

# Beyond the 'intelligent interest' - construing the 'political animal'

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## Introduction

Constructs have a *range* of convenience and a *focus* of convenience. So have theories. The focus or the foci of convenience of PCT are certainly (1) understanding and helping people in trouble, (2) the modulation of constructs through education, and (3) understanding and possibly modifying the functioning of organisations. However, the fundamental postulate and the corollaries of PCT are worded in a much more general way so that they seem to be applicable to a much wider area of phenomena. In this paper I want to address some of the choices people are facing in a wider context, that is, the context of *society* and societies. This seems all the more appropriate at this conference because it was Don Bannister who recalled, in a talk of 1981 (published for the first time this year in Fay Fransella's new Handbook, Bannister, 2003)) that in his last conversation with Kelly, he (Kelly) predicted that PCP in an elaborative sense would "go into politics". Kelly himself in fact laid the foundations in his eminently political paper on Europe's Matrix of Decision (Kelly, 1962). Since then, a few others, notably Du Preez of South Africa, Don Bannister himself (Bannister, 2003), Dušan Stojnov (2003), Peter Cummins (2003), Bill Warren (Warren, 2003) and myself have made a few steps in that direction.

The 'intelligent interest' in the title of this paper is a quote from Don Bannister's paper where he talks about people who refrain from "action, involvement, personal responsibility and personal reaction". And the 'political animal' of course refers to Aristotle who claimed that people inevitably are involved in a relationship with others in the community which in his times was the city or *polis*, hence the 'zoon politikon'. Since this would be true for ants and termites, too, it seems interesting to see what it is that makes the difference for wo/mankind. And what it is that causes some people to take more than an 'intelligent interest' by reading the paper and watching TV, and get involved.

Let me state right at the beginning that it is not my intention to provide the answers. I can't do much more than pose some questions.

## Kelly on the road

When Kelly and his wife travelled around much of the world in 1961, he researched and analysed the constructs that guided the people in the countries he visited. In true Kellyan fashion, he arrived at bipolar constructs such as:

*humanitarianism vs. opportunism*

*idealism vs. materialism*

*ideas vs. wealth*

*(German) scholarship vs. (American) simple-mindedness (pre WW II)*

*(German) vulgar materialism vs. (American) scholarship (post WW II)*

*oppression vs freedom*

It is interesting to see how he handled these constructs not just as meanings or opinions or attitudes (although they seem to be on a very high level of generality) but as – as the term goes now – ‘self-guiding narratives’, i. e. as guide-lines for the vital decisions that individuals as well as nations are required to make. Hence the ‘Matrix of Decisions’. In hindsight, some of the predictions Kelly articulated in 1962, did not materialise – naturally so, as Peter Cummins analysed almost forty years later. But what I found instructive is how Kelly talked about general matters, such as constructs prevailing *in a country* (or constructs *about* a country), as well as about the choices *individuals* were facing. While the former sometimes sound somewhat stereotypical the treatment of the individual aspects appear very empathetic and realistic – at least to a citizen of one of the countries in question who was twenty at that time ...

### **Don Bannister’s dialectics**

Bannister’s paper of 1981 (Bannister, 2003) is titled ‘The psychology of politics and the politics of psychology’ and he addresses the two ways of ‘pre-emptive construing’ indicated by this dichotomy. Is it the environment, the circumstances that force the individual to act in a certain way (those ‘up there’, the forces of history, the complexity of it all), and leave him/her content with developing an ‘intelligent interest’? Or is it psychological matters that drive politicians to behave in a certain way – the psychology of politics? Both positions he calls simplistic:

*“For example, from the point of view of psychoanalytic theory radical political positions and political attacks on social authority are sometimes seen as manifestations of unresolved oedipal conflict with political authority structures representing ‘father’. Conversely, radical political thinkers sometimes take the view that, say, psychoanalytic psychology or some allied theory is merely part of the ideology of bourgeois individualism...”*

At the end he concludes that personal construct theory is politically *libertarian*, politically *egalitarian*, politically *fraternal*. And of course, in doing so he refers to the ideals of the French Revolution. He quotes an early essay of Kelly’s titled ‘Social inheritance’ and proposes that “*your construct system is not your private, isolated invention, your desert island. It is essentially partly a fraternal gift to you and partly your fraternal gift to others*”.

Constructs that Bannister seems to think important are:

*(politically) left vs right  
control of the means of production, distribution and exchange  
by state managers vs by private owners  
authority vs liberty (authoritarian vs democrat)*

So much for the founding fathers (and sons).

### **Them and us – and me**

It is probably not mere chance that some of the people who have written about politics from a PCP perspective live in countries troubled by social upheaval, political disarray and war: Du Preez in South Africa (1979), Dušan Stojnov (2003) in Yugoslavia, and myself in once divided Germany (Scheer, 1996).

Stojnov looks at Serbs and Croats – citizens of one country once but belonging to two peoples that had been enemies before and after their forced unity after WW I. He elaborates on the choices a Serb was facing: *going to war with Croats* means *chance to survive, peace with Croats* means *being slaughtered*; and for a Croat: *going to war with Serbs* means *being yourself, peace with Serbs* means *loosing your being*. “For both sides, going to war was a rationally anticipated decision to save their core national interests.” For someone not involved it may seem difficult to understand the notion that national (or ethnic) allegiance determines how people feel about themselves and their very selves.

The constructs Stojnov mentions are:

*survive vs being slaughtered*  
*being yourself vs loosing your being*

In contrast, Du Preez from South Africa maintained already in 1979:

*“We may construe a person’s identity in terms of peripheral or even irrelevant constructs. That is we may simply misunderstand him. We may think that his nationality or his race is the key to his identity; whereas he attaches importance to his religion, the fact that he is a good musician, and his loyalty to his family”.*

Interestingly, Stojnov found in a study on Serbian national identity – after the war – the “puzzling result” that the respondents chose to consider their belonging to Serbian nationality as a peripheral social issue. Having to choose between being ‘demonised in the eyes of the international community’ and ‘giving up his/her national identity’, they chose the latter – as a generation that “stated constructs such as Health, Self-Respect, Love and Acceptance as their collective core – their social identity”. Which, of course, sounds familiar to a member of an ‘advanced’ Western society.

So on the one hand, going to war against the neighbours was seen as inevitable for Serbs and Croats, *as Serbs and Croats*, but then, at a closer look, the individuals DO seem to have other choices.

And as for myself, I have often asked myself whether my construals of the recent developments in my country are due to me being ‘a German’, ‘a West German’, ‘a West German of the Left’, ‘a psychologist’, ‘being born in the war, now of retirement age’, or is it just *because I am the person I am*? Which brings us back to Don Bannister’s dialectics. So, without ignoring the forces of destiny, I am left (or we are left) with questions such as:

- what do *I* make of this?
- Why do I *look at things* this way? In other words, why do I *construe* events this way?
- What *choices* did I have, and what did I choose?
- And why did *others* make other choices?

## **Personal Construct Theory**

Now let us have a look at what PCT might have to offer to help with understanding what makes the ‘political animal’ tick.

*Consistency vs. fragmentation*

*At a conference of academics involved in Trade Union issues that I attended recently, many participants were puzzled by an experience they had had. As you may know, unions, at least in our country, are involved in battling xenophobia, they are in favour of the integration of refugees and asylum seekers, and participate in demonstrations supporting these causes. This is in agreement with their usual positioning on the political left. But then, some of the union officials on the local level do just that but on the other hand are strongly opposed to giving jobs to foreigners. This my colleagues could not understand because it seemed contradictory.*

Don Bannister in that paper seemed to expect consistent behaviour, too: He wondered why some “free-wheeling, libertarian, political democrat” may be “tyrannically authoritarian within his or her family”. And people like me are surprised that in many ‘developed’ countries majorities of a similar magnitude support social reform and capital punishment at the same time – attitudes that seem incompatible.

I think that we – intellectuals, academics - tend to maintain what might be called a ‘consistency myth’, in spite of the fact that many people – and us included! – often have fragmented construct systems that seem contradictory. In the above-mentioned issue, I came to think that some of the union officials might have a superordinate construct of solidarity: solidarity with your own mob, in a kind of self-help way, the way that helped the working class founding organisations and developing strength to withstand the oppression and exploitation by 19th century capitalists: *A fighting solidarity vs. lonely succumbing to threat and pressure*. If the perceived threat (e. g. to job security) comes from foreigners entering the country illegally their solidarity is with their own folk.

### *Hierarchy and organisation*

Thinking along an ‘authoritarian vs. democrat’ construct, Bannister says that

*“if you are truly a democrat, whatever that may mean to you, and if you have a very wide range of convenience for that construction then you will be a democrat within your family, you will be a democratic parent, a democratic family member”.*

Apparently, for him being ‘truly’ a democrat means having ‘*authoritarian vs democrat*’ as a superordinate construct (and choosing the ‘democrat’ pole for oneself). Obviously, in the example cited above, being friendly towards foreigners was *not* the superordinate construct.

I think that it follows that if you want to find out about someone’s political attitudes it would be appropriate to elaborate or help him/her elaborate the superordinate constructs.

### *Choice and validation*

How do we develop ‘political’ constructs, how do we choose? The same way we develop all our other constructs, by experiencing validation or invalidation, by achieving extension or definition of our constructions etc. How then would a ‘democratic’ construction be validated? Not necessarily by the results of our democratic voting procedures...

Let's take an example: I know (and I am sure you will know, too) people who think and say: "you are lost if you rely on others, better make sure you are independent and got your own." If 'rely on others vs being independent' is a superordinate construct this will have far-reaching consequences. Choosing the right hand pole may reflect a deep distrust of human interaction, based in a lifetime's experience – 'validation'. It may result in a selfish manner of dealing with others, ignoring their interests and needs. Circumstances allowing, an authoritarian political attitude and behaviour may result. However, the choice, in order to avoid being lost, really seems to be in favour of 'being in control of my circumstances and conditions' – but does that mean 'being in control of others'? I.e., being authoritarian? Not necessarily. Other influences (and other choices) may have to be added to go that way.

*One of my jobs in the union context was to help select students (and later tutoring them during their studies) who had applied for a scholarship granted by a union-based foundation. In Germany we have a number of such foundations that are linked to the political parties, to the major churches, and to the federation of trade unions. The scholarships are granted to gifted students whose political, moral and other convictions put them in the vicinity of one of these organisations and who had shown involvement in some sort of community, social, or political activities. Most of the students I had to do with came from a working class background, had achieved their GCE not through a standard high school career and had been involved in some sort of political activity. - In the given context, it is interesting to see how they got involved in politics. Some followed a path handed over by family tradition, with parents being Labour party or Union officials. Others had met with injustice and irregularities during their earlier vocational training and consequently had 'taken up arms' against that. Still others had experienced some other ethical dilemma and made their choices, had engaged in environmental (such as Greenpeace) or prosocial activity (e. g. working with disadvantaged or handicapped children).*

But this question is a much wider one: *why is it* that some people oppose pressure, fascism, suppression – and others don't? Why do some people get involved in politics and or prosocial volunteer activities? (I am not talking about professional activities here – that would raise other interesting questions: why does someone choose to become a politician?). Why do some people leave the armchair perspective of "taking an intelligent interest" behind and get involved?

I have asked this myself for a long time because I have been involved in political activities since I joined a pacifist organisation at the age of fourteen. That was in line with family values although my family was neither actively involved nor pushy about it. Most of my friends did nothing of this kind, except later maybe donating to Amnesty International or Greenpeace. Others did volunteering work for Rotary, Animal Shelters or Environmental Groups. Many just lived their lives. I still do not have a stringent answer.

### *Change of public constructs*

*Public constructs* may be called constructs that are shared by large proportions of a society or by society as a whole, constructs that guide political action. Such constructs and construct systems may change as part of a historical process. The 'Freedom of a Christian' as promoted by Martin Luther and 'Freedom from oppression' as advanced in the French Revolution are separated by almost three centuries. But they may also change in shorter periods of time.

An interesting example is the term 'reform' (see. Fig. 1). Or is it a construct? As a construct it will be determined by its opposite pole. During the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century there was a dichotomy of *changing* the intolerable social and economic conditions vs *conserving* the status quo. Change meaning advancing, hence *progressive* vs. reaction to it to re-establish the status quo ante, i. e. *reactionary*. On the 'change pole', there was a dispute between people preferring a radical *revolutionary* way and others preferring a slower, more evolutionary *reformist* way. So on the *social change pole* there were was a subordinate construct about how to go about it.

Now we have been witnessing a change of perspective, hence a change of constructs. With an ageing population in the developed countries, extended life span, reduced life-time working age etc., the systems of social security are getting into financial hassles. Rather than looking for ways of reducing expenses for military equipment, space research, road construction etc., the dominant political forces in the Western countries are intent on reducing the costs of 'social security'. Hence the proponents of maintaining and defending the achievements of earlier generations with respect to social *reforms* are labelled *conservative*. On the other hand, reducing pensions, privatising superannuation, reducing benefits of the health care system, reducing job security is labelled *reform*: health reform, job reform, superannuation reform, railway reform etc. In social-psychological terms this is about semantics. But I think that would be much to weak a term. It is really about changing ways how things (in this case social conditions) are *construed*.

However, in this case we don't really choose. I think I am not too paranoid to think that constructs of this sort, for use in public, political discourse, are consciously manipulated by the makers of public opinion.

## Conclusions

1. PCT concepts like search for definition, extension, validation/invalidation maybe helpful in understanding political construing and acting.
2. PCP can teach us to accept complexity, fragmentation, contradictions – and help us search for superordinate constructs.
3. We should still be aware of the range (and limits) of convenience of PCT, i. e. remember that PCP is about psychological processes, including those of political actors, but not about political forces.

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Fig. 1

The strange fate of a construct

