



Supertext

The textbook that changed my life

Don Bannister and Fay Fransella's *Inquiring Man: The Theory of Personal Constructs* was the book that made me a psychologist. I bought it in Cambridge at the end of my first term of full-time psychology in 1971, although no teacher had recommended it. It kept me lying a-bed on those Christmas holiday mornings, utterly gripped.

Despite many lectures, I still had not quite seen how psychology worked, theoretically or empirically. Most baffling was that psychology as a science did not seem to be about people or how they thought. This was confronted head on by *Inquiring Man*: "There is a demand from many psychologists that their subject should become more 'humanistic'. This is comical in one sense — it is as if sailors suddenly decided they ought to take an interest in ships..."

And so it continued, explaining George Kelly's psychology of personal constructs, and showing how a successful psychological theory could be formal yet imaginative, scientific yet human, empirical yet subjective, cognitive yet encompassing emotion and personal yet objective: all derived from the central tenet that "the cardinal quality of personal construct theory is its recognition that psychology is man's understanding of his own understanding". Most remarkable was the "repertory grid", a universal yet personalisable measuring instrument, applicable to most ideas and feelings.

Central to the book was the problem of reflexivity, for the theory "treats scientists as men and men as scientists". To illustrate this, Bannister offers a science-fiction fable. The master chemist is wondering what to do with the mysterious green slime in his test tube when he realises that the slime is thinking precisely the same of him. Then comes the clincher: "This special nightmare of the chemist is the permanent work-a-day world of the psychologist."

Inquiring Man is what a textbook should be. It was published by Penguin at a time when they still commissioned cheap, well-written and accessible academic monographs and books, of which I collected many. As the series's general editor, Brian Foss, remarks in the preface: "Nor is it written with that bland neutrality which is the hallmark of the textbook. Psychologists and laymen will be provoked and delighted."

While I was delighted, some colleagues were obviously provoked. Retiring members of our department leave books in the common room with a "help yourself" note, and there I found a copy of the book. The first chapter's marginalia consisted of, "Balls!!"; "A theory of what?"; "meaning?"; "Christ!!"; "Come now!!"; "Who says!?!"; and, on page 11, "tautology?"— and then there was silence. How could one not like such a textbook?

Chris McManus is professor of psychology and medical education, University College London.

THE TIMES

HIGHER

EDUCATION SUPPLEMENT

TEXTBOOK

ISSUE No 24 MAY 26 2006