THE EASY GUIDE TO REPERTORY GRIDS

Devi Jankowicz

Graduate Business School
University of Luton, UK

THE EASY GUIDE TO REPERTORY GRIDS

THE EASY GUIDE TO REPERTORY GRIDS

Devi Jankowicz

Graduate Business School
University of Luton, UK

Telephone (+44) 1243 779777

Email (for orders and customer service enquiries): cs-books@wiley.co.uk
Visit our Home Page on www.wileyeurope.com or www.wiley.com

Other Wiley Editorial Offices

John Wiley & Sons Inc., 111 River Street, Hoboken, NJ 07030, USA

Jossey-Bass, 989 Market Street, San Francisco, CA 94103-1741, USA

Wiley-VCH Verlag GmbH, Boschstr. 12, D-69469 Weinheim, Germany

John Wiley & Sons Australia Ltd, 33 Park Road, Milton, Queensland 4064, Australia

John Wiley & Sons (Asia) Pte Ltd, 2 Clementi Loop #02-01, Jin Xing Distripark, Singapore 129809

John Wiley & Sons Canada Ltd, 22 Worcester Road, Etobicoke, Ontario, Canada M9W 1L1

Wiley also publishes its books in a variety of electronic formats. Some content that appears in print may not be available in electronic books.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Jankowicz, Devi.
The easy guide to repertory grids / Devi Jankowicz.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-470-85404-9 (pbk. : alk. paper)
1. Repertory grid technique. I. Title.
BF698.8.R38J36 2003
155.2'8–dc21 2003006941

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 0-470-85404-9

Typeset in 10/12pt Palatino by Dobbie Typesetting Limited, Tavistock, Devon
Printed and bound in Great Britain by TJ International Ltd, Padstow, Cornwall
This book is printed on acid-free paper responsibly manufactured from sustainable forestry in which at least two trees are planted for each one used for paper production.

CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

LIST OF TABLES

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Devi Jankowicz is Professor of Constructivist Managerial Psychology at the University of Luton. He has been using repertory grids in a variety of occupational and managerial applications for 30 years. He used to specialise in psychometric testing until it was suggested to him that talking to people in their own language might be more valuable than talking to them in psychologists' language, and this book is written in that spirit. As well as being useful in his work as a Chartered Occupational Psychologist, this perspective has been particularly fruitful in his personal research on knowledge transfer across cultural boundaries between the West and the post-command economies of Central Europe.

PREFACE

This book is the result of some experiences I've had during the last 10 years, teaching repertory grid technique to a variety of audiences. There have been two main kinds of trainee. The first has comprised my direct students at Luton Graduate Business School, managers studying for MBA and MSc degrees on a part-time basis, and young graduates on the full-time masters programme. There have also been undergraduates, here and there, from the education and the management departments. All par for the course, one imagines, for a technique which presents itself as a mental-mapping and decision-making aid.

The second group, you might feel, is rather surprising. It comprises members and affiliates of the Occupational Division of the British Psychological Society, as part of their continuing professional development programme; psychologists and counsellors in some UK and Irish universities; and psychologists working for the Employment Service. Shouldn't psychologists, the very people who ought to be well informed about cognitive structures, mental maps, and decision-making technique, already know all this?

You could be right, but by and large they don't, and for two reasons: academic attitudes and simple availability.

ACADEMIC ATTITUDES

There's a certain approach taken to repertory grids, and especially to the theoretical underpinning, personal construct psychology, in university psychology departments. The theory tends to be offered, at a rather basic level, as part of course on personality, and the technique, where it's made available, in a two-hour seminar workshop in which the bare bones are practised but the applications, variants, and solutions to practical problems – 'how do I present the grid results of a large sample of people rather than the single person on whom I practised?' being the most common – are never addressed in any detail.

The attitude stems from a preference for positivist epistemology within the psychological profession, even where the more recent constructivist

approaches are known about, and the related techniques understood. (If you're curious about all this, you might like to glance at Jankowicz, 1987a; Neimeyer, 1983, or the fuller treatment in Neimeyer, 1985.)

The result has been that the repertory grid technique is little used beyond its specialist adherents, and the central value of personal construct psychology as the basis for understanding all epistemologies in the first place has been scandalously neglected – often in favour of a pointless argument between proponents of qualitative versus quantitative methods, statistical versus experiential approaches, all of which is largely irrelevant. And so, people like myself, part of an international network of personal construct psychologists numbering no more, I would guess, than a thousand worldwide, are approached to train those who should already be trained. One does what one can, and this book is part of it.

SIMPLE AVAILABILITY: TO MANAGERS IN PARTICULAR

To focus on the other, and broader, audience for this guidebook, the managers and practitioners. Forget all that about epistemologies. From your point of view in particular, there simply hasn't been a simple practical guidebook to offer you for many years, ever since the Stewarts' *Business Applications of Repertory Grid*, published in 1982, went out of print. There have been many books outlining the basic theory, and one or two on the technique itself, but none have gone into the kind of practical, procedural detail which a user, bereft of a decent introduction in the psychology departments or isolated as a practitioner, needs to see if s/he is to become comfortably proficient in repertory grid technique.

The second edition of the *Manual of Repertory Grid Technique* by Fransella, Bell & Bannister will appear in 2004 (also published by Wiley). That gives a more detailed and in-depth coverage of repertory grids, as did the first edition (1977) by Fransella & Bannister, which has been out of print for several years. This guidebook has been seen in its entirety by the senior author, who has shared details of the planned contents of the Manual with me, all within the constraints of our respective publication schedules.

Between the two, it may be possible to ameliorate, if not reverse, the neglect of this technique in the universities, and in the meanwhile provide the user with a solid foundation for practice.

It remains to thank my kind collaborators. Fay Fransella has already been mentioned; her spirit resides in the comments made by the 'second voice' of this book, though the responsibility for its embodiment in print is, of course, my own. Tom Ravenette provided examples of early forms of grid analysis

and much moral support! Thanks, too, to Ms Marianna Pexton of the Analytical Services Division of the Department of Social Security (DSS), now Department of Work and Pensions (DWP), for facilitating departmental permission to reproduce Table 7.1. My special thanks go to my colleagues and students, who have seen earlier drafts of this guide and contributed their valuable comments and ideas.

Devi Jankowicz
Professor of Constructivist Managerial Psychology
Graduate Business School
University of Luton
February 2003

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

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.

CHAPTER 2

THE REPERTORY GRID: A BASIC DESCRIPTION

We start with a statement of purpose. What is a grid and why would you want one? What does it look like and how is it useful? What, in fact, is it for?

2.1 THE BASIC REPERTORY GRID

'Grid' is actually a generic term for a number of simple rating-scale procedures. They're all used for arriving at straightforward descriptions of how a person views the world, or some smaller part of it, in his or her own terms.

The result of these procedures looks like a set of rating scales printed one above the other, with the ratings arranged in rows and columns into a table or grid. Like a rating scale, a grid can be about anything. Grid procedures result in information which can have an enormous range of applications, and some of these are illustrated in Table 2.1. I shall be drawing on these fields of application to provide examples throughout.

As you can see, they are grouped according to your possible interests; and here I'd like to make a suggestion. While it makes sense to stay focused on your own