

Helpful Hints for using the Repertory Grid Interview

Hints in Choosing Elements	Choosing elements is an absolutely fundamental skill for repertory grid practitioners: get it wrong, and the rest of the process will never right itself
Repertory Grid is a Conversation	Grid is a structured conversation between two people in which Grid provides the methodology for constructive listening as they both explore an issue of common concern
More on Selecting Elements	The three different ways you can derive an element set, with the pros and cons of each approach
Grid Gives You Lots of Bites at the Cherry	The Grid interview is not linear, it gives you many different opportunities to probe for information or insights; you don't have to follow a set formula; you can be flexible
Alternative Strategies for Construct Elicitation	A review of how to define a useful construct, as well as alternatives for achieving a good set of constructs
On the Range of Convenience of Constructs	Not all elements can be rated on all constructs but for a Grid interview to be useful, all or most of the elements should be able to be rated on all or most of the constructs
On the Importance of the Contrast Pole	If you don't elicit the contrast pole from the interviewee, you are left to infer it - and it could be dead wrong.
On Using 'Ideal' Elements	'Ideal' elements are a very good way to explore scenarios, ask 'what if' questions, and be more specific in your enquiry
On Research Design, Purpose, and Analysis	The importance of having a good research design so that you know which analysis method or methods will be the most suitable
Back to a Few Basics	A few hints for absolute newcomers to Repertory Grid
On Propositional Constructs	One particular piece of jargon is worth exploring - that's the question of what is meant by the term 'propositional' construct

Repertory Grid in Recruitment and Selection Interviewing	Nobody can fake a Grid, and so if they feel uncomfortable they retreat into silence or giving you propositional constructs - there's no place to hide, and you're into rather speedy self-revelation
A Brief Illustration of the Importance of Laddering	Laddering up is the process where you try to get closer to the person's core values and preferences
Visual Inspection of Grids	Assume that not only do you not have a computer now, you never will. You are confined to paper, pencil, scissors, and listening skills.
Teaching and Learning Repertory Grid	The processes that happen when someone is learning Grid interviewing are related to administration, analysis, and application
The Importance of Pilot Sessions	If you don't pilot, you could have a furniture van full of data which will not meet the purpose, people leaning on you for the results you've promised them, and a general question 'How do I analyse this?' which is unanswerable
Where's the Beef...	Where in the process a repertory grid interview are you going to find your most useful and insightful information?
A New Acronym I Give Unto You...	All computer users will be familiar with the common piece of geek-speak 'RTMF' - It is an invitation to read the manual first
A Common Mistake and How to Avoid It	A common mistake is to select a set of elements each of which is really one pole of a construct

Sweet and Simple Techniques

Examples of how to design effective Grid studies that do not depend on computer analysis

Sweet and Simple #1	Performance appraisal using a simple, low-tech, cost-effective application of repertory grid - an approach that you can adapt to other applications from the example where appropriate
Sweet and Simple #2	Conflict resolution using a simple, low-tech, cost-effective application of repertory grid
Sweet and Simple #3	The repertory grid interview as part of a process, rather than an end in itself - one more low-tech example of how how that can be achieved using Grid simply and effectively

Skills for an Effective Repertory Grid Interviewer

Skills for an Effective Repertory Grid Interviewer	Seven hints designed to help new Grid practitioners in particular teach themselves the skills of Grid interviewing, analysis, and feedback
Understanding George Kelly and Personal Construct Theory	The purpose here is to give enough understanding of the background to Grid that you get the most out of what it offers - to give you enough background to be able to plan, understand, and analyse a Grid interview
Designing a Session	The purpose of this hint is to give you a wider overview of your choices when designing a Repertory Grid session
Learning the Repertory Grid Interview Process	The learning curve or being an effective Grid interviewer is very steep and requires that you practise your first few interviews in a safe place, with a tolerant friend, on non-controversial topics
Analysis	At least half the serious problems people experience with Repertory Grid are due to failure to include the method of analysis into the project plan
Feedback	In good Grid feedback the principle is for the interviewer to act, as much as possible, as a skilled mirror
Reminders, Tips and Wrinkles	A collection of Handy Household Hints

Hints in Choosing Elements

Choosing elements is an absolutely fundamental skill for repertory grid interview practitioners: get it wrong, and the rest of the process will never right itself.

Elements Must be Concrete and Discrete

The important thing to remember is that elements must be concrete and discrete. Also, your element set should be homogeneous - that is, each element should carry the same 'weight', have the same right to be in the element set. However, if you have a non-homogeneous element set you will soon notice it when the interview starts and you can correct yourself. Break the 'concrete and discrete' rule, though, and you won't be able to recover.

Don't Use One End of a Construct as an Element

For example, someone asked for help with a project intended to clarify the characteristics of effective managers as the interviewee saw them. The element set he was proposing to use was: MOTIVATION, STRESS, COMMUNICATION, LEADERSHIP, RISK, TEAMWORK, PROBLEM-SOLVING, and AMBITION. He was not getting anywhere with this set, as you can see for yourself if you try asking the question 'What have MOTIVATION and STRESS in common which makes them different from AMBITION?' I pointed out to him that he had fallen into the trap of using as elements concepts which were really one pole of a set of constructs: low motivation - high motivation, prone to stress - not subject to stress, etc. What he needed to do was to give his interviewee a set of real managers as elements, and then see whether these constructs emerged in the Grid conversation and how the interviewee used them. With the elements he had originally proposed, the interview would have meandered into meaninglessness.

A good element set should hurt when you drop it on your foot; you will never ever go wrong by making your element set more concrete.

A good analogy is to think about how you might write an analytical essay about American presidents. You would probably have some ideas about the dimensions you would want to uncover or explore, but once you started to be systematic in your background research you would have no choice other than to list a sample of presidents and then, as you read about them, make notes on the important characteristics which emerged. And when you start to write your essay, you would have to introduce individual presidents to illustrate your points. A Grid interview is exactly the same: start with concrete representations of the domain you want to explore (your elements), and then use construct elicitation to derive the important dimensions within your field of enquiry.

Elements Mustn't Overlap or Contain One Another

Another analogy will illustrate the point about the elements being discrete. Suppose that your essay will be about battles. Again, you would start by drawing up a list of battles which give a good spread over your area of interest - begin with concrete examples. Suppose further that one of your battles was the D-Day landing, and another was Omaha Beach - one of the subsidiary battles within the D-Day landing. You'd find that you needed to treat Omaha Beach as a subject on its own, because although it was part of the D-Day landings what happened there was very different from what happened on some of the other invasion beaches. In Grid terms, you've got a

non-discrete element set: OMAHA BEACH as an element is a subset of D-DAY LANDING as an element. This is a potential problem whenever you use an element set composed of events or activities. The best way to guard against it is to try to be sure that your elements don't overlap, and perhaps to think about events or activities which are sufficiently bound in time and place that they could be captured on a video clip.

To change the subject-matter, if you were counselling someone with a difficult relationship, then QUARRELLING WITH SYBIL is not as good an element as THE LAST QUARREL WITH SYBIL, and/or THE WORST QUARREL WITH SYBIL, etc. (ENQUIRE WITHIN does contain the facility to correct an overlapping element set during the interview, with no loss of data).

Summary

To summarise: if your Grid interview seems never to get off the ground, you're getting a lot of generalities which are difficult to refine and/or ladder, your interviewee shows signs of impatience with what feel like meaningless questions - go back and ask yourself whether your element set is truly concrete. Abstract concepts, half-poles of constructs, large-scale events, don't work. To repeat: an element should hurt when you drop it on your foot.

To repeat: an element should hurt when you drop it on your foot.

Prepared by Dr Valerie Stewart

Repertory Grid is a Conversation

One of the things which sometimes worries me is the way I hear some practitioners talking about Grid: as if were something they do to other people, like a psychological test or an interview. The purpose of this tip is to reinforce what Kelly so often indicated: that Grid is in fact a structured conversation between two people in which Grid provides the methodology for constructive listening as they both explore an issue of common concern. I worry that some people seem to focus their attention on the final analysis - the completed Grid - at the expense of the value inherent in the process of getting there.

Involve the interviewee in the interpretation

Let me give some examples. A query came from someone who'd done Grid interviews with a sample of managers - that is, elicited constructs and ratings - and then taken the information back to the office to enter it into the program for analysis. In the course of exploring his query I asked him whether he was going to go back to the original managers, feed the information back, get their comments and refinements, explore any new or unresolved issues. That wasn't part of his plan. This is of course technically incorrect: the results of any 'first pass' with a client are unlikely to give either party the full picture. What bothered me more, though, was his surprise when I suggested it: as if, once his interviewees had yielded up their data, they had nothing more to contribute and that the analysis and interpretation lay solely in his hands. The power implications were unhealthy.

Much more disturbing was a comment made by someone who was proposing a Grid study with the members of a work-group who were not getting on well with one another. She remarked in passing that she wasn't sure how to handle the [feedback](#) because she would be seen to be pointing out their mistakes to them. The great beauty of Grid, properly done, is that it's a means for getting people to see things for themselves.

Remember: the interviewee's probably even more interested than you are

Unhealthy power relationships aside, though, if you understand that Grid is a co-operative conversation you can enlist your interviewee's cooperation in your project - wherever your project fits on the continuum from research to counselling. Your interviewee is probably going to be more interested in the dynamics of his or her construct system than you are - after all, you've seen lots, and it's probably his or her first time. So for example when a counsellor asked me what should be the subject of the fourth interview with a client (she hadn't done the first one yet) I suggested that she leave it up to the client. As long as she had a good repertoire of Grid technology - for example knowing when and how to introduce new elements like [MY IDEAL SELF](#) or perhaps suggest some constructs, she could almost certainly trust the client to see the important issues which the analysis was feeding back.

Sometimes the journey matters more than the arrival

In many Grid interviews, the journey matters much more than the arrival. If you set up a session where the elements are ‘times in my life when I learned something important,’ or ‘changes which our organisation has made in the past two years,’ or ‘times when I tried to be assertive’, the value lies much more in the thinking which the Grid process makes you do than in the final analysis chart. This is the case for any unrehearsed element set (an unrehearsed element set is one which represents concepts which you are unlikely to have given much systematic thought to. So, members of your family or people you work with are not likely to be an unrehearsed element set because you probably think about them a lot, whereas ‘times in my life when I learned something important’ almost certainly won’t have attracted the same amount of deep thought). I keep an **Enquire Within**[®] session about client relationships on my desktop; its value to me is not the shape of the analysis, interesting though it is, but the questions it makes me ask myself.

Summary

In summary: Grid is not a test. It is not something you do to people, but with or for people. It is a process, not a picture, and your expertise should lie in providing the structure rather than arriving at a judgement.

Prepared by Dr Valerie Stewart

More On Selecting Elements

Guidance on how to achieve a good Repertory grid interview element set, by making sure that your elements are concrete and discrete, was given in the hint [Hints on Choosing Elements](#). This is about the three different ways you can derive an element set, with the pros and cons of each approach.

Offered element sets

This is the term for when you as the interviewer determine the element set in advance of the interview, with no input from the interviewee. Use it when you are certain that it is these elements, and these alone, which you want to start the interview. For example, if you were doing market research to see how people construed eight different brands of soap powder, you would use those eight brands as your elements. Or if you were doing separate Grids with all the members of a team about their perceptions of the other team members, then the team members must be the elements for every interview.

The advantage of using offered elements is simply that of control: you as the interviewer determine what the Grid interview will be about. The disadvantage is that your interviewee may not be familiar with some of the elements, and so you need to check that the interviewee does recognise all of them (and perhaps keep a few spare in reserve).

Offer a category

With this strategy, you would name the category into which the elements should fall, but leave it up to the interviewee to name the actual elements: for example 'Think of eight brands of soap powder,' or think of the four best managers you know ... and four of the least effective,' and so on. The advantage of this is that you can be certain that the elements are known to the interviewee, but you might get a slight bias towards those which are more familiar.

Use element creation questions

This strategy has you, the interviewer, prepare a list of questions to which the answers will be the elements: for example 'Tell me the career you would most prefer ... and one you would never consider ... and your best friend's career ... and another which is appealing ... and another which you wouldn't like ...' etc. There are several advantages in this process: it makes sure that you have a good scatter over the domain you are exploring, you know that the elements are familiar to the interviewee, there's a stronger feeling of ownership, and if you are doing a project which involves getting Grids from several people then the collated answers to the element questions are themselves informative. The price you pay is that this kind of element set takes longer to elicit, but in many applications of Grid it's worth it.

Make sure you cover both sides of the boundary

Whatever strategy you use, if you are using Grid to help define a boundary then you need to have elements from both sides of the boundary. In other words, if you are using Grid to uncover how the interviewee perceives the characteristics of good team members, then you must have in your elements some good team members and some not-so-good, otherwise you won't get the contrast. If you want to help someone explore occasions when they have successfully been assertive, you need in the element set some occasions which were successful and some which weren't.

You can mix strategies

You can of course use a mixture of strategies. You might use element creation questions to begin with, and then supply some elements yourself if you want to be sure that those elements are included. In that case, it's probably best to begin with the element creation questions because you will then know whether a given element is there as a response to a particular question.

And remember: elements should be concrete, discrete, and homogenous.

Prepared by Dr Valerie Stewart

The Grid Interview Gives You Lots of Opportunities to Probe

One of the things you learn as you become a good Grid practitioner is that a Grid interview is not linear, and that it gives you many different opportunities to probe for information or insights. You don't have to follow a set formula; you can be flexible.

A few examples to illustrate:

Keep the Flow Going

The most important priority when you're interviewing someone new to Grid is to make sure that they're comfortable with the two-against-one triadic comparison process. Some people take to this very quickly and produce construct after construct. Others find it difficult at first and may need a little help - you can shuffle the cards around for them, for example. If someone's really flowing, don't stop them; but if it's difficult, you could move to laddering up (which pole of the construct do you prefer, in terms of the purpose), or start to do some ratings of elements on constructs. After a little work with laddering or rating, your interviewee is likely to gain insight about constructs and how they work, and you can go back to doing some more triadic comparisons. In other words, you don't have to get all the constructs out first before starting to work with them. You can always go back for more. What's important is that the interviewee feels comfortable with the process.

Pause and Assign Priorities

Another way to get a new perspective on the information generated is to ask the interviewee to sort the constructs into high, medium, and low priorities. This is useful if you've got a great many constructs and you'd like to work only with the high priority ones for a while; but it also enables you to ask the interviewee about the characteristics which separate the three groups. This can give you some more constructs, or take you naturally into laddering.

Use the Differentiation Process

With **Enquire Within**[®], you can start to differentiate between highly correlated elements or constructs on a Grid as small as 6 x 6. Differentiation is a product of the dendritic analysis, where the program looks for elements which are highly correlated and asks for a construct which will 'split' the two - in other words, for a construct on which one element will rate at one end of the scale and the other element at the other end. Or, when you are working with constructs, it asks for a new element which will be rated one way by one construct and the other way by the second. Differentiation is a highly focussed search whose purpose is obvious to the interviewee, and the elements or constructs it produces are almost guaranteed to be relevant to your purpose.

Offer or Ask for New Elements or Constructs

As you work your way through the interview, you can introduce new elements or constructs as appropriate to your purpose. For example, if you were in a counselling situation with someone who was not happy with their relationship with their boss, you might begin by using the existing team members, plus MY BOSS and MYSELF, as elements, and then introduce one or two new elements which give expression to your counselling agenda - for example, MYSELF AS MY BOSS WOULD LIKE ME TO BE, or MY BOSS AS I WOULD LIKE HER TO BE, or MYSELF AS I WOULD LIKE TO BE. Introducing imaginary or 'ideal' elements part-way through the interview in this way is often the best way of exploring this kind of dissonance, rather than having them in the element set from the beginning, because their abstract quality may make them difficult to work with from the start. Similarly you might offer a new construct: if for example you were doing market research on holiday destinations, you might offer a construct *made me decide never to go there again - not so important* and see what constructs were correlated with it. Enquire Within allows you to enter new elements or constructs at any stage in the process and have them brought into the dendritic analysis, so that you can immediately look for the difference between MYSELF and MYSELF AS MY BOSS WOULD LIKE ME TO BE, and go into a discussion about where the differences are, do they matter, whose problem are they, and what would have to change in order to resolve any important differences.

Summary

To summarise: the most important goal, particularly at the beginning of the interview, is to have the interviewee feel comfortable with the process and fluent. If they're producing lots of constructs, go with the flow. If it's difficult, start to use the constructs in some way which will make their purpose more apparent - laddering up or down, rating, looking at the matrix, differentiation ... you can always go back later. You don't have to stick to a prescribed order of doing things in order to get the best out of Grid.

Prepared by Dr Valerie Stewart

Alternative Strategies for Construct Elicitation using Repertory Grid

A correspondent asks about simplified or alternative strategies for construct elicitation using Repertory Grid. This prompts a review of how to define a useful construct, as well as alternatives for achieving a good set of constructs.

The triadic comparison process is the only way you can be certain of getting two poles, so there isn't really any consistently successful alternative to offering the elements in triads. However, here are some hints for making the process as accessible as possible.

Constructs Should be Bipolar

A construct is a scale on which all, or nearly all, of the elements can be rated. Therefore it must have two poles. This may seem to be a very elementary place to start, but one occasionally sees 'constructs' described by just one word - for example 'efficiency' or 'happiness', usually in order to fit them into an oversimplified analysis. The reason why one-word descriptions aren't a good idea is that:

Both Ends of the Construct Should Carry Equal Weight

In other words, both poles should be equally well-defined. A construct like X - not X will prove awkward to use when rating; but more important is the fact that you want to know how the contrast pole is defined by the client. If one pole of the construct is 'creative', the contrast pole might be 'practical', or 'dull', or 'realistic', or 'disciplined' ... or any of half a dozen other notions, depending on the client's experience; and you and the client will only know what's meant by 'creative' if you see its contrast pole. So it would not be useful to let pass a construct 'creative - not creative', nor to label the construct 'creativity'. Ask for the other pole to be defined, with a question like 'how would you describe the other(s) by contrast?'

Constructs Should Be Appropriate to the Purpose

You need to ensure that you are exploring the domain of constructs appropriate to the purpose. For example, you could interview a manager about his or her team members with a counselling contract, in which case you would want constructs about how the manager feels about the team, relates to them; or you could use the same element set but with an agenda of drawing up a person-specification, in which case you would want constructs about performance. The way to take care of this is with the qualifiers - the '... in terms of...' questions you ask when laying down the triads. However, do be aware that at the start of the interview you are likely to get a few [propositional constructs](#) while people settle down into the routine of triadic comparisons; this is nothing to worry about. If you get nothing but propositional constructs, however, this is probably a sign that for whatever reason the interviewee is uncomfortable and you should explore the reasons for this.

So, having defined the qualities of a good construct, are there any tips for making construct elicitation easier?

Physical Sorting is Important

I've seen people try to short-cut the process by giving their interviewee a list of elements and asking them to look at numbers 2, 5 and 7. This doesn't work, even with very perceptive interviewees. It really is important to write the elements on cards so that they can be shuffled around, or otherwise present them three at a time. *Enquire Within* allows you to do both - you can shuffle the elements around on the screen until you see them in a satisfactory physical relationship to one another.

Full Context

One way of being certain that you'll get a construct is to place all the elements in front of the client and ask for the two which are most similar, and then ask what it is they have in common; then ask for the element which is most different on that dimension. This almost always breaks the log-jam, and if it doesn't then you need to go back and think about whether the client is comfortable with the contract and the purpose.

Start Rating As Soon As You Can

Sometimes it helps to show the client how the constructs are going to be used - that is, to rate the elements and form a Grid. So even if you have as few as six constructs, you could start the rating process and show the first Grid analysis - letting the dog see the rabbit, as it were. And following on from this:

Use the Differentiation Process

If you're using a dendritic analysis program, such as *Enquire Within*, with as few as six elements and constructs you can begin to get new elements and constructs from the differentiation process - where you look at highly correlated elements, or constructs, and ask for a new construct or element which will 'split' the correlation if the client sees it as unrepresentative of the truth as they see it.

Summary

So, in summary: there isn't really any consistently successful alternative to triadic comparisons, but there are ways of making the process easier and more transparent when your client gets stuck. If none of these work, then I suggest that you probably need to revisit the way you set up the interview: that is, the superordinate purpose, the purpose for the interview, the client's comfort with the contract and what will happen to the data, and whether you've got a good element set (see the earlier tips on choosing elements).

Prepared by Dr Valerie Stewart

On The Range Of Convenience Of Constructs

For a Grid interview to be useful, all or most of the elements should be able to be rated on all or most of the constructs. If not, some constructs may have a limited range of convenience and some adjustment may be needed.

Range of Convenience

The 'range of convenience' is a term which gives expression to the fact that not all elements in the world can be rated on all constructs in the world. Few people could rate the element FALSE TEETH on the construct 'religious - atheist', for example. For a Grid interview to be useful, all or most of the elements should be able to be rated on all or most of the constructs.

The rating process is the means by which the interviewee gives expression to how the elements are judged, and then in the analysis you are able to see the deeper relationships between the elements and the constructs. So if you find that a construct which has emerged from consideration of one triad of elements is difficult to apply to the other elements, you and the interviewee have to work out whether it is a useful construct in its own right, and/or whether it could be made more useful by adjusting it in some way. (You may also need to consider whether you have a 'rogue' triad of elements).

Problem Constructs

Generally speaking, the constructs which are most likely to give you problems with their range of convenience are [propositional](#), situational, or in some other way closer to the periphery of the construct system. Core constructs, almost by definition, are likely to be applicable to all the elements in your chosen domain. For example, if you were interviewing someone about key relationships, you might elicit a construct 'bullied me as a child - protected me as a child' and this wouldn't apply to relationships which the person had formed after they became adult; but it's not difficult to imagine that this person might have a core construct about the use of power in relationships which would apply to all the elements.

This gives a clue as to one approach you can adopt when you find a construct with a limited range of convenience: that is, [ladder](#) it up until you get closer to a core construct with which the interviewee feels comfortable.

Try Splitting the Construct Into Two

Another common problem can happen when the construct which emerges quite legitimately from one triad proves, on closer inspection, to be better expressed as two. For example, in an interview about colleagues at work, you may get a construct 'plays office politics badly - plays office politics skillfully' and what you really have is two - 'plays office politics badly - doesn't play office politics' and 'plays office politics skillfully - doesn't play office politics'. You'll probably be alerted to this at the rating stage, because it will become apparent that a rating in the middle of the scale doesn't feel right: it feels middling, neutral, not giving enough emphasis to the importance to the client of the judgement 'doesn't play politics.' In some circumstances the apparently simple construct 'male - female' might be better expressed as 'male - bisexual' and 'female - bisexual.' In these circumstances the answer is simple - rewrite the construct as two. The interviewer just needs the

skill to recognise the client's discomfort at the rating stage. Enquire Within allows you to rewrite a construct from the rating dialog box, so this option is always available.

If There Are Still Problems

And if after all this you're still having problems, then it's back to the fundamentals: have you got a coherent [element](#) set, does it address your purpose, is the domain you're exploring one which makes sense to the interviewee? And - never forgetting that Grid is a conversation - it's time to ask the interviewee for help in putting the process back on track.

Prepared by Dr Valerie Stewart

On the Importance of the Contrast Pole

Recently I was shown the results of a 'Repertory Grid' interview - or at least that was how it was described. All the elements were in place, and there was a five-point rating scale; but only one pole of each scale was given. I'm afraid that this is not good Grid practice, and I want to explain why.

Lack of Semantic Weight

There's a very old piece of psycholinguistic research in which the authors took a series of adjectives, such as *happy*, *interesting*, *well*, etc., and used the techniques of semantic differential analysis to examine how much 'weight' was implied when the opposite word was expressed in a variety of ways, e.g. *not happy*, *unhappy*, and *sad*; *not interesting*, *uninteresting*, and *boring*, etc. They found that in all cases the 'Not X' or 'Un X' formulation carried less information than the formulation X-Y, where Y is the dictionary opposite. This is one reason why good Grid practitioners always ask for the contrast pole to be expressed in its own right, rather than using the emergent pole and tacking a negative on the front of it. You want a scale, a construct, where both poles carry equal weight.

What You Infer May Be Wrong

If you don't elicit the contrast pole from the interviewee, you are left to infer it; or if a number of people's constructs are to be combined or shared, then it is up to someone else to infer it. And it could be dead wrong.

For example, imagine that you are interviewing someone about her significant others and she produces one pole which she labels *manic*. Is this one end of a construct *manic - depressive*? Or is it one end of a construct *manic - even-tempered*? Her construct, which of course is personal to her and intended to reflect her experience, could be either, depending on how she experiences the other significant people in her life. If the fully-expressed construct is *manic - depressive*, then the even-tempered people in her life will be rated at the middle of the scale. If the fully-expressed construct is *manic - even-tempered*, then the even-tempered people in her life will be rated at the end of the scale.

Of course, you should take the opportunity during rating and feedback to explore the range of her construct of which one end is *manic*, and together you may want to re-write or split it (see the hint on [Range of Convenience](#) of constructs), but if you leave the contrast pole unexamined then you are not doing justice to the construct system.

Remember All Judgements Are Scalar

This was one of Kelly's first principles: we do not define goodness without having a corresponding definition of evil, and so on. Yesterday, for example, I read the word *determined* use to describe Margaret Thatcher, Pope John XXIII, Nelson Mandela, and Hitler. Most people, I guess, would agree that the word applies to each in some sense; but Thatcher's determination was rather different from the late Pope's, and so on. We would only begin to know exactly what each writer meant by the word if we knew what, for each writer, was the contrast pole to *determined*. (Also, of course, what other constructs correlated with it).

If we describe one pole of the scale and leave the other blank, we don't know what the scale is - not even the scale of which we have defined the one pole.

There Are Other Risks Too

It's not implicit in the process, but I often observe that single-pole Grids are restricted to evaluative words and phrases only, and there is no requirement that every construct be evaluative; and if you present your elements in such a way that the 'good' pole is always the one to be elicited then when you start rating you run the risk of positional response bias in the answers.

Ask For the Contrast Pole

So, please don't omit asking for the contrast pole (and note that it's a contrast, not necessarily a dictionary opposite, and it's much better to use the word 'contrast' when you're asking). Otherwise, you will certainly lose valuable information and you may find yourself construing someone else's construing and getting it wrong.

Prepared by Dr Valerie Stewart

On Using ‘Ideal’ Elements in the Repertory Grid Interview

‘Ideal’ elements are a very good way to explore scenarios, ask ‘what if’ questions, and be more specific in your enquiry. An ‘ideal’ element is not a real one, but one which you and the interviewee invent and then put into the Grid part-way through.

Relationships at Work Example

For example, in a Grid about relationships at work, you might get a sense that your interviewee has a strained relationship with his boss. So you might suggest that you create one or two new imaginary elements and rate them: for example, MYSELF AS MY BOSS WOULD LIKE ME TO BE, or MY BOSS AS I WOULD PREFER HER TO BE. Together you then look at the differences between the first of these elements and MYSELF, the differences between the second of these elements and MY BOSS, and maybe some other comparisons which the process suggests. You can then get into a discussion about the size and nature of the problem, who owns the problem, what would have to happen to change it, etc.

Market Research Example

Or in a [market research](#) Grid, you could introduce MY IDEAL CAR; setting up a person-specification, THE IDEAL PERFORMER or THE IDEAL APPLICANT; examining stressful situations, THE MOST STRESSFUL SITUATION I CAN IMAGINE and THE LEAST STRESSFUL SITUATION I CAN IMAGINE. The idea is to name an imaginary element which gives expression to the question you want to explore when contrasted with the real elements. They can be very instructive in getting to the core of an issue quickly - almost too quickly, if you have a [counselling](#) contract. The difference between MYSELF and MYSELF AS MY BOSS WOULD LIKE ME TO BE might need to be taken in bite-size chunks.

Introducing the ‘Ideal’ Element

For most Grid purposes and practitioners, it’s best to introduce the ‘ideal’ element part-way through the session rather than at the beginning. Get a good number of constructs out through consideration of real elements (people, cars, stressful situations, etc) and then introduce the ‘ideal’. There are two connected reasons for this:

- if you include your ‘ideal’ element from the beginning, you have a non-homogenous element set and it could be difficult to work with; and
- the ‘ideal’ element may not be clearly defined in the client’s mind at the start of the process. Using real elements to give you a rich selection of constructs from which the client can come to their own definition of the ideal.

That's not a hard-and-fast rule; for example, I saw a nice application of Grid used to help someone reflect on selection interviews she had performed, and each triad was composed of two real interviews and THE IDEAL INTERVIEW. That was a very experienced Grid interviewer, working with a client who had already done a lot of thinking about selection interviews. If you want the low-risk route, introduce the 'ideal' element part-way through. **Enquire Within**[®] lets you introduce a new element at any time and rate it immediately, so it's there whenever you're ready to explore the insights you hope to achieve.

Prepared by Dr Valerie Stewart

On Research Design, Purpose, and Analysis

The Repertory Grid interview involves using interviewees' valuable time and resources and considerable introspection which deserves the respect and integrity shown by good research design

Now I've got all the information, how do I analyse it?

There are many, many different ways of analysing Grid data, from simple frequency counts to complex statistical matrix manipulations, and I don't propose to list them all here. What I want to discuss is the importance of having a good research design so that you know which [analysis](#) method or methods will be the most suitable.

Grid is a powerful empty procedure

One of my mentors in Grid technique was Professor Laurie Thomas, who was then at Brunel University. Laurie was easily the best teacher of Grid I have known, and also one of the most inventive in term of research design. One of his key phrases was 'Grid is a powerful empty procedure'; by which he meant not only that it was content-neutral, but also that whenever you do a Grid (unless it's on a topic about which the subject has no experience at all) you will get data. The potential problem, which you have to anticipate by good research design, is that the data might not be suitable for your purpose.

What's your purpose?

For example, you could interview managers about critical incidents in their jobs. The element set would be critical incidents. But what's your purpose? Is it a counselling contract, where your job is to help the manager gain insight into what kind of incidents are the most troublesome?. Is it part of a [competency](#) analysis, where your job is to understand how people construe the demands on their skills? Is it part of a project to see whether there are any differences between people who find it easy to get on with new technology and those who don't? Are you trying to find out whether the organisation is more or less stressed than it was two years ago? And so on.

Each of these purposes demands its own form of configuration and analysis. If this isn't considered beforehand, then you stand a fair chance of finishing up with furniture-vans full of useless data.

Five thoughts on research design

So I'd like to offer five thoughts, thus:

1. **Get to know the range of analysis programs which are available for analysing Grids.** They're all different; they each look at your data in different ways.
2. **Focus on the design of the project.** When we wrote the Business Applications of the Repertory Grid, which was published in 1988, the first half was in effect 'teach yourself Grid'. The second half was about individual applications and purposes, and underlying each chapter there's a more-or-less hidden theme which says 'think how much better we could do this with a computer'.

Nonetheless, what we learned was the huge variety of low-tech ways in which you could accomplish a Grid project when all you had was paper and pencil. They're still valid. And of course they made us focus more clearly on the design of the project and the subsequent analysis because they made us think more clearly about the cost-effectiveness of our efforts. Because it made us think about the 'front end' of the project, we couldn't kid ourselves that somewhere at the end of the rainbow was a computer program which would somehow impose order on badly-planned data.

3. **Pilot, pilot, pilot.** Don't commit yourself to a huge research programme without first working through a small-scale version and seeing for yourself whether it looks as if it will work and meet your purposes. Before you use up other people's time and resources (and create expectations which you may not be able to fulfill) work it through in miniature.

For almost any Grid purpose, there are several different configurations which will do the job; so you can adapt. Anything other than to find yourself buried under useless data, probably followed by the discovery that things are no clearer once you've fed them into the computer.

4. **Feedback.** It doesn't necessarily follow that relying on a computer program excises the message that [Grid is a conversation](#), that a 'first pass' over the interviewees is just that and they should be given feedback and the chance to comment and the opportunity to help with interpretation. But it does no harm to stress its importance.

I remember someone who'd collected 45 Grids from people all over the country, retreated into the computer, and was asking for help choosing a form of computer analysis. He didn't have any plans for giving feedback. Not only was this discourteous to the people who'd given their time, it meant that he was cutting himself off from the chance to question them about the analysis and ask them what conclusions they could draw. He was cutting himself off from one of the best sources of analysis he had: which is not a computer program, it's the people who gave you the data.

5. **Vulnerability to a poorly-stated research hypothesis.** Finally, Grid is a research method just like any other research method in that it is vulnerable to a poorly-stated research hypothesis. A poor hypothesis will lead to an inappropriate research design, difficulty with configuration and analysis, and little or nothing added to the collective wisdom.

Repertory Grid Interviewing - Back to a Few Basics

You might have seen it, read about it, thought that it felt right for something you want to achieve. But you may not have access to an experienced practitioner, or a good course, and so you set out to teach yourself. These few interviewing hints are for absolute newcomers to Repertory Grid.

A Few Hints on Interview Administration

A few hints on interview administration - nothing to do with content or purpose, just how to master an unfamiliar technique.

1. Make the Elements Moveable

By this I mean write their names on separate cards, or have them on pictures if it's that kind of Grid. When you lay them in front of your interviewee and explain the two-against-one process, physically shift them about so that the pair can go together and the singleton is separated.

Please don't just give people a list of elements and ask them to look at three from the list. People who aren't very analytical will find it close to impossible, and even very bright people find it much easier when they can shuffle. It also allows you, by shuffling them yourself, to indicate that you can pair and re-pair in different ways. (*Enquire Within* has a facility called WorkSpace, which allows you to click on the elements, move them into a workspace, and pick them up and move them around with your mouse pointer).

2. Use Big Cards For Constructs

Use big cards for constructs - assuming that you're not entering the constructs directly into the program. Five inches by eight inches (I haven't gone metric) is about the right size. Then you can write the construct in the middle of the card, and you can write your ladderings up and down above and below the construct itself. I usually write an upwards arrow indicating a laddering up, and a down arrow for laddering down.

3. Let the Works Show

If you can, sit catty-corner with your interviewee so that he or she can see what you're writing. When I've got about six to eight constructs, I usually pat the pile and say something like 'You can see what we're doing here - and the more of these distinctions you can give me the better.' Further patting of the pile with the implication that you're doing well is good also. (Careful to be seen to be rewarding quantity not quality - certainly in the early stages. You don't want to give the impression that you're more interested in certain kinds of constructs.

If you sense that the interview is genuinely going in the wrong direction - for example, if you get lots of [propositional constructs](#) and you want behavioural ones, then deal with it by repeating one of the qualifiers; for example '...these three in terms of how they behave'.

4. Go With the Flow When It's Flowing

If you're getting lots of helpful constructs, don't stop the flow by going into laddering. On the other hand, if you haven't got many constructs it might be a good idea to start laddering - you can always come back to construct later. What's important is to make the interviewee as comfortable with the process as possible as early as possible.

5. You Don't Have to Ladder Every Construct

And you don't have to start [laddering](#) with the first construct. Take a sneaky peek at the information as it emerges and choose one or two elements which you're pretty certain will be easy and interesting to ladder on. And if you're deluged by constructs - the record stands at 82 in an hour from someone who fell in love with the process - then you could first ask the person to sort the constructs into high, medium, and low priority and ladder only the high priority ones.

6. Suppress Everything You Learned on Your Active Listening Course

This means, don't summarise the construct yourself (you could ask the interviewee to summarise it, but generally it's best to stay with the construct as it is). Don't supply the contrast pole yourself - say 'And how would you describe the other by contrast?' And don't be afraid of the silence when you've presented a new element set. Silence means that the person is thinking.

7. Keep Your Own Stuff Identifiable

I have a self-imposed procedure, when I'm doing a Grid interview manually (i.e. not straight into Enquire Within), if I need to summarise or otherwise add my own touch to a construct. It's simply to put square brackets around the text; this indicates that it comes from me, not the interviewee.

8. Check for Missing Information

Don't forget at the end of the interview to ask if you've missed anything important (referring back to your purpose). If you're using cards, hand the cards to the interviewee to flick through. If you're using a program which prints a construct list, print off the list. Usually you'll get one of two answers: either they'll say that they've told you more than they thought they knew themselves, or you'll get a highly non-redundant summary of the content of the interview. Or sometimes they'll add one or two more constructs.

9. Tell the Interviewee What Happens Next

Don't forget to tell the interviewee what will happen to the information, how they will get feedback, etc.

Prepared by Dr Valerie Stewart

On Propositional Constructs

One of the more pleasing aspects of Repertory Grid is that it has very little jargon. Elements, constructs, and laddering, and that's about all. However, one particular piece of jargon is worth exploring, and that's the question of what is meant by the term 'propositional' construct. Don't ask me who christened them thus - it wouldn't have been my choice.

Propositional Constructs Describe the Objective Properties of the Elements

A propositional construct is one which describes the objective properties of the elements - such as *male-female*, *old-young*, *new-old*, *business class-coach*, etc. Because they're objective properties of the elements, about which nobody would seriously disagree, they don't tell you much, by themselves, about how the interviewee experiences or feels about the elements. For almost all Grid purposes, you want to get into perceptions and feelings, not objective descriptions. For this reason, some people say that propositional constructs don't matter, or they should be discarded when you move to the real stuff.

They Get New Interviewees Started

However, the reality is more complex than that. Firstly, when you introduce a stranger to the process of construct elicitation, comparing two against one, they're quite likely to begin by giving you propositional constructs because they're getting used to the two-against-one process. Experienced Gridders sometimes forget how unusual that question can feel when you've never been asked it before. So you can expect some propositional constructs at the start of the interview.

Getting some propositional constructs at the start of the interview is nothing to worry about; the priority is to get the interviewee used to how Grid marshals their thinking. Then you can suggest or re-emphasise your qualifying question, e.g. 'Now for these three, can you do the same but think about how you personally feel about them?'

Most people can then move into personal constructs - evaluative, sensory, behavioural, whatever you want for your purpose.

But if someone gets stuck on propositional constructs and doesn't seem to be able to get more personal, then you need to wonder why. Now, because Grid is free from interviewer bias, it is also impossible to fake (try giving me a construct that isn't yours). So if the person's unhappy with the contract, doesn't trust you, is under stress, or feels that they've been 'bounced' into giving a lot of personal information too quickly, their only choices are silence or propositional constructs. Which means that you should think about these issues - trust, stress, relationships, timing - and check the interviewee's comfort level.

They Can Be Useful in Their Own Right

Propositional constructs can be useful in their own right, once you start to analyse the data and look at the other constructs correlated with them. (You'll also see the first stage of this when you

[ladder down](#)). To take an obvious example, if you were interviewing someone about television programmes as part of a market research project, with programmes as elements, you'll probably get a propositional construct like *documentary-entertainment*. You need to know the personal constructs associated with this propositional one: how does the person perceive documentary programmes differently from entertainment programmes?

So - don't look down on propositional constructs. They can send you messages about the interviewee's comfort level, and they will show you the links between the objective and subjective world.

Prepared by Dr Valerie Stewart

Repertory Grid in Recruitment and Selection Interviewing

A number of people have asked lately whether it is possible to use Repertory Grid as a selection interviewing tool. The answer is Yes and No, depending very much on the kind of contract you have with the interviewee.

Can Repertory Grid Be Used as a Selection Interviewing Tool?

It's such an attractive proposition, isn't it? Find out about people on their own terms, in their own language; not being tied to psychological testing; being able to probe interesting areas more fully. However, what you run up against immediately is the fact that because nobody can fake a Grid, and so if they feel uncomfortable they retreat into silence or giving you propositional constructs. Most Gridders have forgotten what it feels like to experience Grid for the first time - the speed with which you become aware that this is all about you, there's no place to hide, and you're into rather speedy self-revelation.

Yes, But

For that reason, I wouldn't use Grid in selection interviewing until the recruitment process was quite advanced, the applicant(s) had had time to feel comfortable with you and trust you, and the interviewer was very clear about the kind of contract you had with the interviewee. In fact, my advice would be exactly the same for Grid as for the use of personality testing, which is:

1. Wait until you have a short-list of people who have gone through all the initial hoops and whom you'd consider employing;
2. Think of the process - Grid or psychological testing - as a way of helping you work out how best you can help this person 'hit the ground running': for example, if you detect that someone would do best as a senior member of a small group, you'll have problems if the only post you have in mind is as a junior member of a large group;
3. Avoid any possibility of suggesting that there are right or wrong answers;
4. What gets presented to line managers is not the psychological profile, or the raw Grid, but a report you've written which summarises the chief points about that person;
5. Feedback to the applicant is essential (you almost can't avoid it with Grid, but unscrupulous people often duck out of it with psychological testing);
6. Data on unsuccessful applicants are kept for a very short time only and then destroyed.
7. No single test or instrument should be relied on for a make-or-break decision. Grid or test results are only part of a bigger package, which includes interviews, references, technical competence, etc.

Then you could use Grid, probably using key events in the person's life as elements, or technical issues related to the person's speciality, and what you're doing is really a very penetrating form of behaviour-based interview. Be careful to allow plenty of time, because you don't want the applicant to think that there was more they could say but you cut them off in mid-flow.

Use at the Person-Specification Stage

However, if you sense that Grid wouldn't be appropriate because you can't meet these conditions, you don't need to remove it from the process altogether. It can do extraordinary things at the person-specification stage.

A session with the receiving manager where he or she is asked to think of critical events in the new hire's job, in terms of the skills and abilities which will be needed to manage them successfully makes the receiving managers think really hard about what they want from their new hires, instead of just reeling off a list of competences and experience. It's a very good way to ensure that the new hire comes into an environment where the manager has gone through some forcible empathy about the demands of the task. It's another way of making sure that the new hire hits the ground running; it's more cost-effective and less personally sensitive than doing Grids with the applicant.

In summary: Grid is great for helping devise person-specifications. It can also provide very interesting insights when used with job applicants, but you must be careful to manage the sensitivities involved and make sure that the interviewer has a high level of skill and empathy.

Prepared by Dr Valerie Stewart

A Brief Illustration of the Importance of Laddering in the Repertory Grid Interview

The Example - Doctors' Specialities

Many years ago, I was asked by the Department of Health to research why doctors chose their particular speciality. The overall purpose was that the Department was concerned that some specialities were overcrowded - in effect, the 'glamorous' specialities - and some, such as psychiatry and geriatrics, were under subscribed. Obviously it was a situation highly suitable for Grid - just to the point of construct elicitation, no more.

I took the precaution of asking the Department's experts in advance what they thought the key issues would be. Pay and status figured highly in their answers.

Using Element Creation Questions

Then I interviewed over 200 doctors. I used element creation questions, such as 'Name your current speciality, Name another one you might have chosen, Name one which under no circumstances you would have chosen, Name one which you wish you'd known more about, etc.' So it stands as a good example of what you can learn by [content analysis](#) of the elements if your sample's big enough and you keep the order of the questions consistent.

The Findings

The findings were fascinating. For example, would you believe that a lot of doctors don't like working with sick people? So they go into mending broken limbs, or delivering babies, etc. And you could tell the difference between a surgeon's constructs and the rest at a glance: surgeons' constructs were very black-and-white, reflecting the nature of the job: you cut or don't cut, you remove or let it stay in place, the patient dies or gets better ...

Using Laddering Up

Anyway, back to laddering, and in particular to laddering up. Laddering up is the process where you try to get closer to the person's core values and preferences, with a question like 'which end of the pole do you prefer, and why?' or 'why is that an important distinction to make about the elements?'

Almost every doctor gave us a construct like 'working with young people - working with adults.' But when I asked the laddering question - which do you prefer and why - there were two completely opposite answers. One group (typified by paediatricians) said things like 'It's a real test of my diagnostic skills when I can't really talk to the patient ... and if you save a life, you save so much life.' The other group said things like 'It's really hard to do a good diagnosis if you can't talk to the patient ... and if you lose a life, you lose so much life.'

In other words, the same construct, but two entirely different views of what it signified to the interviewee.

Three Lessons

There are three lessons (at least) to be drawn from this example, thus:

1. Don't discard [propositional constructs](#), laddering them up or down. 'Working with young people - working with adults' is a propositional construct - i.e. it refers to objective properties of the elements - but it generated important personal information.
2. Simple construct elicitation without laddering is hardly ever enough. If you've got a lot of constructs, you can ask the interviewee to prioritise and work only with the high priority ones.
3. The importance of [feedback](#), of fully involving the interviewee in the process, of not construing other people's construing. The only way I was going to learn this fascinating and important fact was by asking the interviewees at the time.

Grid is a Structured Conversation

It's just another illustration that the best way to think about Grid is as a [structured conversation](#) and that it is not up to us to judge, but to listen skilfully.

Prepared by Dr Valerie Stewart

[Click here](#) for an example of laddering in a session in which an experienced teacher reflects on his perceptions of his class.

Visual Inspection in the Repertory Grid Interview Process

A correspondent asks what can be learned from a Grid without putting it through any kind of analysis process. The answer is: quite a lot, provided that you think about it in advance and configure your session accordingly. In fact, just to make life difficult, I'll assume that not only do you not have a computer now, you never will. You are confined to paper, pencil, scissors, and listening skills.

The suggestions which follow are only a selection of what you could do; and always remember that you and the interviewee must know your joint purpose and you have a good contract.

Use Cards

Arrange to collect your information in a way which makes it easy to move things around on a desktop. So: use small cards for your elements (one per card, of course) and larger cards for your constructs (one per card). Write each construct about halfway down the card, so that you can record the [laddering](#) up information above it, and the laddering down below it. If you think that your interview is going to go beyond construct elicitation and involve some rating, get yourself one or two pieces of stout paper with an empty Grid ready-drawn (leave space at the top and side for writing in the names of the elements and constructs). Apologies if this paragraph sounds too basic, but it comes from early experience of my own.

Elements and Constructs Will be Limited

Reconcile yourself to the fact that you probably won't be able to handle as many elements and constructs as you would in an unlimited Grid, and that most of your information will come from:

- [content analysis](#) of the elements (perhaps)
- content analysis of the constructs (certainly)
- comparing only the ratings assigned to elements, probably in pairs or threes

Constructs Are Bipolar and Not Always Evaluative

Visual comparison of constructs gets difficult because they are bipolar; analysis programs inspect to see whether you would get a better correlation by reversing the constructs, but you won't be able to do this visually. (Don't think you can get around this by asking for the 'positive' pole of the construct to be always on the right. Not all constructs are evaluative, nor should they be).

Content Analysis of Elements

Content analysis of elements can be useful if you are interviewing a large number of people, using element creation questions which remain the same between interviews.

For example, if you're interviewing all the members of a team to learn more about the difference between projects which went well and projects which didn't, you might have the first two questions as 'Name two projects which in your view were successful,' followed by two questions asking for projects which were less successful. Then you might ask for one or two examples of projects which they thought would be difficult but turned out to be easier, and vice-versa; a couple of routine projects; and one 'ad lib' which your interviewee thinks would help complete the picture of life in this team. Compiling the answers to each of these questions could give you some very useful information in its own right.

Content Analysis of Constructs

Content analysis of constructs is simple, and again can lead to instant insights. Ask your interviewee to arrange the constructs in groups which have some similarity to one another. (Or you can do it yourself, but remember that Grid is supposed to be a conversation). Then you inspect the groupings in terms of your purpose - looking for big groups, little groups, and (this is the most difficult, but often the most revealing) groups that aren't there at all.

As an example of 'missing' groups, I'm fond of quoting a construct elicitation project which we did with 200 middle managers in a oil company in the 1980s. When the team began the content analysis, I put £5 on the table for the first person whose data included any mention of the customer. It remained unclaimed.

Group Size and Reliability

As with content analysis of elements, content analysis of constructs is more dependable if you have interviewed a number of people from a homogeneous group, rather than just one person, but you and the interviewee can learn a lot from the content analysis of one interviewee alone. (By the way, the figure of 200 middle managers wasn't our idea. With a homogenous group of people and the same purpose you stop getting much new data about after 20 interviews. The client wanted 200 and this in itself illustrated the risk-averseness which was part of their problem).

Working With One Person

So, if you're doing content analysis of just one person, this is where you can ask some questions depending on your purpose: for example, do the proportions feel like an accurate reflection of the way the interviewee thinks about the world? Is there anything important missing? What's the highest priority group? You can ask for the constructs to be arranged into three piles - high, medium, and low priority - and ask why the interviewee assigned them like that. At that point, good interviewing skills take over.

Comparing one or two elements is the other option. You do this physically; once you have all the elements rated on all the constructs, you prudently make a photocopy or two. (Note: consider using a simple tick/cross - in effect a two-point scale - for your rating. It loses detail but makes the visual inspection very much easier). Then with your trusty scissors you cut out the description of one element and move it next to the element you want to compare it with. At this point the need for good planning of the session becomes apparent, because you need to think about how many of these physical comparisons will be useful.

So, for example, if the purpose of your interview is to help someone whose parents seem to have unrealistic expectations of him or her, you would need to include the elements MYSELF, MYSELF AS MY PARENTS WANT ME TO BE, and perhaps MYSELF AS I WANT TO BE. The other elements in the set would obviously be the person's significant others, but in a sense they would be there as 'carriers' to allow you to get a good range of constructs; you would start work by comparing these three elements and discussing what the comparisons meant, who had the problem, etc. - i.e. moving into a classic counselling interview.

Other inventive ideas might suggest themselves to either of you - for example, creating and rating a completely new element, or cutting all the elements into columns and arranging them in families. But your planning of the session should bear in mind that you want most of the 'weight' of the conversation to come from a small number of element comparisons, and choose your elements accordingly.

There Once Were No Computers

Those of us Gridders who find that the policemen are looking younger nowadays can remember times when this was all we had. Nonetheless, we managed to get some good work done. Hope this helps.

Prepared by Dr Valerie Stewart

Teaching and Learning the Repertory Grid Interview

The processes that happen when someone is learning [Repertory Grid](#) interviewing are related to administration, analysis, and applications.

I'm not talking about learning the theory, or any of the advanced analyses. I'm talking about what happens when you first encounter Grid as a learner, because three things happen at once and unless you're prepared for it - as learner or as teacher - it can feel rather odd.

I always tell people this at the start of a course on Grid. After introducing the basic concepts (Kelly's concerns about interviewer bias, etc. plus elements and constructs) I tell them that their learning will be on three parallel streams, and that different people will be in different streams at any particular time. I've never found a way of reducing the number of streams, so I find that the best thing is to tell them in advance.

What are these three streams?

Administration.

They will be learning the physical task of managing the cards: one set of cards for the elements, another for the constructs (I always advise writing the constructs on cards, usually about 8 inches by 5: write the construct in the middle, and then you can record the [laddering](#) up and down results on the same cards). If the element cards are in any special order, they'll have to take care of that. By the way, it's essential to have the element written one per card, so that you can shuffle. Don't write the elements on a list and ask people to look at numbers 2, 5 and 7. Physically moving the cards around makes it much easier for the interviewee to understand.

At the same time, they'll be practising saying the formula: 'Tell me something that two of these have in common that makes them different from the other,' and its variations. And they have to learn the practice of silence: don't suggest, don't summarise, remember that your interviewees' silence means that they're thinking. Unlearn everything you learned on your Active Listening course.

Listening for themes and meaning

Even though this is a practice session, which probably means that the elements are easy to work with – I usually use elements like cars, or television programmes, or books they've read, rather than starting with a set of significant others - they'll be processing the information coming from the interviewee, their minds will be racing ahead to questions about how they will analyse and interpret the data. And of course they'll ask questions, which means that as a teacher you have to do a fine balancing act: answering the questions in just enough detail to satisfy those who are concerned, without getting into a long discussion about the myriad of analyses and purposes available. Long explanations at this stage will not suit everyone and will distract people from the task of practice.

What else can I use this for?

As people get deeper into practising Grid, they'll start to think of other purposes for this superb methodology. So you'll have lots of questions starting with 'Can you use Grid to?', and the answer will almost certainly be Yes but that won't be enough.

Important teaching points

So, you have these three separate learning streams: administration, analysis, and applications. You'll also have some teaching points which you want to make sure are covered thoroughly, which means that there are times when you want to ask for everyone's attention for some formal input on topics like:

- the importance of the [purpose](#) in helping you configure the session
- the strategies for choosing an [element](#) set
- the characteristics of a good element set
- different types of construct - [propositional](#), behavioural, evaluative, etc.
- [laddering](#) up and down
- choosing qualifiers
- methods of [analysis](#)
- the importance of [feedback](#) and involving the subject in the analysis

Transition to roles and responsibilities

My own experience is that it's difficult to teach even the basics of Grid in less than two days. Often I'm working with an in-house team who have a particular project to do, and so the teaching is focussed in the needs of that project. I've noticed – and I always tell people this – that one of the most useful components of a Grid course is the night's sleep they'll get between the first and second days. It seems that overnight the unconscious processes what's been learned and puts it into some kind of order. So the objective for the second day is to have all the team clear about their roles and responsibilities. However, on the second day people will be ready to ask questions (and understand the answers) about the wider uses of Grid. It's at this point that you get questions like 'Can I suggest an element of my own?' or 'Do you need to do a full analysis?' and so on. At this point – if not before – I introduce the Universal FlipChart, which contains just two words: **IT DEPENDS**.

What this means is that once people have learned the unusual disciplines of Grid – especially the fact that it's a co-operative exercise, interviewers have learned not to interrupt or summarise or construe other people's construing - you can do anything you like with Grid as long as you have chosen to do so, you know why, and you know what effect it could have. So, for example, you can suggest an element or a construct if it will help your purpose – but only if you have first learned the disciplines involved in not doing so. But if you suggest rather a lot of them, it may convey to the client a subtle message that you're only interested in certain categories, or there may be a 'right answer', and so on.

Practical experience

If I'm working with an in-house team to one purpose, then the next step is to do some accompanied interviews – I'll take each person out for a day, we'll do four interviews. I do the first while the trainee 'shadows' me – doing their best to capture the content themselves. Then we reverse roles; and then we decide how best to use the remaining two interviews.

If, on the other hand, the teaching programme is to teach the use of Grid for any circumstances, my preference is for a third day in which the learners go into small groups and help one another

design their own research protocols for their own issues, so that they can configure a whole project, including analysis and feedback. And who knows where it goes from there?

The important message

However, the most important message in this hint is to prepare you for these three parallel learning streams. Enquire Within gives you a lot of help with the administration, but the approach still takes some getting used to. Once you're past that stage – and the learning curve can be very steep – you're ready for the real work of design, analysis, feedback, and mining your data.

Prepared by Dr Valerie Stewart

The Importance of Piloting Repertory Grid Interview Sessions

Piloting sessions is so important to the success of a repertory grid interview project, whether using grid software or not, that it deserves its own dedicated hint.

Why Should you Pilot?

The question may seem so obvious as to be patronising. But we mustn't forget that Grid is a powerful but content-free procedure for having a [structured conversation](#), for a particular purpose, and with many different options for analysis. Unlike some other procedures, a Grid interview will always give you data. So if you've not set it up correctly, you may only learn that distressing fact when you try to make some sense of what you've got; at which point you may be under time pressure to complete a thesis, or you've made implicit or explicit promises to clients or patients and the delay may be damaging to you and/or them.

If you don't pilot, you won't be in a position to give (or get) feedback from your clients which could put you back on track should you be alert for the signals. I'm often surprised at the number of Grid projects which are planned without considering the importance of feedback – not just feedback at the end of the process, but feedback included as an integral part of the process. This is why I lose no opportunity to point out that Grid is a conversation. Often it is a conversation in which the journey is more important than the arrival (i.e. a final statistical analysis). This is why we designed **Enquire Within**[®] so that feedback is integral to the process of developing the cognitive map.

So, if you don't pilot, the worst-case scenario is that you have a furniture van full of data which will not meet the purpose, plus people leaning on you for the results you've promised them, plus a general question 'How do I analyse this?' which is unanswerable. Unanswerable not merely because there are so many different analysis techniques available but because the choice of analysis method should have been settled at the start. You wouldn't start to collect market survey data, or ask questions of a job applicant, or enter a set of figures into your calculator, without knowing what you wanted the results to tell you.

How Do You Pilot?

A pilot begins, like all good science, by your framing the question that you want the Grid to answer – in other words, what hypothesis do you want to test? Stating this clearly means that you will always have a point of reference for the goodness of your pilot.

Then you pilot your resources: that is, your elements or element creation questions, the purpose for this particular Grid (which may not be the same as your general hypothesis but will be linked to it), and the qualifiers you will use.

Elements/element creation questions:

- Do they give adequate cover of the domain you want to explore? If you are exploring a border (e.g. what's the difference between recruits who leave and those who stay) you need as elements both kinds of recruit.
- Are the elements [concrete and specific](#) enough – especially if they are events or activities?
- Will the interviewee understand them and relate to them?
- Have you got enough (six is a bare minimum, I usually recommend nine).
- Have you got too many – it's unlikely, but it's been known to happen.
- Do they all feel as if they 'belong' to the purpose?

Purpose of the particular Grid:

In other words, what do you want from this particular interviewee? If your overall hypothesis is: 'Women bank managers understand their customers' needs better than male bank managers', then you'll probably be interviewing a selection of man and women bank managers and your purpose for that interview will probably be something like 'In order to explore my understanding of my customers' needs.'

Qualifiers:

These are the '...in terms of' questions which modify the basic construct elicitation question and direct the interview towards your purpose. So to continue the example with bank managers, you'll probably have a qualifier like '... in terms of what they want from the bank,' but you won't want one like '.... in terms of their family life.'

Resources:

The elements, element creation questions, purpose and qualifiers are the basic building blocks. Experienced Gridders can usually think of these and try them out in their head to see whether they meet the purpose, but they will go all the way through asking themselves two or three construct elicitation questions: 'That feels about right,' won't do.

Session Practice

However, until you are entirely confident, you'll need someone who will let you practise your session with them, and that means:

Introduction:

What will you say to introduce the session? How will you form a good 'contract' with the interviewee so that he or she is alert and interested and takes your purpose on board? What will you say about what happens to the data, and when the interviewee can expect to see or discuss or work with the final results? Lots of Grid interviews fall over at this point, simply because one hasn't thought of how to introduce this rather strange process and how the interviewee will be feeling about it.

Feedback:

In your pilot interviews, be alert for the best times to give (and receive) feedback. You might prefer to think of feedback as stopping part-way through the session and summarising what you've learned so far in order to choose where to go next. But if you give no feedback at all during the session, so that it just seems like an exercise in producing constructs and rating them, the least that will happen is that your interviewee gets bored. The worst is that you could miss some valuable signals about the content or the process.

Timing:

The pilot interviews are the time to learn how long it will take to do a Grid that meets your purpose – and indeed whether you need just one session, or whether it will go better with two or three and time for reflection in between. If you have externally-imposed time constraints, this is the moment to think about how you can adapt the process so as to get the best value out of the limited time. All sorts of adaptations are possible, and you will find some of the other hints useful here.

Analysis:

When you've got the data from the pilot interviews, and you haven't already chosen your analysis methodology (**Enquire Within**[®] builds it in automatically, but many other grid software programs don't) then your final step is to pilot your analysis and see whether:

1. it enables you to answer your hypothesis, and
2. enables you to answer any promises you may have made to clients about timing, format, etc.

Then the rest of the project should be relatively trouble-free.

Prepared by Dr Valerie Stewart

In the Repertory Grid Interview Where's the Beef?

One of the most important considerations when you are planning - and later analysing - a repertory grid interview is where in the interview process you are going to find your most useful and insightful information.

Quite often, your most useful and insightful information is not in the final Grid analysis; it may happen much earlier.

Some examples:

The language people use for their constructs

For some purposes, all you need to know is the pattern of language people use when describing the elements, and a simple content analysis is all the analysis you need. The classic example of this is using construct elicitation to get people to describe their colleagues at work, as a preliminary to a study of competences or an organisation change intervention. It can be quite enough to know that (for example) 30% of their constructs have to do with knowing the right way to communicate with Head Office, or that 40% have to do with [conflict management](#).

The responses to an unrehearsed element set

If you do a Grid with someone where the elements are 'situations in my life where I learned something', or 'times when I tried to be assertive,' it's unlikely that the responses will come tripping off the client's tongue. You're asking questions which most people may not formally have asked themselves before. You and they can learn a lot through the process of eliciting them.

Content analysis of constructs over a sample group

We once did a study of why doctors chose the specialties they did, and created the elements by asking for examples of preferred and non-preferred elements. Over the sample of 200, there were significant patterns in the elements themselves. Similarly, when we were asked to help a major retailing firm discover why it lost so many graduates, it was useful to ask which other firms the graduates had applied to.

Analysing how just one or two elements, or constructs, are used

You may be doing a [counselling interview](#) where the elements are key relationships. Obviously you use a wide range of relationships in order to elicit the full domain of constructs, but you may find that the bulk of your work can be done by simply comparing *MYSELF* and *MYSELF AS I WOULD LIKE TO BE*, or *MYSELF AS MY MOTHER WOULD LIKE ME TO BE* ... depending on where the agenda of the interview seems to lie.

Exploring a Grid about experience of service in shops, you may find that most of your work can be done by looking at the constructs related to one such as 'made me decide never to shop there

again - not as important as that,' and looking at the elements which rate highly on the first pole of the construct.

If you are aware of all these choices - and the others which are open to you - then you can plan how to do the interview, how much time to use, how much technology you will need, etc. And always remember that you can do a [simple](#) 'once over lightly' with a simple protocol which will guide you towards deciding how to plan a larger investigation.

Prepared by Dr Valerie Stewart

A New Acronym I Give Unto You....

In fact, it's a dual-purpose acronym, and it should be carved over the desk of any Repertory Grid interviewer; because otherwise it will be found carved elsewhere on their person as a reminder of avoidable agony.

All computer users will be familiar with the common piece of geek-speak 'RTMF'. It is an invitation to read the manual first. The acronym I propose requires that the text be stretched slightly to make it pronounceable, but that it a small price to pay. It is TITFA. It means either:

- Think In Terms of the Analysis (*before* you plan your project), or
- Think In Terms of Feedback Always.

You'll find both of these subjects given extensive treatment in some other hints, but the word obviously hasn't got around enough. So please allow us a brief reprise:

Think In Terms of the Analysis (*before* you plan your project)

I've lost count of the number of questions I've seen which can be summarised as 'I've collected X number of elements and Y number of constructs and please will someone guide me to a program to analyse them.' I venture to suggest that there are very few fields of human endeavour where you would spend your time, and other people's, in gathering data without knowing how you were going to interrogate the data to give you something meaningful.

Repertory Grid is so multi-functional a technique that:

- there are many different ways you can plan a study to satisfy a particular purpose, and
- there are many different ways you can interrogate your data to give you answers.

In the days before rapid computing power was available, we grey-haired Gridders used to be adept at designing totally satisfactory projects where the tools of analysis were paper, pencil, the interviewee, and a brain. Look at the hints [On Research Design, Purpose, and Analysis](#), and [Where's the Beef?](#) for more information. But please, please - it's crazy to devote hours to assembling a matrix and then ask 'how do I analyse it?'. The question is likely to be followed by a second one: 'how do I understand what the analysis is telling me?' If it were a matrix of figures from any other domain and you asked a civil engineer or an opinion poll expert or a pure mathematician 'how do I analyse it?' the first question they'd ask would be 'What do you want to know?'

In short: please think about your [analysis method](#) at the start, and remember that there are many low-tech analysis methods which are valid, transparent, and easier for your audience to understand.

Think In Terms of Feedback Always

Repertory Grid is a structured conversation, from which one of the results *may* be a numerical matrix. But the process by which you and your interviewee develop the matrix together is just as important and may be more so. There are some applications of Grid where the journey – that is, the thinking which is prompted by the process – is more important than the final destination. This is especially true when you have a counselling contract, or when the elements in your Grid are ‘unrehearsed’ - that is, topics about which your interviewee may never have done any structured reflection beforehand.

If you set up a Grid whose purpose is to explore ‘my mentors and what I learned from them’, my guess is that most people will have to think hard before producing many constructs, and that you could need three or four sessions, with time for the interviewee to reflect, before you start to mine the important insights. And your role as a good interviewer during that process is to help look for patterns, think of questions, and be a skilled mirror.

There’s a hint - [Repertory Grid is a Conversation](#) - which goes into more detail. But here is a quick summary of the reasons why feedback is an essential part of the process and the analysis:

- it’s useful in your [pilot session](#) when you’re experimenting with different configurations;
- it’s essential if the session is to do anything other than skim the surface of the person’s constructs. Most Grid sessions start with a fairly quick ‘mind-dump’ of the constructs closest to the surface of the interviewee’s thinking, but unless you’re content with this and it fits your purpose the interviewee needs to start mining in depth ([laddering](#) can help here);
- it’s polite. Should you take data from someone without giving them feedback and a chance to comment and help with interpretation?
- it may save you from going down the wrong road in your interpretation of the results. For example, Grid is often used in studies of management competencies; almost always the results will tell you about the current behaviours which are rewarded. If the organisation is changing, you need to take this picture of the current behaviours and ask the client whether these are the behaviours which should continue to be rewarded.

So - please incorporate analysis and feedback into your research design. Don’t leave them until later, because you may find yourself up against a deadline listening to the only honest answer: ‘If I were you I wouldn’t start from here.’

Prepared by Dr Valerie Stewart

A Common Mistake and How to Avoid It

A common mistake in the repertory grid interview is to select a set of elements each of which is really one pole of a personal construct. Here we indicate how to recognise that and offer ways to make your element set more concrete.

Throughout the various hints and manuals I've tried to stress a simple message – that you'll never go wrong by making your elements more concrete. But it's an easy trap to fall into, especially but not exclusively if you are using non-discrete elements, or an element set which is events or activities.

A Real Life Example

Let me give an example which is an amalgam of some real-life situations which we've been asked about. Suppose that you decided to explore how a child coped with the treatment for his lazy eye. (One of my brothers had this – they began by giving him an occluded lens over the good one, but then discovered that he was peeking round the corners, and so the poor soul had to have a sticky plaster completely covering the good eye, for several months). The temptation is to design an element set along the lines of:

- Peeking round the corners
- Tripping over
- Not being able to see the blackboard
- Being called names
- Getting sweaty and itchy in summer
- And so on.
- But in fact each of these 'elements' is one pole of a construct, and in my brother's case the constructs would probably be:
 - Peeking round the corner – not peeking round the corner
 - Tripping over – keeping my balance
 - Not being able to see the blackboard – seeing the blackboard easily
 - Being called names – not being teased
 - Getting sweaty and itchy in summer – feeling OK in summer

Recognising and Solving the Problem

If you tried to use the first list as elements, you'd soon start to feel that something was going wrong when you began to elicit constructs. You'd probably get very few constructs and most of them would be [propositional](#) or simple evaluative ones such as 'I felt OK – I felt miserable'. You'd feel that you were missing something, going round in circles; that there was more detail, and more in-depth analysis, available but somehow you'd be missing it. Your interviewee would give off signals of discontent. What's happened is that you've used as elements statements which are really one pole of a construct, and you need to drop everything down a level. A much better element set might be:

- Going to see the specialist the first time
- The first time I wore the occluded lens
- The time the plaster came off
- The time they made me put the plaster back on
- Playing cricket with the plaster on
- Playing cricket with the plaster off
- A possible source of confusion is that in order to get this element set you'd have had to talk to my kid brother, and probably had to construct a set of element creation questions, such as:
 - The first time you were aware of it ..
 - the first time you felt really miserable ..
 - the first time you thought it might get better ..
 - a time when it didn't matter ..
 - the best time ..
 - etc.

Both you and the interviewee will have to work to ensure that the resulting elements are real, observable, time-bound events. (This is why working with an event/activity element set is more difficult – beginners should start with elements which hurt when you drop them on your foot). The trick is to see if you can make yourself 'hear' a contrast to the actual element you're using, and if you can, then you're probably using half a construct.

Another way you can fall into this hole is by using very abstract elements – for example, if you embarked on a project to explore the skills needed by young doctors and you had DIAGNOSTIC SKILLS, BEDSIDE MANNER, PHARMACOLOGY, STAMINA, and so on. Each of these reduces (at least) to Good diagnostic skills – Poor diagnostic skills, etc. – in other words, your 'elements' should really turn up as constructs.

I'm sorry to make such a meal of this – it sounds so terribly complicated that it might put you off Grid forever. It isn't really, because with the right advice it's a mistake that you'll only make once, or maybe never. This hint will pull you out of a mire than many novices get into and may have trouble seeing their way out of. By the way, the advice to pilot any design in your head or on a trusted friend should help.

If it helps, think of a Grid project as like a surveyor setting out to map a new territory. The first thing they'll do is select some points on the territory – a church, a hilltop, a farm, a bend in the river – and then they'll start to describe how they relate to one another. The sharper their starting points, the more complex a description they'll be able to make. Elements are the starting points, and the constructs are the various descriptors.

In summary – you will never go wrong by making your elements more concrete. And if you're a complete novice, do your first practices using physical objects as elements so that you get a sense of moving through the range and subtlety of the constructs you elicit.

Prepared by Dr Valerie Stewart

See also [Hints in Choosing Elements](#) for the Repertory Grid Interview

Performance Appraisal Using Repertory Grid

Performance appraisal using a simple, low-tech, cost-effective application of repertory grid. An approach that you can adapt to other applications from the example where appropriate.

Regular visitors to our [Hints](#) will have noticed that many of our hints emphasise the importance of seeing Repertory Grid as a conversation; the importance of feedback; and not collecting masses of data which you then don't know how to analyse. So it might be useful to share with you some very simple, low-tech, cost-effective applications of Grid, and trust that you can extract the principles so that you can adapt the example if it's appropriate.

Performance Appraisal

The request was: 'Can you carry out some research to see whether our current performance appraisal system is measuring the appropriate attributes?' It was clear that this was a 'scoping' study – they didn't want answers to two decimal places, just enough to know whether they should do more research.

One of my strongly-held beliefs is that any attempt to define management skills should involve real managers as much as possible. I've seen too many projects go wrong for lack of management buy-in. So the project design was as follows: on five successive mornings we got different groups of between ten and twenty managers in a room with a long table for them to sit round; a big table for me at the top, with two flip-charts; and lots and lots of small index cards, placed in piles before the managers. The managers knew why they were there, of course.

Standing at the flip-chart, I introduced the idea of construct elicitation by writing up the names of three well-known people, asking the magic question 'Tell me one or more ways in which two of them are like each other and different from the third,' and writing the answers in the other chart. The experience of doing this allows the facilitator to make a number of points, such as: your constructs are your own, nobody else's (this happens when someone else tries to provide the contrast pole); constructs are bipolar (you ask how they would describe the other element, by contrast - note that you never use the word opposite); there are different kinds of construct - propositional, behavioural, evaluative. That takes about fifteen minutes.

Getting the Elements

Then I asked them to take nine of the cards in front of them and to write the names, or nicknames, or initials, of three managers who were very effective; three at the other end; and three in the middle. I assured them that I didn't want to see the cards and they'd be destroyed in a little while. Then they shuffled them and numbered them.

Getting the Constructs

Next I asked them to work individually, taking the element cards in groups of three, and writing one construct per card, describing the elements 'in terms of how they behave at work' or 'in terms of their skills'. (Note that nine elements is a useful number because you can write three lines:

123, 456, 789 and ask them to go across, then down, and then diagonally; this ensures that every element gets seen in the company of every other element in the shortest possible time).

I patrolled, giving encouragement where necessary, patting the piles as they grew, settling questions. They managed pretty well; in about an hour and a quarter we had at least 20 constructs per manager and in many cases more.

Laddering and Content Analysis

I passed the bucket into which they could tear up the element cards and send them to the shredder. Then I collected all the construct cards and did a combination of laddering and content analysis, thus: I picked out a card – any card – and asked a laddering question about it. It could have been a ladder up: ‘Which pole is more effective, and why?’ or a ladder down: ‘How do you tell the difference between people who are X and people who are Y?’, but not both. As the process went along, I put the cards in piles depending on their theme, so that it was also a running content analysis. This allowed me from time to time to change tack and ask them if they had any comments on the relative sizes of the piles. We didn’t ladder every card, of course, because there were quite a few repeats, but I made sure that over the five days each theme had been visited at least twice.

By this time we had been working for three hours. Almost time to go: the last question, to everyone, was whether there was anything important about effective management here which we’d missed.

The Personnel Team's Task

That was what we did in the mornings. In the afternoons, the personnel team and I moved into a smaller room with a big table. On large cards we had already written the names of the attributes measured by the current appraisal system. The group’s task was to do another content analysis, thus: if the construct described a skill in the current system, it went on that pile. If it didn’t, we created a new pile.

The Results

The result was that we had three groups of descriptors. One group represented the skills which the current system used and which the managers themselves had used – which meant that they should probably stay in place. Then we had a group of descriptors which the current system used but the managers hadn’t – which prompted the question ‘Should the system use them, and if we agree that it should we’ll have to do a better job of defining them and helping managers use them’. And the third was the group of descriptors they used but the system didn’t – which prompted two questions: (i) are there any of these which we should incorporate into the system, and (ii) are there any of these which people are using and we’d much rather they didn’t – in which case we ought to think about eradicating them from managers’ frame of reference?

Five days work - plus one for report-writing. Transparent, robust methodology. Lots of managers who felt they’d been consulted, and so were more likely to accept changes. Personnel team knowing the results by heart and having learned something. Sweet and simple - we hope you agree.

Prepared by Dr Valerie Stewart

[Sweet and Simple #2](#) - Conflict Resolution

[Sweet and Simple #3](#) - The Repertory Grid Interview as Part of a Process

Conflict Resolution Using The Repertory Grid Interview

Conflict resolution using a simple, low-tech, cost-effective application of repertory grid - one that does not require **Enquire Within**[®] or any other human resource software

The purpose of these examples of 'sweet and simple' applications of Repertory Grid is to emphasise the importance of feedback, and seeing Grid as a conversation, and encourage readers not to look to the technology (whatever it is) for all the answers. We'd like to think that one benefit will be that newcomers learn to ask about, and understand, Grid computer programs when they come to use them. But the programs should be our servants, not the other way around. And you shouldn't feel that you can't make use of Grid just because you haven't a laptop handy.

This example is for people who have good facilitation and conflict resolution skills, and some experience with Repertory Grid. Especially you will have to be ready to explain that someone's Grid represents the truth *as they see it*, not an 'absolute' truth.

Here's an example I took from Laurie Thomas when he was at Brunel University. Laurie was, in my view, the most creative user of Grid and PCP I've ever met. His creativity was of the kind that people write about and aspire to, but rarely attain – a kind of child-like ability to see every question afresh, unhindered by implicit rules or past experiences. The course participants were talking about conflict, and conflict resolution, and how conflict could be described in terms of people having different construct systems – which is a great re-statement of the obvious, of course. If only you could use Grid to identify where and how the systems differ ... but in those days we were only beginning to experiment with programs to analyse Grid.

Nowadays there are programs which will allow you to do a certain amount of sharing and comparing and collating Grids from different people.). But there is the inevitable gap while the data are processed; and the problems of explaining the statistical analysis give an 'out' to someone who doesn't want to confront the conflict. Laurie's method was so stunning in its simplicity and unavoidable impact that it stands as a perfect example of 'sweet and simple' – the only criticism being that it is limited to small numbers.

Here's how. You have two people who are in conflict about an issue – let's say that the manager of a team has one evaluation of her people, but her manager disagrees with her. Get each of them to do a Grid, alone, using the team members as elements. (Unless you have a high level of life insurance, don't use the manager and her boss as elements – when peace has settled they might suggest it for themselves later). Write the constructs on cards at this stage; don't limit the number of constructs they offer, but when they've run out ask them to arrange the constructs in three groups - high, medium, and low priority. Then – still working with the manager and her boss separately – write the elements and constructs into a standard Grid on a big piece of paper (you'll see why shortly). Start by using only the high priority constructs; this will give you a simple picture – literally, as the process relies on visual impact.

At this point comes the only bit of over-simplification in the process, and it won't have a lasting effect. Although you may be used to turning the constructs into 1 to 5 scales, simplify them to 'either - or': that is, each element is described by the right-hand pole or the left-hand pole, no scaling allowed. Still working with each person individually, get them to rate their elements on their constructs. If you have access to a colour photocopier, make one pole pale pink and the other

pale blue. If you haven't, score one pole by filling in the space above the diagonal line you get by going from bottom left to top right, and the other pole by filling in the space below that line. (This is easier to draw than to explain). Photocopy each person's completed Grid onto a overhead transparency. Then, block out the 'either - or' ratings but leave the elements and constructs in place and photocopy that.

You now have a choice of where to go next. You could:

- Give person A person B's Grid and ask her to fill it out as the truth is to her; and do the same with B; and/or
- Give person A person B's Grid and ask her to fill it out as she believes B did it, and do the same with B.

You'll probably find yourselves doing both, actually. The first option's usually a safer place to start. Then photocopy these Grids onto an overhead transparency, as before.

The magic is that when you overlay the two overheads onto your projector screen, the areas of agreement will be pink or blue, and the areas of disagreement will be black.

The good news is that even when you have people who seem to be at daggers drawn about everything, it is very rare for the black bits to be random. Usually they're vertical and horizontal lines: indicating that it's just one or two elements, or two or three constructs, where there is disagreement. So as a facilitator you can point out the good news - how much they really are in agreement - and draw their attention to the fact that it's only a limited number of differences they have to work with.

After that, gentle reader, it is up to you - and, crucially, to them. You've shown them how the technology works, that you have no mysteries. You have exerted no influence. The process is value-free. If you want to suggest any further explorations, you could get them to share their medium and low priority constructs; or move them to a five-point scale; or discuss any disagreements they might have identified about the nature of the contrast pole for a particular construct. In nearly every case, the process becomes self-managing by the participants and you can go home with the satisfaction of a good day's work well done.

Prepared by Dr Valerie Stewart

[Sweet and Simple #1](#) - Performance Appraisal

[Sweet and Simple #3](#)

The Repertory Grid Interview as Part of a Process

The repertory grid interview as part of a process, rather than an end in itself. This 'sweet and simple' example #3, identifying the characteristics which differentiate good managers from poor ones, is intended to show how that can be achieved.

Differentiating Between Good Managers And Poor Managers

The example about [redesigning a performance appraisal system](#) shows how we built in openness, aimed for management buy-in, and involved the personnel team in analysing the data. The example about [conflict resolution](#) shows Grid as the starting-point for a dialogue which the participants will almost certainly manage for themselves with very little facilitation once you have started the process. An underpinning value is that it's not a good idea to have one's feedback rendered useless by the fact that the listeners don't understand the underlying analysis and either do, or don't, say so. The only thing worse, in my experience, is the person who is adamant that you should have used cable stitch instead of left-hand twists to do your correlations. Anyway, here's one more example of how to use Grid simply, low-tech, and effectively (and by the way, if any reader has examples of their own they would like to contribute, please send them in for publication).

This project was undertaken for an organisation which contained a great many techno-freaks (that's a polite way of describing them, believe me) and a number of managers who were trying to manage them. Turnover amongst the techno-freaks was unacceptably high; they couldn't see or didn't value the contribution managers made (which meant that a number of them were dreadful managers themselves); political correctness ran rampant; anything coming from the personnel department was automatically suspect; and so on. Into this maelstrom, for good reasons, the Chief Executive wanted to introduce parallel managerial and technical career paths, pay for performance, career development by means other than resignation, and so on.

One of the first research tasks was to clarify some boundaries. Imagine a 2 x 2 matrix in which the four boxes read: good techno-freak, poor techno-freak, good manager, and poor manager. We needed to know the contents of each of those boxes, but crucially we needed to know about the boundaries and overlaps. Was it the case, for example, that a poor techno-freak could be a good manager? Did all good techno-freaks turn into bad managers automatically, as the folklore had it, and was there anything anyone could do about it? Anecdote abounded, but as Einstein said (and these folk would quote) 'For Instance is not proof.'

It ought to be said, too, that I was highly suspect. A Ph.D. in psychology and the odd visiting professorship didn't count for much in the eyes of the techno-freaks. There would be nothing they'd like more than to take someone from a really soggy discipline like psychology and tear her analysis to pieces over morning coffee – and as you know, if you win that sort of battle you've lost the war.

One thing they did have, though, was lots of money. So we would have no problem with sample size and we let it be known that anyone who wanted to contribute to the study was welcome. (So that nobody could claim that they hadn't been consulted, of course).

One of the most useful pieces of equipment was a Lazy Susan – that’s one of those circular revolving tables which you get at Chinese restaurants – and a great many circular cardboard cake-stands, one per interviewee. The particular ‘twist’ to Repertory Grid was that for each interviewee I divided his/her cake-stand into four quartiles, labeling each with a polite translation of each of the four boxes above. Then, working with each interviewee individually I asked for examples of three staff members (anonymous, of course) for each box: that is, three very effective managers, three less effective managers, three very effective analysts, and three less effective analysts. Then, instead of the usual Grid practice of taking elements at random, I deliberately took two from one box and one from another, so we always knew which boundary we were exploring. Then I asked the magic question ‘How are these two similar and different from the other. (The Lazy Susan made it easy to swivel around and change points of view so that we could easily find similar and contrast elements we could work with.). I was completely open about the note-taking and worked with six pieces of paper for my notes – one for each contrast (Four boxes provides six contrasts). Fortunately they were the kind of people who liked to try for precision with words and we did not often have to wait for one another. At the end of each session I put everything carefully into a plastic bag and popped it in the filing cabinet.

Bearing in mind that I was dealing almost exclusively with introverts, who like time to process, I made it clear that anyone was welcome to come back, ask for their session, and do some more work on it. I also asked them not to talk to one another about it, because there would be plenty of opportunity for feedback and discussion later.

The analysis was fascinating - we did indeed manage to identify the characteristics which differentiated good managers from poor ones, good analysts from good managers, etc, and in the process also found that some deeply-held superstitions about the differences had little or no empirical basis. But this isn’t the place to talk about it. It formed the basis of a thorough action plan which covered recruitment, career management, performance management, training, etc., which was what you would expect from a reasonably good study; I was particularly pleased that the [feedback](#) sessions helped to bridge some of the gaps between the two classes – especially increasing the respect which the techno-freaks had for the managers.

In terms of Grid technique, the most important message is that you don’t always have to put your elements in random triads. If it suits your purpose, you can arrange them. For example, one of my colleagues had a counselling contract to explore someone’s discomfort with selection interviewing, which played an important part in his job, and she used one element THE IDEAL INTERVIEW which was present in every triad. As long as you’ve got a good rationale, you can alter the format until it fits your needs.

Prepared by Dr Valerie Stewart

[Sweet and Simple #1](#) - Performance Appraisal

[Sweet and Simple #2](#) - Conflict Resolution

Skills for an Effective Repertory Grid Interviewer

This set of seven hints is designed to help people who want to use Repertory Grid but don't have much experience and/or access to supervision

The techniques of Grid don't often figure in a university curriculum: personal construct theory is more widely taught, but there's a world of difference between knowing about PCP as a theory, and conducting an interview or planning a large-scale project which brings you face-to-face with real live people who have expectations of you. Then there's the added danger of discovering that you have collected data which you have no idea how to analyse, and that there is no program (and nor will there ever be) into which you can enter your data, press the Analyse button, and there will be your answer – because whatever analysis program you use, you still have to interpret what the analysis tells you.

I have often likened Grid to going into a church and hearing lovely music being created by the organist. You can admire the organist's dexterity and the beauty of the music; but it is only when you stand behind the organist and see the huge choice of stops and keyboards which were chosen for this particular piece can you see the organist's complete skill set; that out of possibly a hundred or more voices and up to five keyboards the organist matched this particular configuration to this individual piece of music. Good Grid interviewers similarly know that they must configure their interview or project to meet their needs, as well as performing the actual interview with skill and sensitivity.

To be an effective Grid interviewer, you need the skills and understanding described below:

- **Understanding.** Enough understanding of, and commitment to, Kelly's core values and the way that Grid gives expression to them; and enough of the basics of Personal Construct Theory to help you in planning and analysis. You don't need in-depth study of PCP to be a good Grid interviewer, but you do need to know that Grid was designed to give expression to a special way of understanding one another.
- **Interview Design.** The ability to design an interview protocol, from the universe of options available to you, which will support the purpose for the particular interview(s) and – where applicable – the project you have in mind. Designing a protocol means specifying the element class; the elements and how they will be created; the purpose for the interview; the qualifiers, which direct the interviewee to focus on the elements in a way that supports the purpose; and, crucially, the method(s) of analysis you will use. Don't assume that you can leave the choice of analysis until later.
- **Interpersonal Skills.** The interpersonal skills needed for the interview. In some ways this is a different set of interpersonal skills than those you would use in a counselling or fact-finding interview – in particular, you need to suppress everything you may have learned on an 'active listening' course, to repress the urges you may have to summarise or re-phrase what the interviewee says, and to be unafraid of silence. Also, in the early stages of your experience with Grid, you need to manage the process of capturing the data – into a computer, which **Enquire Within**[®] supports, or on cards – without being clumsy.
- **Feedback skills.** When and how you use these depends on the nature of your interview. In a counselling interview or similar, you might be incorporating feedback into the interview itself. On the other hand, there are some types of project where your main feedback could be to a group of managers. Good feedback, especially face-to-face, means that you have learned the art of silence (see the point above); you also need the capacity to analyse the interview as it happens, although you may do more detailed analysis later.

- **Analysis skills.** There are many different ways of analysing Grid data – and by no means all of them depend on using a computer – but you need to analyse what you have discovered, in terms of your purpose.
- **Imagination and Inventiveness.** Finally, as you become more practised, you should hope to acquire some imagination and inventiveness. You should know which rules you can break, if breaking them suits your purpose and you understand the consequences of breaking them. You should be able to develop more than one configuration to meet your purpose, which is possible in many cases. You'll learn how to manage difficult interviewees, break log-jams, be able to spot when the interview is going off-course and adapt accordingly.

No set of written hints can ever compensate for the experience of learning Grid technique from a skilled instructor. However we hope that this collection, taken in conjunction with the other hints on this site, will be of some small assistance. At least, we hope, it will take you to that part of the Hippocratic oath that reads: **'First of all, do no harm.'**

Prepared by Dr Valerie Stewart

Skills for an Effective Rep Grid Interviewer

- [Understanding George Kelly and Personal Construct Theory](#)
- [Designing a Session](#)
- [Learning the Repertory Grid Interview Process](#)
- [Construct Analysis](#)
- [Feedback](#)
- [Reminders, Tips and Wrinkles](#)

Understanding George Kelly and Personal Construct Theory

Man is a Scientist!

The purpose here is to give you enough understanding of the background to Grid that you get the most out of what it offers, and that you don't unknowingly do violence to the technique. It does not pretend to be a thorough exposition of Personal Construct Theory or to help develop interview skills, but to give you enough background to be able to plan, understand, and analyse a Grid interview

George Kelly

George Kelly began his career as an engineer, before becoming a clinical psychologist – which may explain his concern for precision. His work dates back to the 1930's, but he was not a great self-publicist and his theories never really had a 'champion' such as you observe with some of his contemporaries. [Repertory Grid](#), and [Personal Construct Theory](#), have only rarely figured as 'required reading' for a qualification in psychology.

Kelly's theory of personality is predicated on one axiom: that, as he put it, *Man is a Scientist*. In other words, from the dawn of consciousness each of us tries to make sense of the world as we experience it, and we do this by constantly forming and testing hypotheses about the world. By the time we are adults, we will have developed a very complex model of the world and our place in it: this model is, according to Kelly, our personality. Kelly's theory of personal constructs develops this principle further – for example, by considering whether and how we modify our constructs when faced with contradictory information, what are our 'core constructs' – that is, the deeply-held values and principles which are unlikely to change, etc.

What is a Construct?

The term *construct* is particularly well-chosen, because it reflects the concept's dual role. On the one hand, your constructs represent the view you have **constructed** about the world as you experienced it. On the other hand, your constructs indicate how you are likely to **construe** the world as you continue to experience it. Your construct system is your history and your predisposition to perceive.

As a simple illustration, let me relate a conversation I recently had with a friend who has the happy choice of at least four countries in which to spend her retirement. Talking about the criteria which would influence her choice, she said that one important criterion was the standard of care for the elderly and infirm. This was one of her constructs, and a very important one. It came as a complete surprise to me, because it had never been part of my construct system. When we talked about it, she said that several of her friends and relations had had long terminal illnesses and very different standards of care; and for the first time I realised that all the deaths I had known had been quick, and no-one had lingered in care. She had formed her construct on

the basis of her experience, and that construct is one which she uses when thinking about countries to retire to. I didn't have that construct, because my experience was different from hers; and so I would not have used it when thinking about countries to retire to – at least, not until the conversation gave me the opportunity to modify my construct system.

Kelly's Methodological Concerns

Kelly developed the Repertory Grid interview as a means of getting people to show him their construct systems. He had some very important methodological concerns about the standard of interviewing, especially in clinical psychology. His major concerns were:

- **Interviewer Bias.** He had seen that the interviewer often contributes more to the diagnosis than the interviewee (remember that he was a clinician and these were the days when Freudians and Jungians and Behaviourists were quarrelling vigorously). I used to work for a major consultancy firm where the client's problem depended very much on who answered the phone – though they weren't allowed to have no problems at all.
- **Specificity** in measuring, and where possible predicting, the characteristics of individual people and small groups. Psychology was a relatively new discipline, and many psychologists were seeking 'laws' of human behaviour. So there was the 'rats, cats, and stats' approach to studying behaviour, and large-scale studies showing the correlations between different aspects of personality and behaviour; but this was no good to Kelly, or to any other clinician, because they see people one at a time or in small groups.
- **Over-dependence on the expert.** Clinical psychology at the time could be satirised as the patient lying on the couch while the 'expert' told him what was wrong with him. Kelly took the view that most people can take responsibility for understanding and, where necessary, adapting their behaviour; and that the role of the therapist would be more useful as a 'skilled mirror.'

The Essence of Grid Technique

In order to circumvent these obstacles in his quest for the client's construct system, Kelly invented the Repertory Grid interviewing technique. The essence of Grid technique is very simple:

- Select a set of [elements](#). The elements are concrete examples of the domain you wish to explore – for example, working with a client who had problems in making satisfactory relationships, the elements would be people with whom the client had relationships.
- Take the elements in groups of three, and ask the question: 'Can you tell me a way in which any two of these people are different from the third, in terms of?' (The 'in terms of' phrase, called a qualifier, directs the client to consider the elements in a way appropriate to the purpose. So in this case the qualifiers might be '... in terms of how you feel about them, in terms of how they felt about you, in terms of how you behaved to each other,' etc.) This two-against-one question produces a bipolar scale – for example *had a sense of humour - I never saw him smile*. This scale is a construct – note that it comes entirely from the interviewee. The interviewer has set up the parameters for the conversation, but has suggested none of the content.

There are ways of exploring the constructs in more depth and detail, but at some point in a full Grid interview the constructs are turned into scales (usually 1 to 5) and the interviewee rates every element on every construct. This gives you a matrix which can be analysed statistically in order to progress the discussion with the client. The statistical analysis answers Kelly's need to measure people individually, and you could, for example, compare the person's before-and-after perceptions. There are several analysis programs available, but it should also be stressed that it is not always necessary to use them. There are dangers, which will be explored later, in letting yourself become dependent on a computer program to do the work for you.

That is the essence of Grid. It is a powerful and content-free procedure. The interviewer sets up the session in order to meet the purpose, but provides none of the content. There is simply no other interviewing technique which will allow you to cover the breadth and depth of the interviewee's map of their world. Its complete freedom from interviewer bias, and the transparency of the process, means that the interviewer can say to the client 'All I'm doing is playing your own perceptions back to you.' There have been times in my life as a consultant where I have had to present the results of a Grid-based research programme to the senior management, and I've known that they wouldn't like it: being able to say 'Fire me if you like, but they'll still continue to think like that' has been the only way I could get them to absorb the information.

Another useful feature of Grid is that because it is a standardised protocol, if you are conducting a large-scale research project with a number of interviewers, any interviewer can pick up the work of any other and understand what happened in the interview. You don't have to have one of those awful reconciliation meetings where everyone has taken notes in their own way and you spend the first day explaining to one another.

Keeping Grid Free From Interviewer Bias

What does all this mean for a new Grid interviewer? At its simplest, it means that we have the means of knowing when, as interviewers, we have influenced the discussion. And because Grid can be completely free from interviewer bias, I suggest that we should keep it that way until and unless the purpose requires us to intervene. Some practical examples:

- Don't supply the contrast pole yourself. If the interviewee says 'These two had a sense of humour,' we don't say 'And the other one didn't?' We say 'How would you describe the other, by contrast?'
- Don't summarise the interviewee's constructs, either verbally or when you're writing them down. If the interviewee says 'She could almost always find two or three new ways of looking at a problem,' that's what you write. You don't write 'Creative problem-solver.' And try to avoid asking the interviewee to summarise a construct, even if there are lots of words, because s/he may say 'Creative problem-solver.' What you have in the first phrase is a detailed, behavioural description of the element – and you'll probably get a similarly specific description of the contrast pole – and later on you could find yourself needing that specificity.
- Don't imply that you're judging the interviewee's constructs, or waiting for a particular type of construct to appear. Yes, you do want to elicit constructs that are relevant to your purpose – that's what the qualifiers are for – but in the early stages of a Grid interview you should respect the fact that the two-against-one process is not how most people are used to thinking and your first goal is to get them comfortable with it. Once they are comfortable with it, you can remind them of the qualifiers (for example 'Could you look at these three in terms of'), or you can ask 'Does that construct relate to the purpose?' I once did a series of Grid interviews with managers and part-way through one of them said that he recognised the process because another consultant had used it on him a few weeks ago. I was playing it strictly by the book – I was a pair of eyes and ears and a pencil – and he said 'You haven't asked me to say anything about decision-making yet.' I said that was up to him, whereupon he said that the previous consultant had said 'Most managers have said something about decision-making by now,' which he'd taken as a criticism. That's the kind of thing I mean when I suggest that you shouldn't imply that you're judging the constructs.
- A related point - it's not for you to judge the importance of someone's constructs. For example, a researcher interviewed a number of people and wrote 'We stopped the interviews after eliciting twelve meaningful constructs.' My question – who decided that they were meaningful? You, or the interviewee? And what exactly do you mean by 'meaningful?' It's not your job to decide that. Much better is to elicit the constructs until the interviewee runs out; do a spot of laddering to change the focus and then ask if that

has prompted any more constructs, and then ask the interviewee to sort the constructs into high, medium, and low priority.

Don't Construe Other People's Construing

One core value for a good Grid interviewer is: don't construe other people's construing. Don't judge. Ask open questions – for example, if you can see a pattern in someone's constructs (let's say that there are a great many constructs about 'sense of humour' in the interviewee's construing of key relationships) it's better to ask 'Can you see any patterns, or groups, in what you've said so far?' than to say 'You've got a lot of constructs about humour.'

Let's be clear. I'm not saying that the interviewer should be completely passive. There will be occasions in any interview when questions or input from the interviewer are appropriate. What I am saying is: make as much use as you can of the unique opportunity Grid gives you to understand the interviewee's world *in their own terms* before you interpose yourself in the process. Once you have interposed yourself, you'll never get that state again. In the rest of this series, you'll see that I advocate 'letting the works show' – that is, making the interview a joint endeavour, being open about the process and what you're recording. Most interviewees will quickly find the process interesting and many become almost self-managing, and the interview becomes a co-operative process in which you offer techniques and they offer answers and insights.

Prepared by Dr Valerie Stewart

Designing a Repertory Grid Session

This is the third part of a set of hints designed to help people who want to use Repertory Grid but don't have much experience and/or access to supervision. The purpose of this hint is to give you a wider overview of your choices when designing a Repertory Grid session.

Let me begin this hint by saying that there are lots of cross-references to other hints on this site, because some of the issues – such as choosing an element set, and methods of analysis – are treated in greater detail there.

The Assignment

Suppose that you're studying Modern American History and your tutor sets you an assignment: 'Discuss the factors which characterise the most effective Presidents of the 20th century.' How will you set about the task?

Obviously your first task is to assemble a list of the 20th century Presidents. You may ask yourself whether you should start your project by considering all of them, or whether you would find it easier to start with a selection – in which case you will want to make sure that your sample includes the extremes, and maybe some about whom opinions differ. While you are doing this, another part of your brain is probably asking questions like 'Effective in whose eyes? What about those where history has changed how they are evaluated? Isn't effectiveness dependent to some extent on the situations they had to confront? How do we define effectiveness anyway? Is it my opinion which the tutor wants, or should I do a literature search as well?'

What you are doing with this internal dialogue is only a very short step away from designing a Repertory Grid session. Grid is simply a way of formalising this quest and then playing back your perceptions so that you can see how much ground you have covered, what patterns have emerged and whether you are content with them, and encouraging you to be thorough.

Configuring the Session

So how would you configure the session? The building blocks of any Repertory Grid session are: the purpose, the elements, and the qualifying questions. The purpose is a statement of why you are doing the interview; the elements are concrete examples of the domain you want to explore; and the qualifying questions direct you to thinking about the elements in a way which is relevant to the purpose. In this case, your purpose statement would be something like 'To explore my perceptions of 20th Century American Presidents'. Your elements would be a selection of Presidents, chosen according to the sampling method outlined in the third paragraph above.

In choosing the qualifying questions you need to strike a balance between the general and the specific – for example, I quoted from the internal dialogue you might have started, thus: 'Effective in whose eyes? What about those where history has changed how they are evaluated? Isn't effectiveness dependent to some extent on the situations they had to confront? How do we define effectiveness anyway? Is it my opinion which the tutor wants, or should I do a literature search as well?' This internal dialogue is prompting some qualifiers *and* some constructs. A good rule of thumb is that you should make your qualifying questions fairly general, because you'll

probably need only three or four. So you might have: 'In terms of their personal attributes, In terms of the situations they faced, and 'In terms of public opinion.....'.

Then you're ready to take the elements in groups of three and ask yourself 'In what way are any two of these Presidents similar to each other and different from the third?' and you're into construct elicitation.

A Note on Qualifiers

The qualifiers direct the interviewee to think about the elements in ways that are relevant to the purpose. They can be very important at the start of the interview, because they set the scene, but mostly they fade out of the discussion once the interviewee has hit their stride. A couple of examples may clarify:

- An interviewer who was using Grid for career counselling reported that she had difficulties getting 'personal' constructs (her words) from her interviewees, using careers as elements. The constructs were mostly what's called 'propositional' – that is, constructs which described objective properties of the elements, such as *regular hours - irregular hours, large firm - small firm* – and she wanted her clients to express their feelings as a first step in counselling. The suggestion was that she ask the clients to think about the jobs 'in terms of the skills they'd need, in terms of how I feel about them, in terms of what it would be like to work there' and hey presto! she started to get 'personal' constructs.
- One application of Grid is for mentoring newly-qualified teachers. The elements used are the children in the class. The first two qualifiers are 'In terms of how they behave in class,' and 'In terms of their home and family circumstances.' However, the third qualifier is 'In terms of how I behave towards them,' which radically changes the interviewee's viewpoint - but in a way which will enable a discussion of how the teacher's behaviour influences the children's, and vice versa.

So the qualifiers can be really useful at the beginning of the session, to steer the interviewee in the general direction of the purpose; but after a while you might not need them if the interview has become self-managing. It's very rarely the case that you need to record which construct goes with which qualifier.

The point of this note on qualifiers is to say three things:

- you need them at the start;
- as long as they're in the right area, don't agonise about the wording, and
- if all goes well, you'll forget them as the interview progresses.

Analysis

Back now to the session on American Presidents. The purpose, elements, and qualifiers suggested themselves easily. But – how are you going to analyse it? Given your assigned task of discussing the factors which characterise the most effective Presidents of the 20th century, the essence of your quest could be summarised as: 'List those constructs which are most closely associated with the construct *effective - less effective*.' Of course, you will also want to group the Presidents themselves in terms of their effectiveness. There are other refinements which you could apply, but the basic question is to explore the constructs associated with effectiveness.

This means that you will need to put your matrix of elements rated on constructs through a statistical analysis. Statistical analyses of Grid data fall into two camps: multivariate analysis and dendritic analysis. There is no point in trying to conceal our partiality for dendritic analysis, but each approach has its adherents. A multivariate analysis manipulates the matrix of elements and constructs so that the relationships between them can be plotted on a two- or three-dimensional chart. A dendritic analysis calculates which two elements are most closely correlated, places them next to each other in the matrix and makes them into a 'virtual' element, and goes on doing that until all the elements are shown grouped in 'families' according to their degree of correlation; and then it does the same thing for the constructs. We are committed to the dendritic analysis approach because it does not lose any of the information – as is inevitable with a multivariate analysis – and because the presentation of the analysis makes it easy to go on growing the Grid by looking for the areas where more clarity is needed.

However, the detailed exposition of analyses can be found elsewhere. What's important in this session on American Presidents is that before you start the process, you know what you want the analysis to tell you – in this case, which constructs are correlated with effectiveness, and how many types of President do we seem to have – and make sure that your method will support these questions. It is simply no good waiting until later and asking 'How do I analyse this Grid?' because the answer you'll get is 'What do you want the analysis to tell you?'

Continuing the Session Development

The example using American Presidents may have looked obvious, but with a little practice and feedback you should find it easy also. For more detail, read the hints on elements ([Hints on Choosing Elements](#), and [More on Choosing Elements](#), [Using Ideal Elements](#)) and on analysis ([Where's the beef?](#) and the three [Sweet and Simple](#) examples). The rest of this hint is not concerned with the details, but with the overall planning of a Grid study.

There are two questions that you should ask yourself before planning a Grid session. The first is: where does the project fall on the construct extractive - reflective, and the second is: where do we expect to find the gems?

Where does the project fall on the construct extractive - reflective?

Some Grid interviews are for you as a researcher to suck information out of your interviewee: market research, for example, some approaches to developing management competences, etc. These are 'extractive' interviews. In other interviews - counselling, conflict resolution, helping someone draw up a person specification - you are there to serve the purposes of someone who has asked for your help. These are 'reflective' interviews.

Knowing where you stand on this scale is helpful. For example, if you were planning a project which would involve 'extractive' interviews with a large number of interviewees, you might invoke the 80/20 rule and put a time limit on each interview; whereas when you're doing someone a service you are there until they no longer need you, but you may be committed to a series of visits with time for reflection in between. Again, in an 'extractive' interview you have rather more licence to get the interviewee to keep to the point (politely, of course, and first having listened for whether what's said is useful); in a 'reflective' interview you are more likely to follow the interviewee's lead.

Both kinds of interview - in fact all kinds of interview - demand feedback, of course.

Where do we expect to find the gems?

Knowing or guessing the answer to this question is a great help when deciding what form of analysis you should consider. By 'the gems' I mean those parts of the interview where you expect to discover the information which is relevant to your purpose. These could range from a simple frequency count of the number of elements, or constructs; content analysis of elements or constructs; analysing how just a few elements or constructs are used (for example, in the session about American Presidents your first priority is to examine the constructs which are closely correlated with the construct *effective - less effective*, though you may go on to examine others); looking at the whole picture; seeing what happens when you introduce a new element or construct, or delete an existing one; and so on. Knowing where and how to look for the useful information will guide your choice of analysis.

Some final points to bear in mind

- Pilot your interview design (including analysis) before committing to it.
- Bear in mind that there may be two or three different configurations which will achieve the same purpose.
- The most common mistake which new Grid interviewers make is to have the elements too abstract. You will hardly ever go wrong by making your elements more concrete.
- Remember that Grid lets you see the interviewee's world as the interviewee has learned to understand it. Even if the interviewee has asked for counselling (i.e. asked your help in re-framing their world), much of it has worked for them until now. Don't judge it - listen to it, understand it, be a skilled mirror before anything else.

Prepared by Dr Valerie Stewart

The Repertory Grid Interview

The learning curve of being an effective Repertory Grid interviewer is very steep, and requires that you practise your first few interviews in a safe place, with a tolerant friend, on non-controversial topics. If you have access to an experienced interviewer, so that you can 'shadow' each other for the first two or three times you go live, so much the better.

Skills Overview

In your first few interviews, you're learning several different skills at the same time – that's one reason why it can feel confusing. You're learning:

- how to phrase and, where appropriate, re-phrase the two-against-one question;
- how to manage the presentation of the elements, which means keeping control of the cards they're written on (unless you're using **Enquire Within**[®], which does this for you);
- how to manage recording the constructs, which means keeping control of the cards they're written on (unless you're using Enquire Within, which does this for you);
- how to monitor the process – how is the interviewee reacting, are you getting information which is relevant to the purpose, etc;
- how to control the use of time, if time is a constraint.

I often teach Grid interviewing to groups of people, and one consistent feature is that people learn these diverse activities at different rates – nothing to do with their intelligence or speed of comprehension, it's just one of those things. So if you decide to teach yourself Grid in a group, which is a good idea because you can observe and get feedback, please don't be surprised if you get different rates of acceleration and pause. In this guide, I'm assuming that you have access to at least one friend who'll let you practise, and if you have a third who can observe then so much the better.

Eliciting Constructs

Start by assembling some small index cards (which you'll use for recording the elements) and larger cards (which you'll use for recording the constructs). You're going to start with some easy elements, so ask your interviewee to name six well-known public figures, or television programmes, or models of car – something you know they are familiar with. Don't bother with a purpose statement, but do think of a couple of qualifiers, such as '... in terms of how I feel about them, in terms of their appeal....' Number the element cards.

Now practise asking the 'magic question' in two of three different ways. The basic question is 'Tell me something that any two of these have in common that makes them different from the third,' but it's worth having some alternative phrases, such as 'In what way are any two of these similar but different from the third,' or 'Can you put any two of them together and the third one is different?' As you're asking the question, lay down three element cards at random; not in a straight line, but at random and shuffle them around on the flat surface.

Note: write the names of the elements in big writing so they occupy most of the card, because some people will try to write the two poles of the construct on the element cards. Also, it's really important to present the triad of elements so that the interviewer can see two against one –

whether it's on the table or into a computer. Giving people a printed list of all the elements and asking them to concentrate on just three is very difficult.

Propositional Constructs

It's quite likely that the first two or three constructs will be '[propositional](#)' – that is, objective properties of the elements, like *male - female*, *young - old*, *entertainment - documentary*, *sports car - family car*. Don't worry about this for the moment, because your job is to write down the construct. Use the bigger index cards, one card per construct. It's a good idea to write the construct about two-thirds from the bottom, leaving space to record any laddering up and down you may want to do later. A useful discipline is to write the characteristic of the pair on the left, and the singleton on the right, and to note the numbers of the elements in the pair and the singleton. If the interviewee names one end on the pole only, don't offer the answer: ask 'How would you describe the other(s) by contrast?'

Note; the exact wording of that phrase – 'the other(s) by contrast'. Don't use the word 'opposite' because the other pole may not be a dictionary opposite. Tagging your question to the other element(s) helps the other pole be distinct. Best practice is that each end of the pole should carry equal 'weight'; so if the first pole is 'shows leadership' you need something other than 'doesn't show leadership' – the other pole might be 'easily led,' or 'sabotages others' leadership,' or 'stopped being a leader,' or a whole variety of other poles, depending on how the interviewee sees the elements.

After you've practised writing down two or three constructs, if the first constructs were propositional try introducing one of the qualifiers, so that you ask 'Again, can you tell me a way or ways in which any two of these are similar to each other and different from the third, in terms of the way you feel about them?' That should shift the emphasis. Also, the constructs are likely to be longer and more personal, and this will give you a sense of how long it takes for the interviewee to think, and for you to write.

Note: people vary greatly in the length of time it takes them to think of a construct. It depends on their knowledge of the topic, how they feel about the process, etc. But at some point you will learn to present the next triad while you're finishing writing the existing one.

Some other hints:

1. Don't be afraid of the silence – it means that the interviewee is thinking;
2. try to write down everything that's said, and not condense or summarise the construct – but if you absolutely have to, then ask the interviewee to summarise it, don't do it yourself;
3. if you simply must put in some words of your own, to explain or summarise, find a convention for remembering that they're yours – for example I put mine in square brackets;
4. some interviewees will give you a long list of single poles, if they can see a number of constructs – if this happens, write each pole on a fresh card and then go back and ask for the contrast pole.

Managing the Cards and the Recording

By this stage you should be reasonably comfortable with presenting triads, asking the question, and recording. You've probably learned that you need to give yourselves plenty of physical space – a good horizontal surface at the appropriate height for writing. It is also a good idea if you can sit so that the interviewee can see what you're doing – it symbolises the fact that this is a *joint* exploration. The next stage is to learn how to impose some order on the process, especially managing the cards. A useful hint: if there are no other pressing reasons dictating the number of elements you have, then use nine. Then you can write a 3 x 3 matrix – 123, 456, 789 – and use

this to order your triads. So you'll have 123, then 456, then 789, then 147, 258, 369, and if you need more you can go diagonally 159, 267, 348, and so on. This makes it much easier to control the cards, because you're not searching for the next triad, and it also has the advantage of giving you every element in the company of every other element in the shortest time. So, if you feel you need it, give yourself a practise with nine elements.

By this time you probably won't feel completely competent in managing the cards and the recording, but you ought to feel as if it's within your grasp. The test is whether you find that it's becoming easier to listen to the actual constructs, rather than just being a recorder. So it's time to try some laddering.

Laddering

The [purpose of laddering](#) is to learn more about what the constructs mean to the interviewee. Personal construct theory refers to people having a 'hierarchy' of constructs, with a few 'core constructs' which represent their own core values at the top, and peripheral constructs at the bottom. (I have much over-simplified this, and PCP theorists must forgive me. The most important thing to remember is that core constructs must be handled with care).

Laddering Up

Start by *Laddering Up*. There are two ways of doing this. Suppose that you're doing a counselling interview in which the elements are key people ([Click here for an example](#)) in the interviewee's childhood and teenage years, and you've been given the construct *took an active interest in my education - paid no attention to my education*. One way of laddering up is to present that construct and ask which pole the interviewee prefers, in terms of the purpose: so your question would be something like 'Which kind of people did you prefer - those who took an active interest in your education or those who paid it no attention?' You might get an answer like 'Those who took an interest.' Then you go on to ask 'Why is that important to you?' Suppose the answer is 'Because there were subjects I would have liked to have studied and I would have been good at.' Then you ask 'And why is that important to you?' and you might get an answer like 'Because I've always felt at a disadvantage compared with my brothers.'

Can you feel how the repeated 'Why?' questions are going deeper, getting closer to the heart of the interviewee? Before we discuss laddering up in more depth, let's look at the other way of asking the question. The other way is to present the construct and say 'You drew a distinction between people who took an active interest in your education and those who paid no attention to it. Is that an important distinction between people in your childhood?' and if the answer's Yes, you ask why, and go on asking why just as in the previous example.

Note: because core constructs are, by definition, very important to the interviewee, don't treat them lightly. We recommend that for most purposes – certainly for 'extractive' Grid interviews – you shouldn't go through more than three levels of asking Why, and you shouldn't ladder up any more than you need to know. You can usually tell when you're getting close to someone's core constructs because they become iterative – they'll use a phrase which indicates that that's the way it is for them and they can't explain further. The body language may give them away also – people tend to use 'going round in a circle' type gestures, or – if you've been insensitive– gestures inviting you to stop.

Further note, on recording and process management: the reason for using a large card for each construct and writing the construct about two-thirds of the way up is that you can write the answers to the laddering up questions above the construct – I usually write a small arrow pointing upwards to show that's what I've done. Note that the answers to the Why questions won't usually be phrased as a bipolar construct, just a comment; for nearly all purposes this is enough. Also, if you get an answer like the one cited above – *because there were subjects I would*

have liked to have studied and I would have been good at – you can ask what the subjects were; learning to follow up clues like this is one of the signs that you're becoming a skilled interviewer. And you don't have to start the laddering process with the first construct produced – look for one which you think is likely to be easy and interesting for the interviewee.

Practise both ways of laddering up. The choice between which method to use should be dictated by the need to ask a sensible question; for example, if you get a great many constructs where there is obviously a positive pole and a negative pole you could feel stupid asking a series of questions about 'which do you prefer as companions, people who have appalling table manners or people who are well-mannered people who have body odour or people who wash people who kick your dog or people who don't?' In this case, it's much better to ask whether that's an important distinction and why.

Also, note that when you're laddering (up or down) you're laddering the *construct*, not talking about the specific elements which generated that construct. Observe that the examples given above quote 'people who are X or people who are Y', and you may need to clarify this by saying 'In general

Finally, if time is an issue or there are other good reasons, you could give all the construct cards back to the interviewee and ask them to sort them into high, medium, and low priority, and then just ladder the high priority ones. And once the interviewee's seen the point of laddering and given you several answers, you can show the remaining cards and ask 'Are we going to get anything new out of this one?'

Laddering Down

Now try laddering down. The objective of laddering down is to 'unpick' the constructs into their component parts, to get information about how the interviewee defines them in practice. The standard laddering down question is 'Can you tell me more about how elements that are (one pole) differ from elements that are (other pole)?' So, using our example of *took an active interest in my education - paid no attention to my education*, you would ask 'Can you tell me more about what the people who were actively interested in your education actually did, in practice, which made them different from the ones who paid it no attention?' A question like this will generate one or more constructs which should describe behaviour: for example you might get *Went to the parents' evenings - didn't go to the parents' evenings, helped me with my homework - never helped me with homework, encouraged me to use the library - said that the library was a waste of time*, and so on. What these new constructs do is give observable, behavioural examples of the original construct in practice. Constructs obtained from laddering down should have both poles defined. Again, observe that the laddering down question refers to the constructs, not to the elements which gave it. Record the new constructs underneath the primary constructs – I use a little down-pointing arrow to show that this is what I've done.

Note: when you ask the laddering down question, some people will go 'across' – that is, they'll give you both poles of the construct – and some will go 'down', giving you lots of descriptors of one pole. If this happens, go with the flow and then take each pole and ask how they would describe the other pole by contrast

Time to Take Stock

Time to pause and take stock. You should have given yourself enough practice that you feel comfortable managing the cards, you're able to listen to the content, you can find a new way of phrasing the questions if you get stuck. You should also have learned to discipline yourself not to suggest any of the content, and not to be afraid of the silence because almost always it means that the interviewee's thinking. Try two or three different people to practise with, and different

subjects, so you get some idea of how interviewees differ, and ask your practice interviewees for feedback.

If you can arrange it, try to get someone to accompany you while you practise interviewing. In the best of all worlds, you would go out with an experienced Grid interviewer who conducted the interview while you ‘shadowed’ them – that is, wrote your own record cards so that you could compare, and then you could swap places.

Frequently Asked Questions

Before we move onto the next stage of Grid, how about some Frequently Asked Questions:

Q1. How long does it usually take to get to this stage?

Answer: it depends on the topic, and on whether it’s an extractive or reflective Grid. If you use element creation questions to get your element set, that will take some time. If it’s an element set which the interviewee will find easy (for example, the team s/he works with) it’ll be quick, but if it’s an unrehearsed element set (for example, times in their life when they’ve tried to be assertive, which are likely to be harder to retrieve) then it will take longer but the time will have been well spent. For eliciting the constructs and laddering, in an ‘extractive’ Grid you should allow about an hour: as a rule of thumb, if I’m interviewing a sample of managers in a study of corporate culture, I’ll use colleagues as elements and I’ll ask each manager for a ninety-minute appointment. I may not get a complete ‘download’ from each manager, but aggregating the results over the sample will compensate. For a reflective Grid, where you’re there to perform a service such as counselling, I’m afraid that the answer is ‘it takes as long as it takes’ – but you may in any case want to build in time for reflection.

Q2. What order do I do things in - when do I start laddering, for example?

Answer: it depends on the flow of the interview. Your primary aim should be to make the interviewee comfortable with the process as quickly as possible – some people slip into the two-against-one comparison easily, others take more time. You’ll probably get some [propositional constructs](#) first; write them down before you start to emphasise the qualifier. (By the way, propositional constructs can be very interesting when laddered, so don’t discard them). Remember also that the corollary of Grid’s being free from observer bias is that it’s impossible to fake one, and if your interviewee isn’t comfortable they’ll send up distress signals. *So, at the start, go with the flow where it’s flowing.* Moving on to laddering can be a good way of helping the insights flow again if the interviewee’s dried up. You can move between construct elicitation to laddering, back to some more constructs, do a spot more laddering. If you’ve succeeded in creating an atmosphere of the interview being a joint exploration through structured conversation, the interviewee may give you some signals which you can follow. (Read the [Hint Grid Gives You Lots of Bites at the Cherry](#)).

Q3. How many constructs ought I to expect?

Answer: it depends on the subject, on your purpose, and your analysis method. A very rough guide is that when someone’s talking about a topic that’s familiar but not heavy with emotional investment or technical complexity – for example, managers giving constructs about their colleagues as quoted above – I would expect somewhere between twenty and forty primary constructs. On the other hand, I have a session about a particular psychological typology that I’m planning a book about, and I keep adding to it as I think of more constructs and it’s up to 85. The number of constructs you should be *content* with – a slightly different question, I know – depends on whether your purpose will permit you to use the 80/20 rule: ‘let’s see how many we get in a couple of sweeps over the territory’. Where it really matters is if your analysis is going to include a frequency count of the number of constructs, and/or a content analysis which includes a

frequency count. The basis of an analysis of frequency count is the reasonable assumption that people won't have many constructs about topics where they have little experience: for example, I can probably muster no more than four constructs about the sea, but if I stand next to an Aussie surfer I can hear that he's got a very sophisticated construct system. If the surfer were (God forbid!) to try to teach me to 'read' the sea as he does, then a simple robust evaluation of the success of his teaching would be the increase in my constructs. To take another example, if in my corporate culture survey interviewing managers about their colleagues 60% of their constructs were about conflict and there were none about innovation, I'll need to be pretty sure of my ground before I confront the management committee with this interesting result. To summarise this point: if you are going to draw significant conclusions from the number of constructs, you must give yourself a good sample and/or the opportunity for each interviewee to dig really deep.

Q4: Do you have any guidance on sample size?

Answer: it depends on the purpose. If you are sampling a homogenous group of people about a subject which they are familiar with but doesn't carry a great deal of emotional investment, then generally you stop getting new information between 15 and 20 interviews. So if you're doing a research project in a company with 32 managers, political prudence says you interview them all so as not to make anyone feel excluded. Otherwise, you may have to work with what you are given if the numbers are smaller, or think about turning your constructs into a questionnaire or survey if the numbers are much greater.

Q5: Do you start every answer with 'It depends?'

Yes. Because once you've mastered Grid and learned to do a 'pure' interview – that is, a conversation in which you provide the structure and do the listening, and the interviewee provides the content – then you'll be able to work out the answer to almost every question yourself. People often ask 'Can the interviewer suggest an element?a construct?' Answer Yes if you know that's what you've done and why. Learning to do a 'pure' interview will train you to recognise when you've intervened, and that's what's important. Sometimes it can be useful for the interviewer to suggest that we add another element, especially what's called an 'ideal' element – MYSELF AS MY BOSS WANTS ME TO BE, or MY FATHER AS I WOULD HAVE LIKED HIM TO BE. Or if you've interviewed a Frequent Flyer on his or her experiences with airline service, you will probably want a construct like *made me decide never to travel with them again - not as important as that*, and if the interviewee hasn't offered it then you can. Almost anything is permissible, as long as you know what you've done and have a good reason for it.

Moving On or Stopping Here?

I've broken the flow at this point for two reasons. One is that after you've collected (and probably laddered) a number of constructs, you might want to engage the interviewee in some feedback (for which, see the next Hint). What you've done by this point is establish most of the dimensions on which the interviewee construes their world, and it could be useful just to talk about these dimensions before going on to rate each element on each dimension. The second reason is that many Grid studies can be performed using construct elicitation alone: in the days before we had much computing power we had to – you'll find three examples in the Sweet and Simple Hints. As a purely personal opinion, I think it did my generation a great deal of good to have to plan studies which used only pencil and paper – we were saved from the temptation of assuming that we could collect furniture-vans full of data and assume that we could load it all into a computer and press Analyse.

However, if your purpose is to reveal the interviewee's constructs as they are used, you need the next stage, which is to turn each construct into a scale, and rate each element on each construct. This will give you a matrix which you can analyse and perhaps develop further. (The Hints on

Feedback and Analysis should be read in conjunction with this hint, which is mostly about administration).

Construct Rating

Explain to the interviewee that the next stage is to see how each of the elements is rated on each of the constructs – for example, ‘You’ve told me about the people who were important in your childhood, and you’ve given me these constructs – wouldn’t it be useful to see how each person rates on each construct?’

You may be using a computer program which presents each element for rating on each construct, which simplifies things mightily. Or you may have to draw up a Grid with one column for each element and the poles of the constructs at either end of each row, with one pole labelled 1 and the other pole labelled with your chosen number. In either case, the question to the interviewee is relatively straightforward; but there are some administrative issues which could arise, thus:

- How many points on the scale? Most people seem content with five. Seven’s a bit fiddly.
- Positional Response Bias. This is an issue you need to stay alert to – even experienced Gridders can get caught in it. It’s very important to realise that constructs in general don’t necessarily have a ‘good’ and ‘bad’ pole; they may simply denote differences, such as when someone distinguishes their acquaintances as *likes to talk things through* - *likes to work things out alone* but doesn’t have a preference. So when you start rating the elements on the constructs, the extreme left will be 1 and the extreme right will be 5, and if there is a preferred pole for a given construct it’s as likely to be on the right as on the left. However, people can slip into mistakenly always giving the preferred pole a 5 (or a 1 – depends on their experience of rating scales!) and so you need constant vigilance to make sure that the interviewee is working from the actual pole descriptions.
- [Range of Convenience](#) of Constructs. Not every element in the world can be rated on every element in the world: try rating FALSE TEETH on the construct *religious-atheist*. So there will be times when you – taking your cue from the interviewee – want to drop a construct out, or re-write it. For example, in a Grid about careers you might have been given the construct *working with women* - *working with men*, which fitted that triad, but when you try applying it more widely it works better as two constructs: *working with women* - *working with both sexes*, and *working with men* - *working with both sexes*.

A Few Final Points

That is about all there is to say about getting the actual Grid done. What you do with it, in terms of feedback and analysis, are contained in the rest of this series. This Hint has deliberately concentrated on how to learn the skills, manage the administration, and prepare yourself for the first few real interviews, and I've avoided talking about content. So, just a few final points:

- You *must* practise in a safe place, otherwise you'll get into a horrid muddle, but the learning curve is steep, especially if you have someone to give you feedback.
- Learn to do a 'pure' interview – that is, one where you know that you have suggested none of the content – because then you'll be able to make sound decisions about adapting the process.
- Let the works show – the sooner your interviewee sees the point of it all, the easier it will become for both of you.
- Don't forget to 'sign off' by asking if the interviewee has had any further thoughts. Sometimes the experience can cause the interviewee to re-structure their insights and you'll get some little gems.
- Most important of all - don't forget that Grid is a structured conversation. It is much more than a matrix of figures to be analysed.

Prepared by Dr Valerie Stewart

Analysis of a Repertory Grid Interview

Don't have much experience and/or access to supervision? Then, if you want to use Repertory Grid, this hint on analysis is designed to help you.

There is already a good deal of information in the other Hints on this site, but we make no apology for the duplication: our observation suggests that at least half the serious problems people experience with Repertory Grid are due to failure to include the method of analysis into the project plan. Regrettably, many of these problems can't be fixed, and the phrase 'If I were you I wouldn't start from here' applies. Please, please, please take note of the following:

- There are many different, and valid, ways of analysing Grid data. Some methods need a computer; others don't. If you ask 'Is there an analysis program for Repertory Grid?' the answer will be 'Yes, several; they do different things; and the choice is dictated by your purpose, the type of data you have, and the questions you want the data to answer.'
- For almost any work that uses Grid, it's possible to think of at least two or three protocols for designing the session. There could therefore be two or three different ways of analysing your data, provided that you incorporate your chosen form of analysis into the design of the session.
- No method of analysis exempts you from looking at the results and deciding what they mean. If you keep a spreadsheet of your family finances, it will show you where the money goes; but it is up to you to decide what this means in terms of turning off the lights, buying a new car, and thinking of the next holiday. Analysis of Grid is exactly the same.
- Don't think of 'analysis' as a one-off activity – you, the intrepid researcher collecting your matrix of data which you take back to the laboratory for analysis. There are many purposes – especially but not exclusively the reflective interviews – where you and the interviewee should stop, do an intermediate analysis, and then move on to the next stage. You will never get a complete picture of the interviewee's cognitive map on the first sweep – people are simply not that superficial. For some 'extractive' purposes you can compensate for this by taking a sample and relying on the 80/20 rule, but the closer you come to helping an individual person reflect, the more you need to be aware that analysis is part of the process, not its end-point. (This is why the Hint on [Feedback](#) should be read in close proximity to this Hint).
- Repertory Grid is a method for structuring a conversation. It is not a rush to complete a matrix which you enter into a computer program. For many purposes, especially the 'reflective' uses of Grid, the journey matters more than the arrival: meaning that the insights garnered in the course of eliciting elements, constructs, laddering, rating, and looking at the analysis so far may be much more useful than the final presentation of the data by your chosen methodology.

These are 'golden rules' for doing an efficient, purposeful, cost-effective Grid-based project. There are some other factors which may influence your choice:

- How easy is it for you to access on-line help? especially if you're new to Grid. Do you have a supervisor or colleague who can guide you? If you'll be using a computer program, can you understand the manual? Because if you're new to Grid, and you haven't been a Good Bear and practised in a safe place first ([see the previous Hint in this series](#)) it can be very difficult to diagnose your problem accurately enough to ask for help in a way which lets the helper understand your problem.

- Who are you going to have to explain your results to? [In a previous Hint](#) I quoted my experience of having to feed back to the Board the fact that the predominant theme in their managers' descriptions of effectiveness was conflict resolution, and – by the way – nobody had mentioned innovation. If I stood any chance of convincing them to take it seriously, my method of analysis had to be so simple and transparent that nobody could wriggle out of the problem by attacking my methodology.

Bearing in mind that there is advice on [analysis](#) elsewhere in these [Hints](#), I'll explain the basics of the different analysis methods but without going into great detail. Here is a general overview of your options:

- Frequency count, usually of the constructs but sometimes of the elements as well. The rationale for doing a frequency count is that people have more constructs about topics of which they have more experience. A frequency count is a very rough guide; you can rely on mega-trends only, not small differences; you must be sure that your interviewee has had every chance to give as many as possible; and it's best used when making a before-and-after comparison of the same person, rather than comparisons between people.
- Content analysis, which may be combined with frequency counts. Like any other form of content analysis, you look at the data (usually the constructs), see what themes suggest themselves, and sort into those themes. Again, the presumption is that people have more constructs about issues they know well; so your analysis is likely to focus on the relative proportions of different themes – such as the preponderance of constructs about conflict management in the way managers described one another in the example above. Whatever your subject-matter, there isn't likely to be a benchmark against which you can compare results – for example, I couldn't say what the ideal proportion of constructs about conflict management should be – but a combination of common sense and input from the client is usually enough to get you started. For example, if you were interviewing a client in order to help him understand why many of his relationships were unsuccessful, and there were a lot of constructs about trust, and when you [laddered up](#) it seemed to be a core construct, you might ask the question: 'Can you see any major themes in your constructs so far?' and if he didn't spot it for himself you might then offer a comment like: 'It looks as if you have a lot of constructs about trust – does this seem important to you?' The most difficult aspect of content analysis is seeing what is *not* there – for example, my seeing that there were no constructs about innovation in my conflict-ridden client. Experience is the best teacher here, combined with your general knowledge of the client's circumstances. Content analysis is very useful when you are comparing the constructs produced by two or three groups of people about the same subject, especially because you don't need any external benchmarking to draw conclusions – for example, I did a study in the Public Service in which senior managers, Ministers, and control agencies all contributed constructs about effectiveness at senior management level. One outstanding finding was that about half the managers' constructs had to do with managing their departments, but this didn't figure at all in the way Ministers construed them – which was very interesting when viewed in the light of the performance contracts between managers and Ministers.
- Examination of just one or two elements, without statistical analysis. For example, if you were doing a career counselling interview, using different careers as elements, you could then ask the client to think of the ideal job and rate it on all the constructs. What you're doing here is to use the real life elements as the means for generating constructs about careers – so you have grounded the interview in your client's real experience – and then used this information to generate a profile of the ideal job. Obviously it's useful to put the constructs into some kind of priority order as well. I had great fun working with a small group of tutors planning a project management course: they collectively generated a number of constructs using projects as elements, and then used the constructs to generate the characteristics of different case studies, such as The Project from Hell, The Project Guaranteed to Over-Run Budget, The Political Nightmare, and so on.
- Statistical analysis using multivariate analysis. There are many different analysis software packages available, commercially and non-commercially. They are all based on analysing the matrix you get from rating the elements on the constructs, by searching for

the smallest number of independent variables which could account for the relationships in the matrix. Most programs will then present this information visually, which restricts them to using two (three at most) variables; the variables appear as the x and y axis, with a z axis if three are used. The position of each element (and sometimes the constructs) are plotted on the visual diagram, so that ones which are similar are close to one another, and so on. At some point the axes have to be named (ideally by the interviewee, as part of the feedback process) and then, depending on your purpose, you look at what the visual plot tells you – for example, if your Grid is about relationships at work and there is a great distance between the elements MYSELF and MY BOSS you would want to explore this: does it matter? How do you feel about it? How does your boss feel about it? Does anything need to change, and if so, what? If this discussion results in an action plan you may then do a new Grid interview and look at what has happened, if anything, to the distances.

- Statistical analysis using dendritic analysis. In this type of analysis, the calculations are made by first looking at the elements to find which two are most closely correlated. So if you have ten elements in your Grid and numbers 2 and 8 are most closely correlated, the program will re-sort the visual matrix so that it places them next to each other, and will make a 'virtual' element number 11. It then drops 2 and 8 from the analysis, replaces them with number 11, and looks for the next two closest combinations, and re-sorts the Grid again until all the correlations have been calculated. Above the matrix, with the elements on the top row of the Grid, it draws a set of 'trees' which show the strength of the correlations. When you look at a dendritic analysis you usually see the elements grouped in 'families' of closely-correlated elements. The analysis will then do the same process for the constructs, putting together those which are most closely correlated (and taking into account that some constructs need to be reversed). The interpretation of the results is based on the axiom that elements (and constructs) which are very closely correlated have very similar meanings, and so the first stage is known as *differentiation* – you look at the elements which are closely correlated and ask whether that degree of correlation actually represents the truth, as the interviewee sees it. For example, if you were going a Grid about characters in Shakespeare, and the first dendritic analysis showed a 98% correlation between LEAR and HAMLET, the question is: 'Are those characters as similar as they seem?' If the answer's Yes, you go on to look at the next correlation, but if the answer's No the program will then ask you for a new construct on which LEAR rates at one end and HAMLET at the other. You then rate all the elements on the new construct, and the Grid is re-calculated. Going through the differentiation process for the constructs is slightly more complex, because you have three choices – to combine the two constructs into one, to offer a new element which will be rated at one extreme on one construct and the other on the second, or to treat the correlation as an important insight which you want to leave in place. For example, if the interviewee gave the constructs *tragic character- comic character* and *make great demands on the actor - easier for the actor* and they were correlated at the 95% level, the question posed would be: 'Almost always you describe tragic characters as making great demands on the actor, and comic characters as making fewer demands – is this a true representation of how you see things?' If the answer is No, then the next question is: 'in that case, can you think of a tragic character which makes fewer demands on the actor? Or a comic part which makes great demands on the actor?' Maybe the interviewee can think of an example or two, but s/he may decide to treat this information as an important insight to leave in place for further thought. This process is a very effective way of highlighting and challenging the interviewee's stereotypes and prejudices. Dendritic analysis is a dynamic process, in which the first calculation serves as a starting-point for building and testing the interviewee's perception of the subject until s/he is satisfied that is clear and complete.

The difference between these two approaches to statistical analysis can be summarised as: Multivariate analysis condenses the information in the Grid, and loses some of the detail in the process, whereas dendritic analysis expands the Grid and loses none of the detail. I'm an unashamed advocate of dendritic analysis, which is why it is built in to **Enquire Within**[®], and I also find that if you really want to go into as much detail as possible then (i) dendritic analysis is the only choice, and (ii) the differentiation process gets people 'hooked' and you can leave the

session with them to carry on alone. However, let us leave this session as we began, by re-iterating two of the Golden Rules:

- Build your method of analysis into your project plan. Pilot it so that you can be sure that it will tell you what you want. And remember that you will still have to evaluate what the analysis tells you.
- Grid is a structured conversation, of which the matrix and its analysis is only a part. The journey may matter more than the arrival. The map is not the territory.

Prepared by Dr Valerie Stewart

Feedback in the Repertory Grid Interview

This is the sixth part of a set of hints designed to help people who want to use Repertory Grid but don't have much experience and/or access to supervision

Some Assumptions

This part makes some assumptions – that you have practised your interviewing technique and can be sure that you are not imposing your own framework on the interviewee; that you have absorbed the twin messages of the importance of planning your analysis from the start, and that Grid is a conversation; and that you don't need advice on the interpersonal skills needed to be a good listener and counsellor. In that case, there are three golden rules for feedback:

- give it;
- always relate it to the purpose;
- ask for it.

Feedback Principles

In good Grid feedback the principle is for the interviewer to act, as much as possible, as a skilled mirror: that is, to ask questions and give information which will encourage the interviewees to see things for themselves, rather than the interviewer offering an interpretation or judgment. This is why it's important to be aware of when, and how, you offer your own thoughts. There may be a time when you need to; and there will certainly be a point where you have to make the connection between what the Grid tells you and the broad purpose which the Grid interview(s) is meant to address. But it's best if you can guide the interviewee to the insight, rather than do it yourself.

It's also important to be clear about whom you will be giving feedback to. This is where the difference between 'extractive' and 'reflective' Grids becomes important. If you're doing a research project for a client which means that you will have to do lots of interviews but probably with a limited time for each (therefore relying somewhat on the 80/20 rule) your main feedback will be a report to your client, with appropriate suggestions for actions, and the people you have interviewed may get a summary report. But if you're doing a counselling interview, and therefore in 'reflective' mode, it's your counselling client who needs the feedback and action planning.

Some Examples

Discussing how to give feedback is best illustrated by a series of examples, from which you can draw your own ideas – after all, no two Grid interviews are the same. The constant which should run through all interviews is *encouragement*, especially at the beginning – if you follow the advice to 'let the works show,' you'll be making a pile of cards with constructs written on them, or a series of entries into a computer program, and once the interviewee has understood the two-against-one principle you can refer to the build-up of constructs and make a remark like 'Now you see how it works, the more of these you can give me (add a phrase relevant to the purpose if appropriate) the better.'

The purpose of giving feedback, besides ordinary politeness, is that it will often facilitate the interviewee to give more information, or re-frame the issues. Unless you have decided to take the 80/20 rule – that is, to interview a number of people on the same topic and rely on the sample size to give you what you need – you can't expect the interviewee to give you everything you both need in a nice neat orderly fashion, moving smoothly from elements to constructs to laddering to rating to matrix analysis and on to action planning. Often the most important insights have to be sweated for, because the Grid interview may be the first time that your interviewee has done some systematic introspection. This is why I suggested earlier that you should be ready to move around within the process itself, for instance by moving on to laddering for a while before going back to look for more constructs.

Patterns

The question which you're likely to need most, for the interviewee and for yourself, is: 'Can you see any patterns in here?' It's a good idea if you can see some, otherwise it's a risky question, and as a general rule it's best if the client can answer rather than your supplying it. Patterns can be obvious surprisingly early, but you must use your judgement about when to raise them – for example, I once did some work for a well-known High Street retailer with a reputation for excellence. They were worried about the turnover in their graduate trainees: a fair number didn't last beyond the first month. I did a group construct elicitation session with (i) some of last year's intake, (ii) some of this year's intake, and (iii) some who'd been accepted but refused. For the elements, I asked each person to write (privately, of course) all the employers they'd applied to. With very few exceptions, the other employers were 'blue chip' companies, but hardly any others in the retail trade. I could have stopped the session there and reported back to the client that they were fishing in the wrong pond – they ought to be attracting the best of graduates interested in retailing, and not be in competition with ICI and BP and Shell. The constructs, and the group discussion afterwards, supported this insight. However the client didn't like it, and they are now rather beleaguered by alligators.

If you have used element creation questions to get your elements – suppose that you're doing a wide-scale training needs analysis and you've asked for critical incidents as elements – then provided that you have stuck to the same order of questions for all your interviewees, there may be a pattern which you can detect in the answers. For example, if you've asked for two really tough incidents, two which the interviewee thought would be tough but weren't, two which the interviewee thought would be easy but weren't, a routine enjoyable event, a routine disliked event, and one more *ad lib* – you may have something very interesting for your client, if there are clear patterns. (HINT: it's always a good idea to ask the client to help you analyse the data. It helps you retain the 'no interviewer bias' standpoint, and it builds in ownership by the client. Also they might be able to read things which you can't, because they work there. See the example below about construct elicitation done in a bank).

I don't think I'd ever stop an interview simply to discuss patterns in the elements, because you could get stuck there. But it is often appropriate to stop and discuss patterns in the constructs, especially when the pattern relates to your purpose. Suppose for example that you were counselling someone who knew that they ought to get fit and take more exercise: you'd probably have an element set of 'methods of getting fit', like aerobics and swimming and tennis (NB. This element set would probably have been derived by your asking the client to name as many methods of getting fit as she could think of). Suppose furthermore that you could see a theme running through the constructs to do with not wanting to make a fool of herself in public, and another theme about not wanting to let the rest of the side down. You could ask her if she could spot any major themes running through her constructs. Or, if you were using cards or could print off her list of constructs, you could ask her to arrange them into themes; or you could ask her to sort them into high, medium, and low priority. If by that point she hasn't grasped what's obvious to you, you could try laddering up the high priority constructs and see if these themes emerged as you got closer to core constructs. If by that point she still hasn't seen the theme, you have two choices: to go back to your non-interventionist role as a Grid interviewer, or to say 'Well, I can see

a couple of themes - would you like me to show you?' and sort the cards yourself and pray for the insight to occur naturally, or you could come right out with it yourself. In making this decision, your guiding skills must be your skills as a counsellor – your reading of her body language and tone of voice, and the other ways you have learned of knowing when to speak and when to stay silent.

One point, though – when I did my first counselling Grids, I felt frightened by the speed with which the problem seemed to become obvious to me, though not necessarily for my client. Anxious not to fall into the trap of construing other people's construing, I asked advice from more experienced practitioners. Their answers could be summed up as: 'You're probably right; this is one consequence of the lack of redundancy in the Grid process, because the interviewee can't waffle on; but hold yourself back in order to give the interviewee time to see things, and be prepared to be wrong.'

Many 'extractive' uses of Grid use only construct elicitation (and laddering, of course) if they have a large sample to interview. This is often the best available research design, because while the technology to share and compare actual Grids exists, it usually imposes restrictions on the research design which are difficult to manage. I often use construct elicitation to measure corporate culture, usually as part of a change programme and/or to develop management competencies. Standard procedure is to ask people to name colleagues as elements (keeping them anonymous) and then elicit constructs 'in terms of how they behave at work'. The analysis is a simple content analysis into the categories which suggest themselves from the constructs, and it is really helpful to enlist some people from the client organisation to help with the analysis (ownership and all that). Feedback is then to the client who commissioned the work; I usually do it by getting the senior managers together in a workshop environment and begin with something which gets them to recall the goals for the business - covering flip-charts with a SWOT analysis, or Hopes, Fears, and Expectations. Then I present the construct groupings, starting with the largest group first; and the question is 'If these are your hopes for the business, and these are the terms in which your managers judge effectiveness, will this view of effectiveness support your achievement of the business plan?' If so, fine; if not, we work on how it will have to change.

This is a very sweet and cost-effective intervention, and because Grid is interviewer bias-free it allows you to say 'Fire me if you like, but they'll continue to think like that.' However, I did learn a salutary lesson about not construing other people's construing when I did this work in a bank under severe threat. The main construct groupings were basically about being a nice guy and good at assessing credit. What struck me was that 'sales effectiveness' was largely equated with activity level, rather than skill, and I'd prepared myself to discuss that point. However, the Retail Manager pronounced himself delighted with that result, because – to quote him almost directly – 'three months ago the little dears wouldn't even have mentioned activity level.' He said that he'd spent the last few months persuading them to put their boots on and get onto the playing field; skill in playing the game was the next item on his agenda.

Meaning lies in Function

Back to 'reflective' uses of Grid, where you have chosen to use a computer program to analyse your data. Here the possibilities and strategies for feedback are so many that we can only give a few examples, and leave it to your own practice to learn what seems to be appropriate. The principle to bear in mind is that *Meaning lies in Function* - in other words, you only know what a concept means to your interviewees if you see how they use them. You can base a good deal of feedback around this principle: for example, the best place to start can be looking at elements (or constructs) which are closely correlated, and asking if this represents the truth as they see it. So if the interview is about close relationships, you might ask 'You've described yourself as very similar to your mother, but very different from your sister – would that be true?' If your counselling skills tell you that you've probably hit a hot spot, then you'd probably probe this or ask if the interviewee wants to leave it for later. If the response is 'No, I'm more different from my mother than this suggests,' you can ask for a new construct which rates Mother at one end

and Self at the other, and re-calculate the Grid. (**Enquire Within**[®] makes this very easy for you – the differentiation process, as it's known, is automated or you can do it visually). Probing similarities is often very useful when examining the constructs, because it gives you a sight of the interviewee's stereotypes: if you get two constructs which are semantically different but are closely correlated – for example *religious-atheist* and *bully-not a bully* – the presumption is that the interviewee associates religious people with bullying behaviour, and atheists are seen as much less likely to be bullies. Obviously this is an area you would want to probe with your counselling skills.

The Ideal Element

Finally, another technique you can use when giving feedback is to invent an 'ideal' element, or offer a construct. So if we go back to the lady who wants to get fit but has problems with feeling incompetent and letting the side down, you can use the constructs – in the Grid, or just on their own – to develop an element called MY IDEAL WAY OF GETTING FIT. Rating it on the constructs will give you the criteria, which you can put in priority order; the interviewee then has a shopping list of questions to ask, or you may be able to make a suggestion yourself. Similarly, you could offer a construct if it is appropriate to the purpose and hasn't appeared naturally.

Feedback is Essential

To summarise: feedback is an essential part of any Grid project, but as far as possible in the early stages you should try not to interpose your own interpretation; better to do it by open questions. At some point you will come to the action planning stage, which is where your own experience and wisdom will be in demand. Most important is to be able to know, yourself, when you have stepped out of the 'I provide the structure, you provide the content' role and started to share what you see.

And Never Ever Forget That Grid Is A Conversation!!!!

Prepared by Dr Valerie Stewart

Reminders, Tips, and Wrinkles for Repertory Grid Interviewing

This is the seventh and last part of a set of hints designed to help people who want to use Repertory Grid but don't have much experience and/or access to supervision

This final part is intended to help you if you get stuck, or need a spot of inspiration. There's no continuous theme; just a collection of Handy Household Hints. If any reader would like to contribute, we'd be pleased to include them.

1. Don't forget that Grid is a conversation. Yes, I know, we've said that before, but no apologies for saying it again.
2. The same goes for: Pilot your session and Plan Your Analysis as part of the design.
3. Don't assume that somewhere out there is a generic Grid analysis program which you can call up at will. There are many kinds of analysis – including a fair number which don't use a computer – and you need to choose the appropriate analysis in advance.
4. No analysis program will spare you the task of interpreting the results in terms of your purpose.
5. Consider where in the interview you will learn the most – which could be anywhere from the answers to element creation questions to the relationships in the analysed matrix, and plan your process and timing accordingly.
6. Set out your contract with your interviewee: why you're doing the Grid, what will happen to the results, any issues about confidentiality, etc.
7. If your interviewee seems to get stuck early on, remember that people can't do a Grid about something they know nothing about. If that's not the problem, remember that you will hardly ever go wrong by making your elements more concrete: things, people, time-bound events or activities. It's a common mistake to make a *feature* of an element into an element.
8. You'll probably get propositional constructs early on. Don't worry, because the first task is to establish the two-against-one principle with the interviewee (and you can use propositional constructs in laddering). But if you keep getting propositional constructs, try being really explicit about including the qualifier (the '... in terms of' phrase) in your question. If that still doesn't break the log-jam, you may have a problem with your interviewee's comfort level: because Grid can't be faked, an uncomfortable interviewee only has two choices: to go silent or to give propositional constructs. Go back and check your contract and whether the interviewee is comfortable with it.
9. Grid gives you lots of bites at the cherry. You can do a few constructs, a spot of laddering, a few more constructs, some rating the important thing is to keep a good flow going and make the interviewee feel comfortable and able to see where you're going
10. Try to get constructs in the form $X - Y$, rather than $X - not X$; both poles should carry equal weight. *Creative - Has no Imagination* is better than *Creative - Not Creative*.
11. It is not the case that one pole of the construct should be 'good' and the other 'bad'.
12. When referring to construct poles, talk about the *contrast* pole rather than the *opposite* pole. Learn to ask the question 'How would you describe the other one, by contrast?'
13. It's OK to re-write a construct when you start using it to rate all the elements.
14. Not all the elements in the world can be rated on all the constructs in the world. If you find that it's difficult to use a construct to rate more than a few of the elements, ask the interviewee if they'd like to drop it or re-phrase it.

15. An in-depth interview in 'reflective' mode may need to be spread over several sessions while the interviewee processes what's happened so far.
16. Don't construe other people's construing – it's not up to you to decide what's important, or high priority, or meaningful. Ask the interviewee. It's a joint exploration.
17. Practise being non-interventionist, and not offering your own contributions, so that you can be sure of the point when you stopped being a recorder and moved into the 'helpful interpreter' mode.
18. Feedback, especially in a 'reflective' Grid, is part of the process, not the end-point.
19. Leave time and space at the end for you to check the interviewee's comfort level, ask for feedback, repeat what will happen to the data, ask if there are any last-minute thoughts.
20. Grid is a technique which can serve you all your life. It can change the way you listen, think, ask questions, and be aware of yourself. It's worth learning properly. The good news is that the learning curve is steep: if you are reflective and/or lucky enough to have someone observe you, most new Gridders will have mastered the basics with four or five practice interviews. You then spend the rest of your life learning more.

I've used Grid for nearly thirty years. I can honestly say that I've never got tired of it. I always find something new to honour in the technique. Sometimes I think that it could only have been designed by someone who was half engineer and half psychologist, which George Kelly was. He has left us a unique gift. Thank you, George.

Prepared by Dr Valerie Stewart