

SOCIALITY AND NEGOTIATION IN THE RESEARCH GRID INTERVIEW

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When we use a grid to understand someone, we describe what we're doing as eliciting constructs – using our expertise as if we were pulling teeth out of a person's head. This image of a tooth available for extraction – something that is clearly there, distinct and separate, provides a metaphor inviting further discussion to avoid an oversimplification. A moment's reflection on grid procedure indicates that something more subtle is going on: we are negotiating over meaning. This negotiation is an interactive process in which both parties, interviewer and interviewee, have to influence the other if their distinct aims are to be achieved. The interviewer's careful management of sociality is essential if s/he is to do justice to the interviewee's construing. Something similar happens in the relationship between the interviewer and the data obtained.

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INTRODUCTION

The key point made in what follows is that a repertory grid depends fundamentally on negotiation between interviewer and interviewee, in which mutual sociality is a primary requirement. The point is probably obvious in a clinical setting, or when a grid is used as part of a training or staff development endeavour, but may be forgotten in a research setting— and the present account applies to that setting in particular.

The thrust of the argument can be summarised in four points:

- a) “If you want to know what a person thinks, why not ask them; they might just tell you”. That actually paraphrases Kelly's argument (Kelly, 1991: 1, 241) for the use of Self-Characterisation technique, but it applies all the more so to the repertory grid as a procedure. However...“Do people mean what they say?” (Kelly, 1963: 110) Sometimes they might and sometimes they might not; or they may not be sure. And so...
- b) The grid interview is necessarily an act of sociality: best regarded as a social process involving a series of subtle interactions between interviewer and interviewee to estab-

lish what the other means from his or her point of view, which shape and influence the constructs that are obtained and recorded.

- c) How the grid is analysed, especially when it's one of a set being examined for shared content, is also an act of sociality in the part of the researcher interacting with the data.

WHAT DOES THE INTERVIEWEE THINK?

The process of asking is not simply a matter of stepping through the standard grid elicitation procedure— see e.g. Fromm (2003: 35-43), or Jankowicz (2004: 24-26). Part of the problem might stem from Kelly's original term, the ‘Role Construct Repertory Test’. Clearly, the grid is not a psychometric procedure dependent on a set of standardised norms. It is used largely in an idiographic manner, and what is standardised is a fairly structured *procedure*. In our contemporary usage, ‘test’ is a misnomer.

Nevertheless, researchers often conduct a grid interview following the psychometric assumption that it measures a personal attribute— something that's ‘in there’, a structural component of the personality yielding a profile, inside the per-

son's head. One talks of 'elicitation' following what one might call a 'dental model' based on pulling teeth, with the person's constructs clearly *there*; and clearly *theirs*, available for extraction. This may not be a very useful way of thinking about the process.

Butt & Burr (2004: 124) make the point very well: "Human conduct is a mystery and it is best approached by asking people what they are doing, how it reflects their construing. This is quite different from thinking that people *have* constructs that are in some way responsible for the way they act." (My italics.)

While one's aware of being engaged in a social interaction, it is easy for the interviewer to forget just how actively s/he is shaping the constructs being recorded. Examining the basic components of the process:

1. *The Topic*. In a research grid, this is usually the researcher's, who asks the interviewee to address just part of their repertoire. Maybe this interests the interviewee, but maybe the interviewee is blithely indifferent; engaged in other matters involved in earning a living, or enjoying a well-earned rest, s/he is granting a precious hour to something that may be seen as a bit of a distraction.
2. *The Elements*. If the intention is to analyse a set of grids, the researcher will either impose the same set of elements on all the interviewees, or elicit each individual's elements according to a rubric that applies to the whole sample: 'Your most liked colleague'; 'our present boss', etc. To achieve the sort of uniformity that makes for easy analysis, it is unusual to invite the interviewee to determine the number, nature, and range of elements that fall within the range of the topic in question.
3. *The Constructs*. These are determined pre-eminently by a process of mutual agreement, rather than by a process that consists entirely of the 'credulous listening' (Jones & Jankowicz 1998) that beginners in grid technique are advised to adopt. This issue is examined in detail below.
4. *The Ratings*. The rating of elements on constructs can be particularly problematic, requiring the interviewer to make judgements that may impact on the particular numbers being recorded. For example, obtaining rat-

ings after all the constructs have been elicited may lead to somewhat different ratings than obtaining them one construct at a time while the particular contrast that each construct expresses is still fresh in the interviewee's mind (see e.g. Neimeyer et al., 2002; the discussion in Fransella et al 2004 pp.59-65 provides further examples.)

Another example. The judgements made by the interviewer may not necessarily be consistent across the different interviewees in the sample, and it is my impression that these are likely to depend on the nature of the interaction with a particular interviewee. Thus, it can be helpful to remind the interviewee that a rating scale of 1 to 5 consists of relative, not absolute, values, and that therefore, it may be unhelpful to avoid giving an extreme rating to a particular element in order to 'keep it in reserve' for a particularly extreme element on another construct. Yet the interviewer is more likely to make this comment with an interviewee whose ratings are all in the mid-range, or at one end of the 1-to-5 range, than with an interviewee who is consistently using the full width of the scale with all of the constructs.

DO INTERVIEWEES MEAN WHAT THEY SAY?

Kelly is particularly interesting on this: Kelly (1963: 110-111).

We know that interviewees may find it difficult to put a construct into words, and so we try to help them articulate their intention, doing so in a sensitive way, by asking what they mean rather than assuming what they mean.

However; from the interviewee's perspective:

1. the interviewee may be creating a distinction that applies to the triad of elements for the very first time. S/he may never have had that thought before, about those elements or indeed any other offered in the grid. It may be freshly minted.
2. Or the distinction may be available but has to be put into words for the very first time as the interviewee spends a few moments to think about it...
3. ... with only a tentative link to the past, and to subsequent action. The behavior the inter-

viewee has drawn on to create the distinction may be lost in the past; the behavior s/he anticipates in offering the construct now, may in fact turn out to be different when engaged in, surprising the interviewee as well as the interviewer.

What's offered may be quite definite, or it may be rather tentative, and in this case, elicitation becomes a delicate process. Moreover, from the interviewer's perspective:

1. The interviewer may need to intervene to shape the verbal expression into 'proper' contrasts that the interviewee didn't offer in the first instance, 'splitting out' and 'straightening' what Yorke (1983) has called 'forked' and 'bent constructs'. Kelly (1963: 111) quotes the example of a construct as first offered, "Mary and Alice have gentle dispositions but neither is as attractive as Jane", which it is up to the interviewer to separate into two distinct constructs— *Gentle versus Abrupt*, and *Attractive versus Unappealing*, perhaps, the nature of the two meanings being checked with the interviewee, of course.
2. Indeed, this is done with care and by a sensitive assistance in finding the words with which the interviewee is comfortable. Note, however, that it's an imposition of our construction system: of our Kellian rules about what constitutes a construct, necessary if any sort of analysis is to be possible.
3. The interviewee might have been perfectly content, as part of a view about gentle attractiveness, to construe acquaintances in the original way. The fact that the interviewer may be drawing on PCT to reject the original form as possibly pre-emptive, and certainly, difficult to work with, is an intervention that shows just how interactive the elicitation process may be.

THE GRID INTERVIEW AS AN ACT OF SOCIALITY

Sociality makes for effective role relationships, according to Kelly's 11th Corollary. This is especially important when the roles involve a therapeutic interaction (although the link to effective-

ness is quite complex— key issues being usefully reviewed by Winter (1992: 177-179), and when there is a power differential between the two parties, such as the one that obtains between a supervisor and a subordinate within the *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1991) of the organisation in which they work.

Certainly, where the roles are those of researcher-with-interviewee, there is a limit to what is possible. Clearly, there are several important differences between the research setting and the clinical/organisational setting; but here, a particularly important difference relates to *time*. We lack the time available in ongoing clinical or organizational role relationships.

In the precious 60 minutes or so of a research grid interview (and there's usually just the one interview), try as s/he might, the researcher can't just climb inside, to step into the other's shoes, without distorting those shoes at least a little. Our feet as academic scientists are necessarily rather different to those of the interviewee, Kelly's lay scientist, given our differences in experience, not least those of professional background.

This manifests itself in several ways. For example:

1. The wording the interviewee agrees as representing the construct (especially when the construct is a freshly minted one) is going to make a difference to the ratings applied. In some cases this may be straightforward but in others, it may take a considerable amount of time for the interviewer to obtain enough of the interviewee's past experience to grasp the interviewee's meaning with precision. Time needs to be taken for some laddering down (Jankowicz 2003: 64-66) or pyramiding (Fransella et al., 2004: 43-44; Jankowicz 2003: 67-68) to make the intended meaning clear.
2. Further, the precise wording of the distinction being made may be tweaked as the interviewee applies the construct to each of the elements in turn 'along the row', and this may mean adjusting the ratings of the elements dealt with previously in that row; or not; or doing so systematically for each construct... as time allows.

An eventual difference of just one or two ratings on one or two constructs may make a difference to the relationships being recorded in the grid. Very different clusters may emerge in a cluster analysis of the grid, for example.

One may wonder whether all this really matters. In a sense, it doesn't. Interviewers aren't careless; they do the best they can, working with what they've got, and take great care to make sure that the interviewee legitimizes its accuracy.

But that isn't my point. What matters is that we arrive at a completed grid *as the result of a process of negotiation over meaning*, rather than through an act of extraction of what's already there.

Examining this further, we start with a definition. Negotiation as a process in which two parties

- shift their position on some issue
- by an exchange of views
- in a way that may alter their own view of their initial position
- towards a final, (non-negotiable) agreed stance
- which, when successful, leaves both parties satisfied.

Like many negotiations, the negotiation of meaning in a grid interview is unbalanced, usually due to power differences which both parties, if sufficiently experienced, will know how to handle. However, in a grid, the negotiation is unbalanced in a particular way. In the grid interview the interviewer knows what the final position is, in advance: s/he is, after all, following the rules of grid technique and knows how far they might be departed from before the data obtained are unusable.

However, the interviewee may only discover that point during the process of deciding that the construct wording being recorded does or doesn't indeed represent his or her intended meaning. And it may take the interviewee some time to become sure about this kind of decision, after several constructs have been obtained... several different meanings negotiated. The repertory grid is a rather peculiar procedure to anyone who encounters it for the first time, one in which the role of grid interviewee differs from the role required in more conventional interview and

rating scale procedures. It's an odd way of asking, and answering, questions, which has to be learnt, and learnt very quickly, by the interviewee. In contrast, the interviewer is familiar with the process and the kinds of position that are likely to occur.

Given the subtleties that make construct elicitation more than a simple matter of extracting what's already there, one might expect some of these issues of sociality to obtain even in those situations in which the researcher engages with a group, each member of which follows the researcher's instructions about basic grid procedure but is otherwise left to his or her own devices in determining the wording and the precise ratings to be recorded. Once the researcher's statement of rationale and basic instructions have been understood, each group member is on his or her own— there is no further 'interviewer effect' on the data— but a form of negotiation does still take place.

The negotiation is internal to each person, as he or she ponders; makes up his or her mind; decides exactly what he or she wishes to make public and what would be better kept private; and makes a final commitment in the form of the words and ratings that record the way in which the elements are to be construed. One might view this process as one of *internal* negotiation between two or more of each individual's community of selves. (Mair 1977).

No wonder that an hour's grid interviewing is seen as tiring, by both interviewer and interviewee, whatever the setting, one to one or on a group basis!

GRID ANALYSIS AS AN ACT OF SOCIALITY?

Similar points may be made about the data, as the researcher carries out an analysis of a single grid, or of several grids put together into a sample.

The researcher examines the data for the outcomes they contain. To draw conclusions from the data, the researcher is asking the data what they have to say, and asking them in a way that can ascertain which conclusions are plausible and which aren't. The procedures of induction and deduction may follow a relatively informal

process of logical reasoning, or may be bolstered by statistical analysis and model building.

Might one regard this as a process of sociality? Strictly speaking, one can't, since sociality implies agency on the part of both participants, and while the researcher is an agent, the data are not – they are not active in that kind of way.

However, the process *does* seem to involve a form of negotiation of meaning.

The researcher applies analysis techniques that can identify a particular meaning in the data, interacting with the data towards a particular end-point. (Note, however, that the data don't move much towards the researcher and, however the researcher salami-slices, the data exercise their own constraint.)

Can this kind of negotiation, as with the negotiation between interviewer and interviewee, be seen as unbalanced?

It can be. One of the non-negotiables of the technique that pertain in the content analysis of a set of grids is that the categories used, and the coding of the constructs to categories, must be reliable. The reliability of one's data analysis places a limit to the validity of the conclusions that can be drawn. If the categories have been derived from a previously published scheme, (see e.g. Landfield 1971: 165-175; Winter, 1992: 28-33) the researcher must cite sufficient evidence that the category scheme is reliable, before going on to demonstrate the reliability of coding to those categories. If they have been derived from the data in the present study, it is essential for two people to derive them independently, and to code the constructs to categories independently, before discussing the outcome and agreeing more precise category definitions in order to increase the reliability that is finally obtained.

Usually, this works; acceptable reliabilities can be obtained, Cohen's Kappa and Perrault-Leigh Is values (see Perrault & Leigh 1989) of over 0.9, for about 300 constructs across 12 or so categories being typical. Once reliability is established, one can then assess the information available from the analysis, with a reasonable chance of being satisfied with the accuracy of the conclusions. Occasionally though, the two researchers have difficulties in arriving at a reliable set of conclusions... while the data just sit there and won't budge!

Now, one might cheat; as for example, by the generic practice of 'ignoring outliers', or in the

case of content analysis, by permitting large numbers (say, more than 5% of the constructs) to be regarded as 'unclassifiable' or 'miscellaneous'). But this is an act of the researcher, not of the data. The data retain their integrity – they don't change, after all.

If research is to be worth doing at all, the power in this kind of negotiation is necessarily unbalanced – for the researcher should acknowledge that the data must have the last word.

A final thought is that there may well be particular value in the public discussion of what the data might imply. There is some evidence that an interaction with the researcher, in interpreting the implications to be taken from the meanings recorded in a grid, is seen as helpful. Eden and Sims (1981) used grid data as part of the induction process of new employees into an organisation. They reported that the examination, by the newly recruited replacement, of a grid provided by the previous job-holder could be a useful aid in the induction of the new employee, dealing with the tacit, as well as the explicit, nature of the psychological contract available to the incumbent of that particular job. But in particular, they reported that the process was felt to be especially valuable if the new employee was able to discuss the implications s/he took from the grid, about the job, with the researcher.

Thinking in terms of meaning negotiation opens up lines of inquiry that, one could argue, have been insufficiently researched so long as we view construct elicitation using the relatively crude dental model. Researchers are accustomed to recognizing, and seeking to minimise, the 'interviewer effect' when engaging in interactions based on conventional interviewing technique. Once it is recognized that the information made available by means of a repertory grid is an outcome of a subtle negotiation over meaning, the researcher's question becomes not 'how might I minimize my impact?' – for that is seen as impossible when meanings are an outcome of negotiation process – but 'what is the nature of my impact, and how might I best manage it, as I help the interviewee share their meaning with the world?'

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