

## Going to the loo on a plane – PCP and the small things

Jörn Scheer (Hamburg, Germany)

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### Introduction

Most people involved in PCP are scholars or practitioners who at some time in their career more or less accidentally ran into PCP to discover that the theory and/or the Repertory Grid proved to be a valuable tool in their professional practice. So did I. But at some stage I remembered that ‘Nothing is so practical as a good theory’ and while on a 22 hour flight from Germany to Australia, I began musing about some very personal constructions of the interactions of Body, Mind and Society. Let me state right at the beginning that my internal system as far as the disposal of liquid waste is concerned is functioning perfectly well. What I am going to speak about is therefore not grounded in dysfunctional physical conditions.

*Most people like to sit at the window when they go on a longer flight. My preference however is an aisle seat. Why is that so? You know that flight passengers are supposed to drink several litres of water before and during the flight. Healthy as that may be, it has considerable side effects. When I was still intrigued by the aerial views out of the window, inevitably, after a while I used to feel the need to relieve myself. Of course, I did not want to be a pest for my two neighbours, so I waited a while. Tried to distract myself by reading the in-flight magazine for a third time, studied the duty-free offerings in the catalogue in the seat-pocket, and watched the ‘abridged and edited’ movie on show on the overhead monitors. For some time, that worked fine, mental discipline being one of my favourite exercises. However, it did not take very long for the body to take over, and during a full hour’s time I became increasingly obsessed with the attempt to relax. My thinking became definitely constricted, and finally I asked my neighbour to let me pass. No worries. But a 13 hour flight from Frankfurt to Singapore is quite a long while, the sequence of events repeated itself, and I felt increasingly embarrassed. Of course I noticed that the lady next to me availed herself of the opportunities that I created and most of the time beat me on the way to the little cabin.*

*That’s why I prefer an aisle seat. Because then I am in control. Yet, I marvel at those co-travellers who do not go to the loo once between London and Bangkok. I suppose something is wrong with them. They either haven’t had a single drop during the twenty-four hours prior to the flight. Or they have a bladder the size of a pumpkin. Or they climb over me while I am asleep.*

Now if we look at this little episode, I find it abounding with implications. It makes irrepressibly clear that we are not only cognitive beings, involved in mental activities. We are also animals constantly battling physical needs such as hunger, thirst, not to speak of non-vital needs like sexuality. This seems so basic that it does not appear in psychological research or reports most of the time. It is obvious that a Cartesian mind-body dualism that would see physical needs as – in this case - dominating the mind does not make sense here. *The simple fact is just that I have to go the loo.* And my cognitive activity centres on how to go about without bothering my neighbours too much. So there is the social, the interactive dimension involved, too. But it is not really a separate dimension either. It is part of the process I am entangled in. And it is relevant even if I am having an aisle seat. Because after the movie finishes there tend to be long queues in front of the loos – so there is more to anticipate...

And what might be a *superordinate construct* behind or above these pretty concrete little events? I think it is, in line with the general idea in PCP of man/woman being master of one's fate, the notion of *being in control*. Being in control here means being in control of everything that might affect one's psychophysical well-being, and not being at someone else's mercy. Similarly, people suffering from flight phobia (or flight anxiety) keep telling me that it is not necessarily the 'real' danger of dying in a plane crash (which is much lower than the probability of dying in a freeway accident). It is the fear of not being able to 'get out', that is, to 'do' something in case of emergency. In other words, fear of not being in control.

### **PCP as everyday psychology**

I have been using this little episode - which most of you might have experienced, too - to illustrate what might be meant if we speak of the "unending flow of experience", or if Mancuso says, we are construing permanently, from millisecond to millisecond. If we are not paying only lip-service to a famous metaphor, we should be aware that speaking of the 'person-as-scientist' might be misleading if it is taken as implying some sort of well-designed procedure (as others, like Beverly Walker, have observed, too). But this episode also stands for the banality or triviality of the absolute majority of choices we are making everyday. For we don't only make high-profile choices like going to university or not, getting married to this woman (or man) and not that one, or becoming an old bugger or a nice person. Most of the time we *anticipate* on a small scale, engage in wee little *experience* or *CPC cycles*, are happy with hardly noticeable *validations*. The academic discipline that is PCP, however, deals mostly with the 'big' issues, the hard or difficult things, the 'problems'.

Sometimes people ask me: "What have you been involved with lately?", or "What exactly are you doing as a psychologist?" Then I try to give an impression of what PCP is about and what my interest in it is. Then the intelligent laypersons often say: "Isn't that what psychology is about in the first place?" And: "Is there anything that I can read about it?" So I think there may be a receptive public interested in what PCP might have to offer. These persons are not particularly impressed by the 'scientific' psychology of the day. And I think it would be a good idea to *invite* them to PCP. In fact, the book of that name - *Invitation to PCP*, by Vivien Burr and Trevor Butt (Burr & Butt, 1992) - is probably doing a good job in coaxing people into looking at the PCP approach by focussing on a few important areas.

But it is also necessary to raise interest among psychologists, and psychology students. Most of the time, they think of PCP as a *cognitive personality theory* of mere historical importance. And for them to become interested, it is necessary to show that PCP is a serious tool in professional practice, like psychotherapy, education, organisation and business. At this time, there is only one psychological theory that offers insight into many of these professional fields, but also aims at non-professional ones. That is the *psychoanalytic approach* which aims at encompassing most things human.

### **PCP and the small things**

For both groups of readers, it would also be desirable to show that the scope of PCP goes far beyond 'cognitions in personality theory'. For if we think of a person as - incipient - scientist, that holds for every person. Even if we concede that the range of convenience of PCT may be principally limited, we still think that it is applicable to most areas of human activity. Of *human* activity only? Kelly suggested leaving the subhuman sphere for later. But 50 years on, Fay Fransella in the outlook chapter of the new Handbook (Fransella, 2003) goes

beyond that. If anticipation is a central criterion, and psychological processes or (even more fundamentally) vital processes are *channelised by the ways anticipation is performed*, then construing is not restricted to cognitively active people. James Mancuso (also in the Handbook) (Mancuso, 2003) has argued that *newborn infants* and even *foetuses* construe. If anticipation is the critical issue, then – Fay concludes somewhat daringly – the *immune system* is a construing being. And even *plants* seem to ‘predict’ where the best nutriments may be and send their roots in that direction. We don’t have to go that far. But millions of pet owners would be happy to read about how their darlings construe their world and give meaning to the events they encounter including mum and dad.

And at the other end of the life span: we need to know more about ‘normal’ *ageing*, or even ‘successful’ or as the new term goes, ‘constructive ageing’. (Julie Ellis and myself have started research on that.) There is a lot going on that is *not* about deficits and suffering. And there is certainly re-construing required if we are to achieve ‘wisdom’!

I am not joking. What is needed, I think, is something like Freud’s famous ‘Psychopathology of Everyday Life’. That’s what I mean by ‘*PCP and the Small Things*’.

### **PCP and the good things**

Another focus I think we need could be called: ‘*PCP and the Good Things*’. Like many other psychological disciplines that are concerned with interventions, PCP seems to be focussing on difficulties, disorders, diseases, disarray, troubles, drama, loss etc. This is of course due to the history of PCP as a discipline embedded in the helping professions. But if PCP turns its attention to the ordinary, there are other things to look at. For instance:

- There is a tradition of analysing *Eating Disorders* but has anyone written on the *pleasures* of eating and drinking? That is certainly among the most important things in life, yet nearly uncharted territory in PCP. Applying the corollaries, the cycles, the ways of construing to eating and drinking would be a fascinating experience.
- *Illness* has been an issue, although there is not very much on physical illness. But there is even less, in fact hardly anything about *health* and *well-being*. There we may be in for some surprises. Health is a high value, and healthy behaviour therefore should be in high esteem. But we found, for instance, that some people not only enjoy smoking but connect non-smoking with undesirable properties like conservative, boring, being a loner. For them, smoking is not part of a health-related construct system (as health psychologists tend to assume) but of a social-interactive one. We are talking about fragmentation and superordinate constructs here.
- The all-important *work sphere* is mostly seen as a problem zone. But there are interesting issues involved such as personal growth, professional identity (Julie Ellis has written about that), and yes: job satisfaction. There are rumours that there are people around who actually ENJOY working...
- Recreational activities like *sport* and *exercising* deserve more attention. This is another field where mind, body and the social interact in a – to me – fascinating way. As far as I know, Dave Savage is the only one who has approached this field, and it is still in the field of counselling. But I could tell little stories – like the introductory one – about what I feel and think, i. e. construe, when I run or ride my bike.

- Much of our 'spare time' (outside sleeping, working, eating and drinking) is devoted to *leisure activities*, like enjoying the arts: reading books, listening to music, going to the movies. A lot of work to do for constructivists, not leaving everything to the advertising industry! After the early work of Bannister (1988) and Miall (1988) for literature, Button (1988), Ben-Peretz and Kalekin-Fishman (1988) and Blowers and Bacon-Shone (1991) for music there hasn't been much published. And that was mostly 15 years ago. The same holds for *holiday* and *travel*. Except for an often quoted study on British seaside resorts and Beverly Walker's essays on travelling (Walker, 200, 2003) there is not much from a PCP point of view. What about *shopping*? (The clinicians might have something to say about 'retail therapy'...) What about *fashion*? Something that is of interest to at least half of mankind, in fact womankind, to be exact.

### **PCP and the Big Picture**

Then there is the large scale – *PCP and the Big Picture*. The ever present field of *politics* has been heralded by Don Bannister as an important field for PCP scholars 25 years ago, but only few writers have taken up the challenge. However, with the increasing 'internationalisation' of PCP, issues of ethnic or national identity, of migration, or the role of language have attracted some attention among PCP authors. (I've talked about that earlier today.)

### **Construing the intimate**

Three more, somewhat related, topics deserve, in my view, more attention. They could be subsumed under the heading: '*Construing the Intimate*'.

- *Interpersonal attraction* and *partnership* have been studied – but what about *dislike*, *hate*, *repulsion*? Here I think the 'negative pole' has been neglected (except in the therapeutic context of 'suffering').
- *Gender issues*, including masculinity and femininity, have not seen much research activity. Since all of us are affected by our very being that would seem really important. (There is a paper at this conference.)
- And, perhaps not surprising, *sexuality* (except concerning dysfunction and criminal offence) has been underexposed (or under-treated). Anything about construing an orgasm? Maybe we are still pretty Victorian, after all. Again, at this conference there are a number of papers announced that deal with different aspects of sexuality. Maybe we are to witness a tide change here!

Of course, we still need PCP for specialists. PCP seems well established in the fields of therapy and counselling, in dealing with people in organisations, with people in trouble, legal or otherwise.

But I think PCP should not restrict itself to the 'specialists': the counsellors, the consultants and the instructors. After all, construing is a habit that everybody indulges in from time to time. *If not all the time*.

So I would like to suggest a kind of project that could have the tentative working title:

## Construing the Ordinary - The Psychology of Alternatives

And the table(s) of content could look like this:

PCP for Specialists	Construing the Ordinary - The Psychology of Alternatives
Counselling and Psychotherapy	PCP and the Life Span
Children Disorders People in trouble Trauma and loss	Perinatal construing Children and parents Teaching and learning Work, prof. identity, satisfaction Partnership Old age Death and dying
Consulting	
Business Organisations	PCP and the Good Things
	Eating and drinking Health and well-being Love and sex Sport and exercise Holiday and travel Arts and music
	PCP and the 'Big Picture'
	Politics Otherness Ethnicity and migration Identity and gender

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