaneously a way of not articulating (Burke, 1966) and, along with the process of sedimentation, this speaks to the issue that many communicative efforts are devoted to “fix” and reproduce certain discursive systems of particular groups’ or individuals’ interests over

others. Mumby critiques social constructionist positions that recognize how communication constitutes meanings and identities, but do not address the inherent power dimensions that go along with this process. We can see this process of “fixing” at a broader social level where certain groups engage in communicative practices that articulate/fix/reproduce marriage as a heterosexual institution and also at the social level of an interpersonal relationship where parties engage jointly in actions that privilege particular ways over others of viewing their relationship.

This process of fixing is inherently power-laden, but not in the sense of static, monolithic, top-down power where one group or person exercises power over and against another, although people may experience power this way. To the extent that people experience power in this coercive, imposing fashion, it is due to Foucault’s (1979) disciplinary notion of power “as a series of capillary mechanisms that pervade the entire social body, constructing identity and defining what counts as knowledge” or a particular way of construing/being in the world (Mumby, 1997, p. 20). Revisiting Mumby’s point that communication is for self-de(con)struction, the postmodern communication project as a discourse of vulnerability suggests that we look for the articulations of communication, identity, power, and knowledge not to the end of substituting one particular world-construing effort with another, but to open the “possibilities and consequences of various articulations, disciplinary practices, and communication choices” (p. 20).

Kelly’s notion of choice and the dichotomy corollary can be extended here in this discussion of power and how communication is political. Della Pollock and Robbie Cox (1991) argue that due to being positioned by discursive, ideological systems, “we are inescapably bound to ‘violent hierarchies’ of meaning, by which any meaning is stable only to the extent that it effectively suppresses its ‘other’” (p. 174). If we understand 1) the dichotomous nature of constructs where there are two oppositional poles, 2) that people choose alternatives (one end of the pole over the other) in this dichotomous construct (the choice corollary), 3) these choices are made within a construct system that exhibits ordinal relationships among constructs (organization corollary), we begin to intersect with Pollock and Cox’s point here. However, Kelly may have over-estimated the extent to which people choose one pole over the other for themselves. Kelly assumed that there was

an equal chance that people would choose one alternative over the other, although others in the Kellian tradition argue that the ratio may be 68% to 32% (Adams–Weber, 1970). One way of accounting for this discrepancy could be to look at how one pole is socially marked, while the other end is socially unmarked, and that people are constrained to mean, or choose, one pole over the other due to the marking and “fixing” engendered by discursive systems. This ordinal relationship may be “violent,” literally or figuratively. Thus, the “choice” corollary is inherently power-laden in that individuals “choose” marked alternatives of dichotomous constructs to the extent that they are constrained to do so by their social systems they exist within. Of course, it is important to note that people exercise “choice” here, but that this choice may not be conscious or intentional due to the fixing and constraining facets of discursive systems. Further, it is important to highlight the dialectical (maybe paradoxical?) relationship between enabling and constraints; that is, to the extent that persons are constrained discursively to act in particular ways, this may also be the extent to which they subjectively experience this “constraint” as enabling and “natural.” John Solas (1992), who engaged in an ideological critique of the Kellian tradition, is worth quoting here on this point:

In contrast to Kelly’s injunction, “If you do not know what is wrong with a person, ask him or her to tell you” (1955, pp. 322–323), deconstruction requires the “vigilant seeking-out of those ‘aporias,’ blind-spots or moments of self-contradiction where [a person] betrays the tension between... what [he or she] manifestly *means to say* and what [he or she] is nonetheless *constrained to mean*” (Norris, 1987, p. 19). (p. 387)

### Communication is (im)possible

Given that this paper stresses the importance of highlighting communicative practices, the position that communication is (im)possible seems to be counter-intuitive and somewhat self-effacing. Of course, this would be completely consistent with postmodernism as a discourse of vulnerability, and it represents what I (and maybe Mumby) consider to be the starting point for a postmodern theory of communication. That is, we must theorize communication from what it lacks or is unable to accomplish. Mumby draws on Chang (1988), Hall (1985), and Laclau and Mouffe (1985) to formulate this postmodern communication condition that notes that the postmodern social

condition (or postmodernity) is not a completely fixed, sutured, unified totality. Rather, the social condition “consists of a complexly articulated set of discourses that attempt to ‘fix’ meaning in particular ways for social actors – but this meaning is always, by definition, partial, incomplete, and subject to slippage and transformation” (p. 16). Communicative practices always select certain aspects of social reality, deflecting others, and reflects/constructs/privileges those aspects that are selected (Burke, 1966; Carl, 1997).

This process of articulation stops, fixes, or arrests the flow of differences to construct a center, but this articulating always fails to account for the totality and closure it seeks, and thus communication is its own impossibility. Further, centers are always shifting and subject to resistance from the margins. Mumby states that “communication is thus (im)possible in that it simultaneously is stable (creating shared, relatively fixed, discourses) and unstable (continually articulating the possibilities for its own transformation). In this sense, shared discourses always embody (and are defined by) ‘otherness’” (p. 16), a similar point concerning the self that Mair (1977) articulated from a Kellian tradition. With this focus on (im)possibility, communication researchers can focus on the processes of discursive struggles between social groups and social individuals, investigating “the process by which social actors and institutional forms attempt to arrest, fix, and transform the constant overflowing of every discourse” (p. 18).

### **Communicating and relating via a postmodern(ized) Kelly**

Thus far in this paper, I have attempted to illustrate points of harmonious and clashing intersections between George Kelly’s personal construct theory and postmodern critiques (drawn heavily from discussions by Rosenau and Mumby). In this closing section, I will work from Mumby’s four postmodern communication conditions -- communication is (im)possible, political, for self-de(con)struction, and subjectless -- to briefly re-articulate an example of an interpersonal/relational communication project informed by a postmodern(ized) Kelly.

Steve Duck (1994) argues that two minds come together in a social context where through the social action of talking, “initial commonalities are successively related to revised constructions

of another's system of meaning and that a final goal of relating partners is shared meaning" (p. 98). What would this scenario look like via the postmodern communication conditions? First, the goal of shared meaning would never be (able to be) accomplished due to the (im)possibility of communication. Any communicative attempts to secure a sutured, shared reality between the two social actors would always "slip," and collapse on itself. This slippage, however, does not have to be viewed in a negative light however. For it is this continual slippage that allows people to keep communicating (and failing) in the process. Communicative "stabs" at a shared reality will always end up displacing other versions, keeping the movement complex and alive.

Second, communicative practices are political in that a particular version of the shared meaning is privileged over other alternative constructions, and may be in the best interests of one person more than the other at any given time-space. Social actors would be seen as being in a struggle over shared meanings for their relationship. This "struggle" could be playful, light, and relatively harmonious, while it may also be more hostile, dark, even abusive. Further, it can be fruitfully argued that people may not be in the "same" relationship. For example, in the case of a heterosexual marriage, complex discursive systems position the man and woman differentially. The man may have "his relationship" or relational-constructing processes, while the woman has "her relationship" (Acitelli, 1993). However, it is important to note that people are not just positioned by a gendered discursive system, but by multiple and possibly conflicting systems (Kramarae, 1996). With this move, we can take a subject-specific concept like Bourdieu's habitus or Kelly's personal construct system to illustrate the individual's relational constructing-process, but also understand that this system is only possible given the process of interpellation into subject positions that serve as shifting bases from which people can communicatively act in the world. This last point highlights the decentering of the subject, but not its eradication, and presents Mumby's notion of communication as subjectless.

"His" relationship and "her" relationship are not the only versions of this complex social form however. The relationship is a social entity that also exists through these discursive interactions within the social minds of the two people, between the two people, and also as it is constructed

through communicative interactions with other members of their social network. However, let's not get too focused on constructive efforts, as Mumby wants to highlight the de(con)structive effects of communication. Discursive interactions attempt to "fix" the meaning for a particular relationship (at the intrapersonal, dyadic, network, etc. levels), and these meanings are actively resisted. For example, two men who jointly construct their relationship as lovers may be constructed by their parents as "just good friends," which privileges heterosexual love as possible and legitimate, but not homosexual love. The de(con)structive move here is to look at how all parties are engaged in constructing the two men's relationship and whose ways of construing are privileged at given interactional moments. Of course, this de(con)struction does not just take place because the men are gay and often marginalized in contemporary U.S. society. Relationships between male and female friends are also subject to others construing that their relationship is "really" something "more" than friends, implying a sexual component that may exist to a greater or lesser extent (Werking, 1997). Further, communication as de(con)struction also occurs at the "dyadic" level, in interactions between the two relaters, as they necessarily strive for new, possible ways of articulating their relationship so that it is not static, stale, or confining to either of them.

By briefly working through one relational communication example, we can see how Mumby's postmodern communication conditions could be applied to research practices. This illustration is indicative of the fact that insights from both Kelly and postmodern thought can be extremely rich. Postmodernism brings to Kelly an understanding that the construal process of people is highly discursive and power-laden, while Kelly provides a subject-specific and process-oriented framework that facilitates a re-working of the modernist subject. This paper is one (more) articulation exploring these conflicting and mutually informing intersections.

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