

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

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This small volume is intended as a convenient and user-friendly introductory guide to the various procedures involved in eliciting and analysing repertory grids. It isn't an academic treatise but a guidebook which provides you with instructions on

- how to elicit grids
- how to analyse them to an accepted and rigorous standard.

It isn't a book about the theoretical background, personal construct theory (PCT), since there are many of those: the bare bones of the theory are outlined, just for reference, in Appendix 6. It isn't an academic treatment of repertory grid technique, with a comprehensive review of the research on grids and their use. That job is done by its companion volume, Fransella et al. (2004): see below. It is a practical workbook and guide, using which you can teach yourself how to elicit and analyse repertory grids. By the time you finish it, going through all the examples and exercises, you will be proficient in grid technique. Think of it as an introduction which teaches you the basics, and refers you to more advanced information as required.

1.1 HOW TO USE THIS GUIDEBOOK

The purpose of this section is to provide you with some suggestions on how to make the best use of the material which follows. The first thing to notice is that it's been written by two distinct persons.

The first is a technician. He knows about grids, and he wants to tell you, as clearly as possible, how you can use them. One of life's definitive techies, he takes the reasons for his knowledge for granted, and in order to provide clear procedural instructions, he doesn't stop to examine his ideas or his rationale in any great detail. He knows his stuff, and all he cares about is to help you understand what you're doing with grids, as clearly as possible. He often uses relatively short, declarative sentences, since his purpose is clear and simple instruction. He writes like this, using the full width of the page.

The second person is a theorist. She, also, knows about grids, and has used them extensively herself. As a result, she knows that the simple use of a procedure does not guarantee success; indeed, she believes very strongly that simple technique, bereft of ideas, concepts, and the *reasons for* doing things in a particular way, is often misleading and occasionally dangerous. There's no such thing as a simple procedure, uninformed by a set of assumptions for doing things one way rather than another, and if you're unreflective, and don't learn a good set of reasons, your use of grids will be inaccurate and, ultimately, ineffective. Because she deals in theory, justification, and rationale, her sentences are often a wee bit longer. She writes like this, in indented text.

Occasionally, the two argue with each other in order to make a point.

Secondly, it follows that the best way of reading this book is to read it in stages. There are five simple steps.

- Skim-read it, just running your eyes over the text as you turn the pages. See what's on offer and, more importantly, how it's laid out, with text, exercises at the end of each chapter, and answers to exercises and supplementary information in the appendices.
- Read it from start to finish, in order. This isn't a textbook that you can dip into, and the various bits of technique build on each other. Take your time, and master each section before moving on to the next.
- At the outset, you should ignore the theorist, and read only the material written by the technician. Avoid all the indented material. Get your head round the procedures, and focus on the examples.
- When you have grasped the bit of technique that's involved, and perhaps practised it on yourself *only*, read the indented material which accompanies the technique.
- Don't use the procedure with another person until you've read *both* sets of material.

Consequently, this book is a dialogue between two voices. It will be up to you as the reader to put the two voices together; to make your own sense of the two sets of

information. Reading has to be an active process if the material which you read is to be retained, and procedures which encourage people to talk to themselves as they're reading are a particularly good way of learning! (see Thomas & Harri-Augstein, 1985: 16–17).

Pace yourself, and don't spend too long at any one time with this guide. It's not a novel that you can read in one gulp, nor is it something you can pick bits out of. Some of the procedures may look complicated, and it may take you a little while to get up to speed. *They're actually very straightforward*, as you'll realise as soon as you've carried them out. Each one takes a bit of explaining in written text, but as an activity in itself, is very easy – as you'll see as soon as you do the relevant exercise. And so, steady does it. Plan on reading a section at a time, do the exercise(s), practise the technique, and come back to the next section another day.

If you have a friend with whom you can spend time trying out each technique as you learn it, that would be very helpful, though a lot of the grid activities can be done by yourself, on yourself.

Towards the end of each chapter, you'll find the following:

- A set of 'Things to Do'. The best way to learn a technique is to practise it, and the exercises under this heading provide you with the opportunity to do so. If you want to learn how to use grids, you have to tackle each exercise at the point in the text where it's suggested.
- Occasionally, some suggestions for 'Further Reading' are provided, highlighted where relevant.

At the very end of the book, you'll find a set of appendices. Of these, one is particularly comforting, and that's Appendix 1. It provides you with the 'Answers to Exercises'. Take them on board, look again at your own attempt at the exercise and, when you're happy to proceed, read on from the appropriate part of the chapter.

The other one I want to mention here is less cuddly, but you'll appreciate it because it's very practical. Appendix 7 is a 'Summary of Grid Procedures'. This will be your *vade mecum* after you've learnt the basic techniques. Every procedure presented in the guide is collated here in note form, to be used as an *aide-mémoire* when you're carrying out a grid interview and need to refresh your memory about one of the steps. You can expect to use it a lot at first, dispensing with it when you feel ready.

This book is meant to be entirely self-contained, and so it is, so far as the basics of grid technique are involved. You can be up and doing without any other reading. However, name–date references and a reference list in the usual form are provided, so that you can develop your knowledge of the background

theory, advanced points of technique, further details on procedures, and some applications.

You'll need these in any case if you're using grids to obtain empirical material for an assessed project or dissertation that forms part of a course of study you're following. If so, you may have encountered repertory grids before, for they form part of Chapter 13 of Jankowicz (2000a), a research methods textbook for management project and dissertation work.

Finally, if you want further guidance on points of technique, resource materials, and a gateway to additional resources, you might like to log in to *The Easy Guide to Repertory Grids* website. There are further details on this at the end of Chapter 9.

1.2 WHAT THIS BOOK CONTAINS

We start off in Chapter 2 with a description of what a repertory grid is, what it consists of, and why you would want to use one. A completed sample grid is provided so that you can see the beast for yourself, while the exercise gets you used to the basic constituents of a grid, which are called 'constructs'.

Chapter 3 provides you with the procedural steps involved in conducting a grid interview (or eliciting a grid; the terms are synonymous), how to prepare for it, and what the different design options might be. The exercises have you eliciting a grid, and experimenting with the options available to you.

Chapter 4 is a refresher and problem-solving facility. I have tried to anticipate the kinds of questions you might be wanting to ask after you've attempted your first grid, and have provided you with what I hope will be helpful answers – plus some further resources, including electronic ones, where you might find further assistance. The exercises seek to develop your ability to resolve issues that arise in grid technique. Partly, this depends on becoming sensitive to the grid interview as a delicate interpersonal and social process, and, to that end, you are referred to Appendix 2, which provides a detailed transcript of a grid interview session keyed to the exercises.

Once you've got that far, you've come a long way! You know a lot of what there is to know about elicitation, and the next step is to examine the rich information that a grid provides, and to see how it might be analysed. Chapter 5 addresses the basic analysis of a single repertory grid, encouraging you to take account of the process by which you arrived at your interviewee's meanings, as well as describing what's to be seen, and how it might be interpreted. By the end of this chapter, you should know how to get at the meanings being expressed in a single grid. The exercises are designed to give

you practice at doing just that: process analysis, simple eyeball analysis, and some construct categorisation.

Chapter 6 takes you a step further, looking at the informational relationships within the grid. Where the previous chapter was largely descriptive, and you made relatively little use of all the numbers, Chapter 6 outlines ways in which you can examine relationships within the grid, using the numbers.

- 'Is it really true that this person likes his best friend better than himself?'
- 'I got the feeling in the grid interview that the interviewee described her boss in terms very similar to those she uses when she talks about her main competitor's MD. Can I see any particular evidence for that?'
- 'If I understand the interviewee correctly, this company's unique selling proposition is practically the opposite of those used by its competitors. Have I understood that accurately; how can I check it?'
- 'Whenever this student says he's confident about a subject he's studying, he also says he had to rely on other people to learn it properly. Is there a relationship between his social support and how effectively he learns?'

Some simple, and some more complex, procedures are outlined by which relationships of these kinds can be examined. The exercises provide an opportunity to practise different components of the analysis procedures.

One of the criticisms that can be levelled at existing ways of teaching repertory grid technique is that relatively little time is spent in teaching people how to analyse *sets* of grids. A grid is a very rich and complex description of one person's views (in fact, it's been designed as the individual assessment device par excellence!) and, perhaps as a result, the analysis of *samples* of repertory grids is rather neglected. Chapter 7 is an attempt to put that right. It provides two different forms of content analysis for the aggregation of grid materials, advocates the use of differential analyses within very simple research designs, and emphasises the importance of reliability in the analysis process. The exercises give practice in all of this.

Chapter 8 provides an introduction to what is, arguably, the most important and powerful activity associated with grid work: the description and self-assessment of the interviewee's personal value system. Along the way, it tackles the issue of social desirability responding ('faking good'), and, as an outcome, provides you with a credible and powerful way of addressing the problem. The exercises encourage you to consider your own values in a given situation, prioritise them, and examine what might be required for you to change them!

Finally, in the last chapter, we confront the major issue of change itself. Change and difference: how can you tell when someone has changed their mind? And how can you assess how well one person understands another person's mind? Is it really possible to get into the other's head and see the world through their eyes rather than your own? The examples check how well *you* have understood the procedures involved.

1.3 WHAT THIS BOOK MISSES OUT

Firstly, it doesn't talk to you like a textbook. At least, I hope not! The point is to learn how to do something in the here and now, rather than to understand it conceptually. There will be times when you think that I'm spoon-feeding you, and, no doubt, academics who review this book will feel that it's far too basic. Never mind: that is a sacrifice well worth making if it creates some clear space in which you can concentrate on learning the basics of technique. You can get round to the more conceptually orientated books once you've mastered this one.

Always remember the need for a leavening of theory if you're not to misuse the practicalities! There is one text, just one, which you could usefully regard as a companion volume to this one, and as a first recourse when you find that the basics outlined herein are an insufficient basis for your questions. Twenty-five years ago, Fay Fransella and Don Bannister published their *Manual of Repertory Grid Technique*, a text which is to reappear as Fransella et al. (2004). Use that as a conceptual back-up.

Secondly, it needs to be remembered that this is an introduction, and that there's more to learn about more specialized, advanced techniques once you have mastered the basics. There are, for example, a number of index measures (see Section 5.1) based on grid information and sometimes used in therapy. I haven't included them here because they are best used in conjunction with other sources of information (clinical interviews, psychometric tests, *repeated* grid measures, and familiarity with at least one strong theory of cognitive structure), and none of these are included in this guide. (It is rather tempting, for example, after recognising monolithic construing in a single grid, to infer that the individual engages in obsessive thinking in general. I'd rather not make inferences of that kind on the basis of a single grid.)

Thirdly, although I mention computer analysis of grid material, I don't provide a systematic review of the various software packages available for grid elicitation and analysis. This is especially relevant to Chapter 6, in which two of the four procedures rely on some form of software. The introduction to that chapter gives you details of a website through which you can access an online repertory grid elicitation and analysis engine, which is platform-independent and will provide you with any computation facilities you need in working with this guide. (That is a matter of personal preference. Some people

like to fiddle with software while they're learning about a procedure that can make use of such software, and some people find it a distraction.)

1.4 A WORD ABOUT THE EXAMPLES

As I've mentioned above, this book provides you with a large number of illustrative examples, worked examples, and exercises, using which you can acquire the various techniques. I wondered whether to base the whole account round a single case, whereby all of the examples would illustrate and develop one particular individual's material on a given topic in a consistent way. I imagine this would have made for a coherent learning experience! I decided against it, though, for two related reasons.

Grids can be used for an enormous variety of purposes, and can deal with any topic under the sun. I wanted to give you a flavour of that richness, by using a variety of examples. Secondly, as you'll see over the page, grids can be used by a great variety of people – undergraduates, teachers, business managers, researchers, and any and all occupational specialists – and it would probably have narrowed interest for the remainder if I'd provided examples pertinent to just one of these groups. If at any point you find that the examples aren't you, then read on. You'll come across something personally relevant shortly after, I'm sure.