Construing a “Perfect Knight”: A Personal Construct Investigation of Mass Murder

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On July 22, 2011, Anders Behring Breivik emailed a compendium entitled, “2083: A Declaration of European Independence,” to more than 1,000 addresses before bombing government buildings in Oslo and attacking a Labor Party youth camp, killing 77 people. This article adopts a credulous attitude and analyzes a personal section of his compendium from a personal construct psychology perspective, as if it were a self-characterization. Its aim is to understand further the construing processes of individuals who become “radicalized” or engage in acts of extreme violence, on the assumption that such understanding is a prerequisite for preventative and restorative strategies. The personal construct formulation of Breivik’s construing and actions is compared with the analysis of terrorism by an historian, Roger Griffin.

On July 22, 2011, Anders Behring Breivik wrote the last entry in a 1,516-page compendium entitled, “2083: A Declaration of European Independence” (Berwick, 2011), on which he had worked for nine years, before emailing it to more than 1000 addresses. Within less than 2 hours he bombed a major government building in Oslo, causing eight deaths, and then shot to death 69 people at a Labor Party youth camp on Utoya Island. Atrocities such as those’ committed by Breivik may appear incomprehensible and cause one to reach for constructs of evil or mental illness in a vain attempt to understand their perpetrators and more generally restore a sense of meaning. However, although such constructs may provide a rationale for either punishment or psychiatric treatment of the individual concerned, they rarely offer more than a reassuring illusion that his or her actions can be comprehended. Indeed, as indicated by George Kelly, the primary purpose of construing and treating the perpetrator in this way may be to confirm that, “he really is not one of us” (Kelly, 1955, p. 506). By contrast, Kelly’s personal construct theory takes a “credulous approach” by attempting to view, and make sense of, the individual’s choices and actions in terms of his or her personal view of the world. Such an approach, in which the client’s views are taken “at face value,” and he or she is regarded, “like the proverbial customer,” as “always right” (Kelly, 1955, p. 322), may not be too challenging when the client’s construing and actions do not deviate too far from social norms.

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However, the limits of credibility may be tested when the approach is applied with individuals who have been responsible for major loss of human life, as has been explored in a series of studies of people ranging from serial killers to a concentration camp commandant (Reed et al., 2014; Winter, 2006, 2007; Winter et al., 2007). In these studies, it has been argued that attempts to understand the constraining of such people are a prerequisite for any measures directed at prevention of future atrocities of this sort. As Nowinski (2004) remarked in considering cases of mass murder,

People may, and sometimes do, willingly embrace an identity and choose a pathway that, when viewed from the outside, is dark and destructive. We need to understand the process by which individuals opt for a dark vision if we hope to prevent such choices and their consequences. (p. 521)

This article extends this work by exploring whether such a perspective can help to elucidate the course of action that led to the carnage inflicted by Anders Breivik in July 2011. First, however, we will consider the psychiatric perspective on Breivik.

**PSYCHIATRIC DIAGNOSIS**

The first psychiatric evaluations of Breivik following his arrest concluded that he was “psychotic” (Tørrissen & Aspaas, 2011, p. 239) and thus not legally responsible for his actions. This raised severe doubts and, although the first reaction of the prosecution agencies was to ignore these, a second psychiatric committee (Husby & Sørheim, 2011) was eventually appointed that concluded Breivik was “not psychotic” (p. 273) and thus responsible. The first committee noted “a reduced mimicry, few movements on the chair, signifying a light psychomotor retardation” (Tørrissen & Aspaas, 2011, p. 89), whereas other psychiatrists from the same hospital interpreted this as due to Breivik having to wear handcuffs and other restrictive devices.

Although Breivik was eventually judged to be responsible and therefore sentenced to 21 years of imprisonment, the court initially had a curious reaction to the different psychiatric evaluations. No questions were posed to the first psychiatric team, but several were raised with the second team, whose conclusion was not directly acknowledged but “noted.” The disagreement between the two teams is yet another indication that psychiatric diagnoses are mere constructions, likely influenced by political considerations. As we will see, Breivik himself anticipated that there would probably be an attempt to discount his views by regarding him as insane and there are, of course, numerous instances of political dissidents—for example, in the former Soviet Union—being consigned to psychiatric hospitals for this very reason. In another Norwegian case, the Nobel laureate Knut Hamsun, a confirmed Nazi during World War II, was judged “not responsible,” and thus not imprisoned (Żagar, 2009). What happened in the Breivik case may be similar to what happened then: “Someone has talked together,” as a useful Norwegian expression goes. Might it have been too threatening to see that Breivik, after all, is in some ways still like all of us?

A psychiatric assessment may also be a means of ensuring that an offender suffers the fate that public opinion determines he or she deserves. For example, the British serial killer Ian Brady, who initially spent many years in prison (and wants to return there), is now consigned to a maximum security psychiatric hospital, despite there being little or no indication that he merits a psychiatric diagnosis. The reason for this is that he wants to starve himself to death, and although he would have the right to take this politically inconvenient action in prison, he has no such right
in the psychiatric hospital, where he has been force fed for many years (Chancellor, 2006). That a psychiatric diagnosis may also be rejected when it is contrary to public opinion is indicated by the case of another British serial killer, Peter Sutcliffe, the “Yorkshire Ripper.” Despite being diagnosed as a paranoid schizophrenic by four psychiatrists, the judge did not accept that Sutcliffe was not responsible for his actions and he was sentenced to life imprisonment for murder, as the public had demanded. Three years later, his psychotic state eventually led him to be transferred to a psychiatric hospital, although again it has been suggested that political considerations influenced this decision (Bilton, 2003).

**TRANSITIVE DIAGNOSIS**

Kelly (1955) was critical of traditional psychiatric nosology, with its pigeonholing of people in fixed diagnostic categories. He viewed the person with psychological problems, just like anyone else, as primarily concerned with the anticipation of his or her world and as using a system of bipolar personal constructs to make predictions, which may be validated or invalidated by experiences of subsequent events. The optimally functioning person essentially moves through a series of experience cycles (Kelly, 1970) involving formulating hypotheses, or constructions, testing these out, and if necessary revising them; whereas in the person with a psychological disorder, this process becomes blocked and a construction “is used repeatedly in spite of consistent invalidation” (Kelly, 1955, p. 831). An understanding of the development of a person’s construing, and consequent behavior, is therefore likely to involve consideration of accounts of events in his or her life, as these “are the validational evidence against which he won and lost his wagers, against which he tested his personal constructs” (Kelly, 1955, p. 688).

Kelly’s alternative to psychiatric diagnosis was “transitive diagnosis,” in which an attempt is made to elucidate the avenues of movement open to an individual by using a set of diagnostic constructs which, unlike psychiatric constructs, “are neither good nor bad, healthy nor unhealthy, adaptive nor maladaptive” (Kelly, 1955, p. 453). Essentially, then, a formulation is provided of the client’s way of construing the world using the same dimensions that may be used to understand anyone else’s construing (Winter & Proctor, 2013).

Some of Kelly’s diagnostic constructs concern aspects of a person’s construing that are at a low level of awareness, perhaps being suspended or held in abeyance, if their “implications are intolerable” (Kelly, 1955, p. 474) in that they are incompatible with the rest of the person’s construct system. Others concern the hierarchical structure of the person’s construing, in which superordinate constructs carry more implications and core constructs are “those by which he maintains his identity and existence” (Kelly, 1955, p. 482, italics in original). Another set of diagnostic constructs involves strategies used by the individual in an attempt to make better sense of his or her world. For example, in dilation, the person who is faced with incompatible constructions extends his or her perceptual field in an attempt to reorganize the construct system at a more comprehensive level; whereas in constriction, conversely, the perceptual field is delimited in an attempt to minimize such incompatibilities. Another contrasting pair of strategies is loose and tight construing, the former involving vague and variable, and the latter precise predictions. Diagnostic constructs concerning control are set out in Kelly’s (1955) 

**circumspection-preemption-control cycle,** in which the person considers the issues involved in a decision, selects the most superordinate issue or construct, and chooses how to construe an event in terms of this construct. Other diagnostic constructs concern “emotions,” which Kelly (1955) associated with the awareness of
transitions in construing. Thus, threat occurs when one becomes aware of an imminent comprehensive change in core construing; anxiety occurs when one finds one’s world unconstructable; and guilt is experienced when one perceives a dislodgment from one’s core role, one’s characteristic way of interacting with others. Aggressiveness involves actively elaborating one’s perceptual field and developing new choices; whereas hostility occurs when, faced with invalidation, the person manipulates the world to fit in with his or her constructions rather than vice versa. Transitive diagnosis may also be concerned with the content of construing, such as dilemmas or inconsistencies in the person’s view of the world.

RATIONALE FOR A PERSONAL CONSTRUCT FORMULATION

We now attempt to adopt a credulous approach to, and formulate a transitive diagnosis of, Breivik as he portrayed himself in his compendium. Our focus is on an extraordinary section of the compendium described as an interview with a Justiciar Knight Commander of the PCCTS, Knights Templar. Breivik stated in the compendium that this interview was “conducted over three sessions,” that “it might be considered irrelevant by many people,” but that he decided to include it because he “personally would enjoy reading a similar interview with another resistance fighter” (Berwick, 2011, p. 1350). In it, Breivik was clearly both interviewer and interviewee, and it is therefore similar to a self-characterization, as developed by Kelly (1955), in that Breivik provided a description of himself as if written by someone who knew him intimately and sympathetically. As in interviews with celebrities in glossy magazines, or star players in football programs, we are even given a list of his favorite items in various categories, ranging from drinks to films to eau de toilette. We are also told which people he would like to meet; these include the Pope, Vladimir Putin (whom he describes as someone whose enemy he would not wish to be), and Radovan Karadjik (whom he considers an honorable crusader and European war hero).

Our initial intention had been, as in previous work (Winter et al., 2007), to analyze this more personal section of the compendium as a textual grid, an adaptation of Kelly’s (1955) repertory grid technique in which “elements” (usually people) and descriptors of these elements are extracted from a text. A matrix is then formed indicating which descriptors apply to which elements. However, the grid contained too many blank cells for this to be a meaningful approach, indicating that Breivik’s descriptors (construct poles) were each applied to very few elements. The constructs concerned may have had a limited range of convenience, only being relevant to few elements, or may have been used in a “lopsided” fashion, most elements being allocated to a particular pole of each construct. As an alternative, we therefore adopted a purely qualitative approach by focusing on the insights provided by the personal section of the compendium into the validating history of Breivik’s construing, and his possible responses to invalidation, as well as applying some of Kelly’s diagnostic constructs to his view of himself and the world.

VALIDATIONAL HISTORY

Childhood and Family

Breivik’s interview with himself described what would seem to be disruptive and potentially invalidating experiences relating to his family: his parents’ divorce when he was a year old;
his father and stepmother, whom he visited regularly, losing the case for his custody; their own divorce when he was 12 years old; his father subsequently “isolating himself” and saying that he was not ready to reestablish contact with him when Breivik attempted to do so; a stepfather whom he described as a “very likeable and good guy” but also “a primitive . . . beast”; and a mother and step-sister who developed complications from untreated diseases. It may be surprising, therefore, that Breivik considered that he “had a privileged upbringing with responsible and intelligent people around” him; that he did not really have “any negative experiences in” his “childhood in any way”; and that he “came from a typical Norwegian middle-class family” (Berwick, 2011, p. 1387). Could it be that he had suspended some constructions concerning his childhood because their implications were intolerable?

His descriptions of his childhood generally indicated that, rather than construing his family members negatively, he tended to reserve his criticism for the socio-political systems that he saw as influencing them. Thus, he said he did “not approve of the super-liberal, matriarchal upbringing . . . as it completely lacked discipline and . . . contributed to feminism” him “to a certain degree” (Berwick, 2011, p. 1387), but he regarded this as part of a general “Marxist deconstruction of the nuclear family and feminisation of European men.” Similarly, he viewed his stepfather’s behavior as due to Marxist political doctrines that had caused a “complete breakdown of . . . ethical standards,” and stated that, although his sister and mother shamed their family, this was “a family that was broken in the first place due to secondary effects of the feminist/sexual revolution” (Berwick, 2011, p. 1174).

Breivik’s construing concerning political and social issues is in marked contrast to that of his family members, apart from his stepfather. This is most apparent in relation to his stepmother, whom he described as “a moderate cultural Marxist and feminist” who used to be a director in the Norwegian government organization responsible for granting permits to foreigners, who, in his view, were mostly Muslims. He regarded her as a “category B traitor,” who was “a willing . . . tool for the Multiculturalist Alliance in the indirect genocide of Norwegians through the continued Islamization of Norway.” As such, he said, “Although I care for her a great deal, I wouldn’t hold it against the” Knights Templar “if she was executed” (Berwick, 2011, p. 1434).

This passage again demonstrates Breivik’s distancing of himself from any personal animosity toward members of his family by viewing them as mere pawns of broader social and political groups, who should, if necessary, be impersonally “terminated” in the fight against these groups. Breivik’s construing here shows evidence of dilation for, as Kelly (1955) described, the person who uses this strategy “lumps his childhood with his future” and “sees vast ranges of events as possibly related” (p. 477).

Adolescence and Young Adulthood

The validational fortunes of Breivik’s construing in his adolescence and early adulthood are of particular interest because of the role played by Muslims in his experiences. For example, he described how his best friend was a Muslim, whom Breivik fully expected to follow his own path and the “Norwegian way” but instead came to resent Norwegian society and assault and harass ethnic Norwegians, including arranging a physical attack on Breivik. The invalidation of his construing of his friend led him to engage in major reconstruing and changes in his behavior. Prior to this incident, he had been involved in the hip hop community and the most active “tagger” (graffiti artist) in Oslo, gaining respect and the admiration of girls for these activities, the more
so the more reckless they were. He was a gang member who formed alliances with members of Muslim gangs to obtain protection and be allowed freedom of movement in Oslo. It is apparent that he admired many characteristics of the Muslim gang members that he felt were lacking in most ethnic Norwegians—namely, pride, a certain moral code, and “respect for people who respect themselves,” together with lack of respect for those who are not prepared to use violence. However, he had now reconstrued those whom he “used to call friends and allies” as the most “hypocritical, racist, and fascist” people he had ever met (Berwick, 2011, p. 1390).

In his compendium, Breivik chronicled eight personal experiences of assault or robbery, and numerous threats by Muslims, together with several serious assaults on people known to him. He also described how ethnic Norwegian “girls” admired the very characteristics in Muslim “boys” that he himself used to admire and viewed them as “superior” to ethnic Norwegian boys. In his view, the Muslims boys considered Norwegian girls as inferior whores who provided them with pleasure at a time when Muslim girls were “off limits.” Perhaps of particular significance was an incident in which he was surprised when a white Norwegian girl pushed past him in a queue, telling him to “MOVE—YOU PIECE OF SHIT” (Berwick, 2011, p. 1395, capitalized in the original). He responded in a similar manner, and was then threatened by four Muslim men who had been sitting with the girl. He described negotiating to offer the “Muslim whore” an apology. Although he presented this as a “deterrent strategy,” it must surely have been invalidating and humiliating for someone like Breivik, for whom it is apparent that female admiration was of considerable importance. Indeed, in view of his construing of recklessness as a “tagger” as leading to such admiration, it may not be inconceivable that he anticipated that this would also be achieved by his infinitely more reckless actions in July 2011.

Political Construing

As Eriksen (2012, p. 208) noted, Breivik’s ideological coming of age was within an anti-Muslim “discursive universe” in Norway. On breaking from the hip hop movement, he decided to dedicate his life to politics, joining the Progress Party, which espoused an anti-immigration cultural conservatism compatible with his own emerging political beliefs. However, he suffered further invalidation when his candidature for the Oslo City Council was not supported by the party’s youth organization. His anticipation that it would be possible to change the system democratically was also invalidated, for example, by the Progress Party being ridiculed. Therefore, he decided to leave conventional politics to take the course of armed resistance. His account of this process can clearly be viewed as following the stages of Kelly’s (1955) circumspection-preemption-control cycle.

The event that he considered “ripped the scales” for him in his decision was the Norwegian government’s support of the NATO bombing of Serbia when, as he said, “all” the Serbs “wanted” was to “drive Islam out” by deporting Muslims. Further validation of his construal of his government, and of the futility of involvement in conventional politics, was provided by several other incidents, and by continuing Muslim immigration. His conclusion was that “these suicidal traitors must be stopped” (Berwick, 2011, p. 1380).

Business Ventures

Breivik’s attempt to gain the “economic independence” that he required for the project on which he was embarking involved setting up a business, which he described as his proudest achievement
TABLE 1
ABC Model Analysis of Advantages and Disadvantages for Breivik of Being a European Resistance Fighter

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Construct poles</th>
<th>Construct poles</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a1.</td>
<td>a2.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>completely focus on tasks as part of European resistance movement</td>
<td>create a large family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b1.</td>
<td>b2.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>i)</td>
<td>i)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hard way</td>
<td>live easy life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ii)</td>
<td>ii)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sacrifice own life</td>
<td>enjoy all benefits of modern society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>iii)</td>
<td>iii)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>labeled as racist or bigot</td>
<td>avoid suffering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>iv)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>risk losing job</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>v)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>risk losing everything</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c1.</td>
<td>c2.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>i)</td>
<td>i)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cannot look kids in eyes</td>
<td>good man</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ii)</td>
<td>ii)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>suicidal</td>
<td>selfless</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>iii)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>don’t have guts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>iv)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>coward</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>v)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>apathetic hypocrite</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vi)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>don’t care</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vii)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>guilty</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>viii)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>miserable creature</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ix)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>no chance of being free</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The analysis considers the advantages and disadvantages of each pole (a1 and a2) of construct a. Construct poles b1 are construed disadvantages of a1, and construct poles b2 are construed advantages of a2. Construct poles c2 are construed advantages of a1, and construct poles c1 are construed disadvantages of a2.

in that it earned 4 million kroner. Although his business then went bankrupt, he again portrayed what might be thought to be a profoundly invalidating experience favorably, as a cost-efficient way of achieving his goal of obtaining enough funding for his operation.

RECONSTRUING

It is clear that as he moved through various experience cycles, Breivik engaged in considerable reconstruing—of Muslims, of his friends, of political parties, of his government, and in particular of himself. Indeed, he stated that his self of 15 years ago would view his current political beliefs as indicating that he was “a complete nut job” (Berwick, 2011, p. 1383), that he “had to completely reestablish” himself “on an existential level,” and that as a result, his current self is a better, more moral, and more responsible person than the “self centred fuck” (Berwick, 2011, p. 1406) that he used to be.²

Some of the choices he made during his process of reconstruing can be elucidated by Tschudi’s (1977) ABC model, in which the advantages and disadvantages of each pole of a construct are delineated. In Table 1, this model is used to explore Breivik’s construct of “focusing completely on the tasks of the European resistance movement” versus “creating a large family.” It can be seen that, although the former pole of this construct entailed numerous disadvantages, for example, involving sacrifice and risk, its advantage was that it allowed him to see himself as a good, selfless man, “driven by idealistic goals.” For example, he stated:
It’s human nature to be selfish, to seek admiration, love and affection. This is why very few people will have the self insight, the ideological and moral confidence and strength to act selflessly on behalf of their own countrymen on their own initiative without a solid hierarchical organisation or country supporting and encouraging them. We have taken these thankless tasks upon ourselves because we possess these traits; the self insight, the ideological and moral confidence and strength and we are willing to sacrifice our lives for our brothers and sisters, even though they will openly detest us. (Berwick, 2011, p. 1384)

He also stated, “my love for them exceeds my own self serving interests. That’s not the kind of person I used to be, but it’s the type of person I have become” (Berwick, 2011, p. 1403). He went on to construe himself in an even more grandiose way:

I will always know that I am perhaps the biggest champion of cultural conservatism, Europe has ever witnessed since 1950. I am one of many destroyers of cultural Marxism and as such; a hero of Europe, a savior of our people and of European Christendom—by default. A perfect example which should be copied, applauded and celebrated. The Perfect Knight I have always strived to be. A Justiciar Knight is a destroyer of multiculturalism, and as such; a destroyer of evil and a bringer of light. (Berwick, 2011, p. 1435)

Interestingly, in reflecting on his choices, he used a quote that was also used by serial killer Ian Brady (2001), in describing his own philosophy: “It is better to live one day as a lion, than one hundred years as a sheep” (Berwick, 2011, p. 1359).

A particular area in which Breivik must have had to reconstrue himself concerns his use of violence. In describing his experiences of conflict with Muslims as an adolescent, he pointed out that he did not do anything to provoke any of the incidents, except to reply to the girl who insulted him. Indeed, he stated, “as all my friends can attest to I wouldn’t be willing to hurt a fly and I have never used violence against others” (Berwick, 2011, p. 1395). One wonders how this can be reconciled with the carnage he eventually inflicted, and indeed with the violence that he advocated elsewhere in the compendium. To justify this, he stated, “there are situations in which cruelty is necessary, and refusing to apply necessary cruelty is a betrayal of the people whom you wish to protect,” and “it is better to kill too many than not enough, or you risk reducing the desired ideological impact of the strike” (Berwick, 2011, p. 846). His estimates of the number of victims—namely, around 45,000 cultural Marxists and multiculturalists killed and a million wounded—are based on a principle of “proportionality,” or equivalence with the number of victims of these groups themselves. In his view:

In many ways, morality has lost its meaning in our struggle. The question of good and evil is reduced to one simple choice. . . . Survive or perish. Some innocent will die in our operations as they are simply at the wrong place at the wrong time. Get used the idea (sic). (Berwick, 2011, p. 846)

It appears that, perhaps like many members of armed forces engaged in the horrors of warfare, he was able to deal with fragmentation and inconsistency in his construing by regarding his actions as beyond the realm of conventional moral constructs. He was thus able, as he stated at his trial, to consider that he “acted out of goodness, not evil” and that “under normal conditions I am a very nice person.” He was also able to avoid the guilt that, in Kelly’s terms, would accompany dislodgment from his core role of being an essentially good human being.

In justifying attacks on mosques for women during Ramadan, Breivik clearly displayed Kellyan hostility in that, if Muslims are inconveniently not already showing what he regards as their “true
face,” their anticipated response to such acts will enable constructions of them as radicalized, violent Jihadists to be validated. Thus, he stated that “the European Islamic Ummah is our most potent weapon in our fight against the establishment. Our objective in Phase 1 and 2 will be to manipulate this force by contributing to radicalise Muslim individuals.” He continued:

This can be achieved by provoking and inciting them to choose the path of Jihad prematurely. The most efficient way of infuriating Muslims is to strike at their most prized “possessions,” their women. Through deadly and strategic precision attacks (pin prick attacks) we will incite them to engage in violent riots and various forms of Jihadi activities prematurely. The media will have no choice but to cover it, and by doing so contribute to radicalise more Europeans. This spiral will polarise societies and more Europeans will come to learn the “true face of Islam” and multiculturalism.” (Berwick, 2011, p. 930)

CONSTRUCTION

Although, as we have seen, Breivik sometimes used the contrasting strategy of dilation, his major strategy for dealing with incompatibilities in his self-construing appeared to be one of constriction, drawing in his perceptual field. His isolation and asceticism at times since deciding to take the route of armed struggle, including a year spent playing war games on his computer, would seem to be indicative of such constriction. His actions and ultimate goal can also be seen as a constrictive response to his vision of the enforced dilation of the “Islamization of Europe.” Thus, he stated that “the Islamic world . . . should be completely isolated and Islam reclassified and banned as a fascist/imperialistic and genocidal political ideology” (Berwick, 2011, p. 1384). His proposed isolation of the Islamic world would essentially exclude it from the “perceptual field,” in much the same way as he described the division between East and West Oslo, in which “luckily, a majority of Muslim savages . . . live on the East side of town” (Breivik, 2011, p. 1395), whereas “we usually chose to stay in our neighbourhoods on Oslo West.”

Constriction is also evident in his attitudes toward women. He stated that because far fewer women than men support his cause, “we must significantly reduce these women’s influence on political issues relating to national security, social structures, penal policies, border control, immigration, assimilation,” and “certain cultural issues,” and “it is essential that we prevent our women from propagating their suicidal compassion in ‘safe and more controlled environments’ in the future. Sure, this is sexist policies but nature itself is sexist and you cannot defy primary natural laws” (Berwick, 2011, p. 1357).

Murder can in some cases be regarded as a constrictive act (Winter, 2007), in which the person effectively narrows his or her perceptual field by removing “incompatible” elements, in Breivik’s case “traitors” who were promoting “an Islamic colonisation of Europe.” In referring to “cultural Marxists” he stated, “We will eventually annihilate every single one of them” (Breivik, 2011, p. 1382). Lower level, or Grade C, traitors would be removed from the perceptual field by deportation.

THREAT

Underlying much of Breivik’s view of the world, as well as his actions, appears to be a profound sense of threat, in which “the awareness of an imminent comprehensive change in one’s core
structures” (Kelly, 1955, p. 489, italics in the original) is of European values being submerged by multiculturalism and Islamization. As he said, “fighting for your people’s survival, when threatened, is the most logical thing to do to. Defending your people and culture from genocide is the most basic and recognised human right and one of few causes actually worth dying for” (Breivik, 2011, p. 1383).

Another type of threat experienced by Breivik is perhaps that described in Landfield’s (1954) exemplification hypothesis that “a person would be perceived as threatening if he appeared to exemplify what the perceiver once was but no longer is” (Kelly, 1955, p. 490). As we have seen, as a youth there was much commonality between Breivik’s construing and that of the Muslim young men with whom he associated. It is conceivable, then, that part of the threat Muslims posed to him was that they reminded him of a former self that he had outgrown. Indeed, he still saw commonalities between himself and militant Islamists, for example, in terms of isolationism, belief in shock tactics, and belief in an afterlife. For example, he wrote, “We both share one common goal. They want control over their own countries in the Middle East and we want control of our own countries in Western Europe” (Breivik, 2011, p. 966). Paradoxically, this led him to envisage the possibility of collaboration with Jihadists to achieve joint aims, effectively recreating the “security alliances” that he formed with Muslim gangs as an adolescent.

ANTICIPATIONS

Breivik’s compendium contains numerous anticipations about the actions on which he was intending to embark and their consequences. He saw these as a “shock tactic” designed to do ideological damage and “wake up the masses,” and this anticipation seems to have been validated to some extent by media coverage, including discussion of the ideas expressed in his compendium. He wrote that arrest of a “European resistance fighter” following an operation will “mark the initiation of the propaganda phase” and the subsequent “trial offers . . . a stage to the world” (Berwick, 2011, p. 947). However, he anticipated that there would be an attempt to discredit the resistance fighter by, for example, applying psychiatric labels to him: as he said, “the cultural Marxists and the full force of the European multiculturalist mainstream media will do everything within their power to portray people like me as nothing more than delusional nut jobs” (Berwick, 2011, p. 1383). As we have seen, this anticipation was validated by his first psychiatric assessment following his arrest. He wrote in detail about statements that should be made at a trial, but although his anticipations of his postoperation situation are highly elaborated, they are not without evidence of anxiety. For example, he stated:

I have an extremely strong psyche (stronger than anyone I have ever known) but I am seriously contemplating that it is perhaps biologically impossible to survive the mental, perhaps coupled with physical torture, I will be facing without completely breaking down on a psychological level. I guess I will have to wait and find out. (Berwick, 2011, p. 1435)

The views Breivik expressed in his compendium clearly served the purpose of providing a considerable degree of structure to his construing in what might otherwise have appeared a chaotic, uncertain world. It is small wonder, then, that the faintest awareness of any possibility that these views could be dismantled by interrogations following his arrest would lead him to anticipate the possibility of complete psychological breakdown.
DISCUSSION

A personal construct analysis of Breivik’s interview with himself indicates that he experienced invalidation of a rather idyllic construction of his childhood, of a view of himself in his adolescence as an admired gang member, and of his later aspirations as a politician and a successful businessman. Little or no responsibility for these negative experiences appeared to be attributed to himself or his family members, but instead, perhaps drawing on increasingly prevalent anti-Muslim discourses, he regarded the blame for them as lying with socio-political systems, especially those he construed as promoting multiculturalism. Such beliefs seemed to provide considerable structure for him in the face of chaos and uncertainty. He appeared to be able to shore up his view of the world by using processes of suspension and constriction to avoid incompatibilities in construing, together with hostile (in Kelly’s sense of the word) extortion of evidence for his constructions. The submergence of Western values by Islamization was viewed as a particular threat, but he was able to reconstrue himself as a selfless, “perfect knight” in countering this threat, culminating in his actions in July 2011.

Modernism, Terrorism, and Breivik’s Construing

This portrayal of Breivik’s construing accords with the analysis provided by historian Roger Griffin (2012) in his treatise on terrorism. The terrorist project, for Griffin, may be a way in which a person who is intolerant of ambiguity deals with uncertainty. This uncertainty characterizes modernity, in which, to quote Baumeister (1991), “Society stopped telling people who they were and instead it was left up to the individual to construct her or his identity. This brought a welcome increase in freedom but it also brought new strains and difficulties” (p. 95).

One way of dealing with uncertainty is to search for a world view to provide what Griffin, following Berger (1967), referred to as a “canopy,” or a “sacred canopy” if religion is a prominent part of it. A common result is a sense of empowerment and dedication to a strong mission. In those for whom this is a terrorist mission, acts of extreme violence come to fulfill the human need for meaning. The purpose of terrorist violence is to inflict personal suffering in a spectacular way that disseminates profound anxiety. There are also expressive ends in that it is conceived to deliberately achieve a symbolic blow or victory against a demonized other.

Griffin’s analysis is consistent with our personal construct formulation of Breivik as having faced invalidation and threat, but then finding meaning and developing a favorable self-construction through his terrorist project. Griffin describes the new, empowered self emerging in the terrorist as a “false ‘true self,’” a product of “heroic doubling.” A central question is whether this is a permanent new self or whether it is possible for the old self to reemerge and replace the new, terrorist self. Heroic doubling is usually associated with “splitting,” a process wherein all badness is projected onto a primary target, which in Breivik’s case was those whom he saw as destroying European culture—namely, “propagandists of cultural Marxism/multiculturalism,” or “MSM” to use his abbreviation. The terrorist’s target comes to exemplify everything that is evil in Manichean fantasies of a world divided into good and bad. Whereas the bad world is described in great detail in Breivik’s compendium, there is relatively little about the contrast, the good world. There are some references to Odinism (Odin was the main god in the Viking pre-Christian religious tradition), but these are not elaborated. Christianity is mentioned, but he
does not describe himself as a devout Christian. His main call seems to be for a return to an ethnically homogeneous, patriarchal Western culture.

Although Breivik’s construing processes, and the genesis of these, may therefore show some commonality with those of certain other terrorists, the pathways to terrorism are varied. As Canter, Sarangi, and Youngs (2012) demonstrated, a personal construct analysis may elucidate these individual routes to terrorism. At the very least, as in the present analysis of Breivik’s construing, it may render more construable actions that are designed to derive some of their anxiety-inducing and threatening power from their very incomprehensibility. It may also conceivably suggest individual pathways for reconstruction and disengagement from terrorism, or for prevention of construing processes that may lead to “radicalization” and terrorist acts. We are under no illusion that reconstruing a terrorist or radicalized individual is easy or likely, not least because it would involve massive guilt and anxiety and would require, in Griffin’s (2012) terms, the shedding of a false “true self.” However, that it is not impossible is indicated by moving stories of radicalized Islamic fundamentalists who changed their beliefs and are now leading a dialogue center for Muslims and Christians (Husain, 2007; Nawaz, 2012). As indicated by Neimeyer and Tschudi (2003), restorative justice may offer possibilities for reconstruing. Whether this may be fruitful in Breivik’s case will be the subject of a future article.

CONCLUSIONS

As Canter and colleagues (2012) pointed out, “there is a dearth of direct explorations of the conceptual frameworks of individuals who have been directly involved in terrorism” (pp. 1–2). If possibilities to interview such individuals are limited, study of narratives written by them may be a viable alternative means of exploring their construing. Constructivist and social constructionist approaches to the analysis of narratives generally focus, respectively, on their coherence or their performative aspects (Neimeyer, 2000). Although either of these perspectives might usefully be applied to Breivik’s interview with himself, our own approach, extending previous work, has indicated that a personal construct analysis, including the use of Kelly’s diagnostic constructs, may help to elucidate the construing that led to the individual’s actions. A personal construct formulation of a client’s construing would normally be used as a basis for choice of therapeutic interventions, which in Breivik’s case might initially focus on the development of an alternative structure to that provided by the beliefs expounded in his compendium. Although opportunities for taking forward an approach of this type with Breivik in any formal way are unlikely, we do not discount the possibility that, even with an individual such as him, future events could lead to sufficient dismantling of his “false ‘true self’” (Griffin, 2012) to open possibilities for restorative justice. Whether or not this is so, the message that his actions may be comprehensible in the same terms as are anyone else’s, rather than discounted as manifestations of “mental illness,” may still be an important, if threatening, one in helping to prevent others following paths such as his.

NOTES

1. Breivik, who was born in London, uses an Anglicized version of his name in this document.
2. A complete list of the other construct poles that Breivik used to describe his “old” and “new” selves may be obtained from the first author on request.
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REFERENCES

Construing a “Perfect Knight”: A Personal Construct Investigation of Mass Murder

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