Edited by
Peter Caputi
Linda L. Viney
Beverly M. Walker
Nadia Crittenden

PERSONAL CONSTRUCT METHODOLOGY

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This book is dedicated to Antonio – for reminding us that the essential elements of life are to love, to be loved and to seize and live each day.

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About the Editors

Peter Caputi is an Associate Professor in the School of Psychology at the University of Wollongong. His contributions to measurement issues in Personal Construct Psychology (PCP) have received national and international recognition. This is evidenced by influential papers, as evidenced by citations in two major texts on PCP methodology and theory, and two edited volumes (one already published and one book forthcoming) in the area. Peter is an active reviewer for *The Journal of Psychology: Interdisciplinary and Applied, Journal of Constructivist Psychology, Personal Construct Theory and Practice, Personality and Individual Differences, Australian Journal of Psychology, Clinical Schizophrenia & Related Psychoses*. He is also on the editorial board of the *Journal of Constructivist Psychology* and *The Journal of Psychology: Interdisciplinary and Applied*. Since 2000, he has published over 100 peer-reviewed conference papers, journal articles, and book chapters and is currently teaching several statistics based subjects at the University of Wollongong.

Linda L. Viney is a Professorial Fellow in the School of Psychology at the University of Wollongong. Linda pioneered the introduction of Personal Construct Psychology in Australia. She is a prolific author having published extensively in the Personal Construct Psychology literature and more generally in clinical, counselling and health psychology. Linda is a past editor of the *Australian Psychologis*t and is currently of the editorial board of the *Journal of Constructivist Psychology*.

Beverly M. Walker is a well-known theorist and researcher in the area of Personal Construct Theory. Her particular focus has been on social relationships, and the kinds of processes involved. These include validation, and modes of dependency on others. With David Winter she published an overview of the approach for the *Annual Review of Psychology*. She has edited a volume of the J*ournal of Constructivist Psychology* on nonverbal

approaches to understanding of construing, with her own focus on the use of photographs.

Nadia Crittenden has been an active member of the Personal Construct Psychology Research Group, based in the School of Psychology at the University of Wollongong, for more than 20 years. During this time, she has taught in this area, conducted training workshops, presented and published research, and supervised higher research degrees using PCP research techniques. Dr Crittenden is currently a Senior Lecturer in the School of Psychology at the University of Wollongong.

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Preface

In 1955, George Kelly published two volumes titled *The Psychology of Personal Constructs* that would challenge theorists at that time. The work was innovative, challenging and liberating at a theoretical level. Kelly saw people as adventurers who are capable of experimenting with how they make sense of their lives (Walker & Winter, 2007). Within this framework people are not "locked into" one particular way of seeing the world. By realizing we have the freedom to experiment, we have the ability to explore alternative interpretations of events, people or situations in our world, and thereby increase our ability to anticipate those events, and how people might behave or react in certain situations.

Central to this radical and innovative theoretical position is the concept of construing. Kelly's additional contribution to the psychological literature was the development to methods for assessing construing. Kelly held the view that if you want to know something about someone then you should simply ask them – they may tell you! These methods are usually conversational, but structured in nature (Walker & Winter, 2007). Participants become active co-investigators, along with the administrator of the method, in an exploration of how participants experience, understand and interpret reality.

The most well known and widely used of Kelly's methods is the repertory grid. The repertory grid is used to explore the relationships between a series of elements (things we try to make sense of such as "a close friend") and a set of constructs or dimensions that are used to make sense of elements. Grid-based techniques are not limited to only exploring the construct-element relationship. For instance, dependency grids are used to sort what resources a person might use in a variety of situations (Walker & Winter, 2007). Personal Construct Psychology also offers users a family of non-grid-based methods. Examples of non-grid-based methods includes Hinkle's (1955) laddering technique and Kelly's (1955/1991) self-characterization technique.

This book reviews and describes a number of well-known and new grid-based and non-grid-based methods. In addition, a number of chapters describe applications of these techniques in clinical and non-clinical areas. Chapters have been contributed by leading experts from North America, Britain, Europe and Australia which highlights the internationalization of research in Personal Construct Psychology. The book is divided into four sections. The contributions in *Section I* "set the scene" for the book. Heather Hardison and Robert Neimeyer's chapter presents an excellent overview of the properties of assessment methods in personal construct psychology. Subsequent chapters in this book complement and expand on the material presented in Chapter 1. In Chapter 2, Linda Viney and Sue Nagy present a set of guidelines for non-grid-based approaches.

Section II: Qualitative Approaches – Exploring Process includes four chapters describing non-grid based methods for exploring the process of construing. Beverly Walker and Nadia Crittenden describe and illustrate the technique of laddering in Chapter 3, a technique that "is seemingly simple in its description, complex in application, and can be powerful in impact" (Walker & Winter, 2007, p. 462). In Chapter 4, Finn Tschudi and David Winter present the ABC method. This technique is useful in understanding why people hesitate to change. Nadia Crittenden and Chantal Ashkar in Chapter 5 describe Kelly's (1955/1991) self-characterization technique which involves writing an autobiographical piece in the third person. In Chapter 6, Lindsay Oades and Linda Viney describe and illustrate a methodology for understanding the process of construct revision and re-construing.

Grid-based approaches have been used extensively in Personal Construct Psychology. Three chapters in *Section III: Quantitative Approaches: Exploring Process* introduce and illustrate these methods. Peter Caputi provides a brief introduction to grid based methods in Chapter 7. In Chapter 8, Peter Caputi, Richard Bell and Desley Hennessy discuss new and traditional representations of repertory grid data. In Chapter 9, Brian Gaines and Mildred Shaw build on the material in Chapter 8 in their discussion of computer-supported constructivism. Finally, Linda Viney and Peter Caputi expound on their work with content analysis scales developed within a personal construct framework.

Section IV consists of three chapters exploring the application of personal construct methods in counseling and clinical settings. In Chapter 11, Luis Botella and María Gámiz illustrate narrative assessment within a personal construct approach. Heather Foster and Linda Viney illustrate the use of drawings in personal construct assessment in their chapter. Finally, Miriam Stein and her colleagues demonstrate how constructivist methods can be used with adolescents in psychotherapy.

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This book would not have been possible but for the generosity of the contributors. Their expertise is reflected in the quality of the chapter that make up this volume. We would like to thank Tim Broady for his work on this book. Finally, we would like to thank Karen Shield and Annie Rose from Wiley-Blackwell, for their patience, professionalism, and compassion. Karen and Annie have been integral to assisting us with preparing and bringing this book to completion.

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Part I
Setting the Scene

1

Assessment of Personal Constructs: Features and Functions of Constructivist Techniques

Heather Gaines Hardison and
Robert A. Neimeyer

> *The psychology of personal constructs is not so much a theory about man as it is a theory of man . . . It is part of a psychologist's protracted effort to catch the sense of man going about his business of being human, and what on earth it means to be a person . . . Our theme is the personal adventure of the men we are and live with – the efforts, the enterprises, the ontology of individuals so convinced there is something out there, really and truly, that they will not relent, no matter what befalls them, until they have seized it in their own hands.* (Kelly, 1963, p. 183)

These thoughts, first written nearly 60 years ago by George Kelly, have since led to various attempts by clinicians, including Kelly himself, to "catch the sense of man" through distinctive assessment tools for use in psychotherapy settings. This chapter will review several of these personal construct assessments and how they have evolved over the past five decades, with special emphasis on their distinctive advantages and limitations as assessment methods. We will begin with an overview of the fundamental principles of Kelly's theory of personal constructs to provide an explanation of the theoretical framework within which these assessments were created.

Personal Construct Systems: An Overview

The guiding assumption of George Kelly's (1955) personal construct theory (PCT) is that humans literally construct the meaning of their own lives, by

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devising, testing, and continuously revising personal theories that help us make sense of the world around us and anticipate our future experiences. These personal theories, called construct systems, are comprised of an indefinite number of personal constructs that help differentiate, integrate, and predict life events. Personal constructs may be highly idiosyncratic or widely shared, and may vary in terms of how central or important they are in construing one's life (Winter, 1992).

According to Kelly's (1955) view of constructive alternativism, there are countless possible constructions of reality. In other words, events are subject to as many alternative ways of construing them as we ourselves can invent. Thus, personal construct theory describes how each of us uniquely construes or interprets our own world. Constructs, and their interrelationships within a hierarchically organized system, form the basis for hypotheses that guide an individual's choices and actions (Winter, 1992).

Kelly (1955) defined a construct as a particular way individuals have of viewing, giving meaning to, or construing the individuals and events in their life and the world around them. According to personal construct theory, all constructs are "bipolar," meaning some sort of contrast (e.g., intelligent/ignorant) is implied. The implied contrast gives constructs their uniqueness. Meanings of certain constructs may vary according to the element being construed, and implied constructs may vary across individuals. For example, the contrasting construct of the word "lenient" might be "harsh" to one person and for someone else it might mean "unbending or fixed," which are rather different meanings. Therefore, even though individuals may draw upon common and publicly shared discriminations in constructing their conceptual templates, they typically develop construct systems that are in some degree idiosyncratic, giving their construct systems a richer personal significance than relying on simple dictionary antonyms.

Kelly (1955) proposed that each person constructs his or her own version of reality using a hierarchical system of personal constructs. "Not only are the constructs personal, but the hierarchical system into which they are arranged is personal too ... When one construct subsumes another its ordinal relationship may be termed superordinal and the ordinal relationship of the other becomes subordinal" (Kelly, 1955, pp. 56–58). It is common for an individual to revise his/her construct system continuously as the universe constantly changes across time. Hence, constructions that might have seemed reasonable at some point in the past can be invalidated by current events. Kelly viewed individuals

as personal scientists, classifying, categorizing, and theorizing about their world, anticipating on the basis of their own personal theories, and acting on the basis of their anticipation.

One of the most important aspects of personal construct theory is that individuals will differ from each other in their constructions of events. Kelly (1955) suggests that to obtain the best explanation of a person's organization of experience or behavior, one should find ways to inquire of the person who does the organizing because only he or she is expert on this unique process, which leads us to how constructivists actually inquire about an individual's construing process.

Constructivist Assessments

What makes an assessment constructivist? Neimeyer (1999) explained that these assessments tend to identify and explore personal narratives and constructions of the individual's experience, and evaluate his or her unique construct systems and hierarchies. This evaluation can be done by using, for example, ladders, repertory grids, implication grids, resistance to change grids, self-characterizations, and a variety of other measures that have a focus on the assessment of personal meanings (Neimeyer and Bridges, 2003). Thus, personal construct methods are designed to assess how the individual makes sense of the world, yielding a more holistic view of the respondent's meaning system than is afforded by most traditional psychological assessments. Personal construct psychology is essentially an idiographic approach, and its main strength comes from its ability to depict the content and structure of individual internal representations and ultimately to draw inferences about the general human process of meaning construction (Jankowicz, 1987). In applied settings, constructivist assessments essentially allow practitioners to better understand their clients and how they view the world around them.

Overall, personal construct assessments can contribute in clinical settings by guiding case conceptualization and the course of treatment, by revealing the core constructs that drive and contribute to clients' sense of identity and the reality of the world in which they live. In this respect they accord with a contemporary constructivist approach to assessment and therapy, which focuses on how clients order the world, develop a sense of self and relationship, and act in a way that is coherent with these constructions (Mahoney, 2003).

The aim of this chapter is to review five personal construct assessments that have been used to evaluate clients' construct systems. Particular attention will be given to evidence of their validity and reliability, the ways they can be used in various settings, and the unique advantages and disadvantages of each of these techniques. The assessments that were selected for this chapter include some of the more popular and frequently used methods as well as ones that are promising, but less frequently used. These include repertory grids, a structured interview to assess how people view individuals and events in their social world, (Fransella, Bell, and Bannister, 2004; Kelly, 1955); implication grids, used to assess the relationship between constructs (Hinkle, 1965; Winter, 1992); laddering interviews, a technique designed to elicit central core values (Hinkle, 1965; Neimeyer, Anderson, and Stockton, 2001); resistance to change grids, designed to identify core commitments or impasses (Hinkle, 1965; Landfield, Stefan, and Dempsey, 1990; Winter, 1992); and self-characterizations, narrative sketches written by the client to explore self-constructs (Kelly, 1955; Winter, 1992). Rather than performing an exhaustive review of all published studies regarding each method, our focus will be on a subset of publications bearing on the psychometric and practical advantages and limitations of each technique in assessing personal constructs in psychotherapy. We will conclude with a final section that formulates recommendations for future research on the various measures.

Repertory Grid

The repertory grid, which is a variation of Kelly's (1955) Role Construct Repertory Test, is essentially a structured interview procedure that allows the investigator to obtain a glimpse of the world through the "goggles" of the client's construct system. The goal of the repertory grid technique is to allow an investigation of a person's construing process of various aspects of his/her world and of the structural properties of the construct system. In its original form, the repertory grid was designed as a means of assessing the content and structure of an individual's repertory of role constructs, that system of interconnected meanings that define one's relationships to others (Kelly, 1955).

Essentially, the repertory grid consists of eliciting from the respondent a list of *elements*, or aspects of experience, and rating those elements on

various constructs. The elements can include different people, facets of the self, a particular person or relationship at different points in time, situations, types of jobs, or any other items or individuals in his or her world (Fransella *et al.*, 2004; Winter, 1992). Most commonly the respondent is asked to provide the names of individuals who fit certain role titles (e.g., your mother, your partner, a person of your own sex whom you would dislike having as a companion on a trip). The clinician will elicit a number of constructs by asking the client in what important way two of the elements are alike and thereby different from the third. The clinician then will attempt to elicit the contrast pole of this construct. For example, if prompted with the triad my spouse, my father, and myself, a person might respond, "my father and husband tend to be very conventional people, but I'm more rebellious." This basic dimension, conventional vs. rebellious, would then be considered one of the significant themes or constructs that the person uses to organize, interpret, and approach the social world, and to define his or her role in it (Neimeyer, 2002). This procedure is then repeated with another triad of elements until a sufficient number of constructs has been elicited (Winter, 1992). The clinician can design the grid to meet the requirements of his/her particular situation and can choose the preferred grid size, commonly using in the neighborhood of 12 constructs by 12 elements. Next, the respondent is asked to rate or rank each of the elements on the resulting construct dimensions. All of these steps can be completed using computerized programs (e.g., WebGrid III, Omnigrid, Gridcor, etc.) that conduct a variety of analyses on the resulting matrix of ratings (Bringmann, 1992) and also provide clinicians with graphic representations of the client's construct system (Liseth *et al.*, 1993). These can then help answer some of the following questions: what are the major dimensions or structural characteristics of the client's construct system?, how is the self construed?, how are other significant people construed?, and so on (Sewell *et al.*, 1992; Winter, 1992). Fromm (2004), Jankowicz (2003) and Fransella and her colleagues (2004) offer comprehensive guides to repertory grid administration, analysis and interpretation, as well as examples of completed grids on a variety of topics.

Scores yielded and analysis

By presenting the respondent with a large number of elements (e.g., a disliked person, best friend, one's ideal self, etc.), the repertory grid (also

referred to as repgrid) elicits a broad sampling of the personal constructs that represent the person's outlook on life. These constructs can then be interpreted clinically, used as the basis for further interviewing, or coded using any of a number of reliable systems of content analysis. It is often helpful to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the grid to discern larger patterns. This analysis might involve correlating and factor analyzing the matrix of ratings to determine which constructs "go together" for the respondent (for example, *responsibility* is associated with *stability*, whereas *irresponsibility* implies *instability or chaos*), or to learn the people with whom the client most and least identifies. The connections among constructs could reveal the reason that maladaptive patterns are held firmly in place for certain individuals. For example, a client may resist becoming more assertive instead of passive, because for this client assertiveness is associated with being rejected as opposed to being loved by others. Associations among elements (e.g., degree of correlation between actual self and ideal self) in a grid can also be clinically informative by providing the clinician with useful indicators of progress in psychotherapy (Neimeyer, 2002).

Results of repertory grids can be interpreted at two basic levels, focusing on the content and structure of the client's constructions. At the content level, grids can be analyzed in a qualitative fashion by considering the unique constructions of specific figures on the grid and the idiographic meanings of particular constructs. Constructs can be coded using a system devised to analyze constructs into separate categories based on their content (e.g., existential, moral, emotional, relational, and concrete) for both clinical and research purposes (Feixas, Geldschlager, and Neimeyer, 2002). Repertory grids also can be analyzed at a structural level by concentrating on specific relationships between given constructs and between certain elements, the overall degree of differentiation or complexity within the client's construct system, and a multitude of structural features that can be obtained by computerized grid scoring programs (Fransella *et al.*, 2004).

Grid measures

Fransella and Bannister (1977) warned about the proliferation of repertory grid measures and of finding different ways of calculating these measures because they are becoming more complex, rendering comprehensive coverage beyond the scope of this chapter. Thus, we chose only a subset of the most frequently used grid measures for inclusion, as described below.

Construct system differentiation

Intensity (Fransella and Bannister, 1977): Intensity scores reflect the total degree of interrelatedness among constructs on the grid. Higher scores indicate greater integration of constructs into a coherent system, whereas lower scores reflect greater differentiation. Restated, Intensity is a measure of the extent to which the respondent's construct system is highly intercorrelated on the one hand, or multidimensional and complex on the other. Intensity is calculated by summing the absolute values of the Pearson correlations between ratings performed on all possible pairs of constructs and then multiplying by 100. The Intensity of a particular construct is an indicator of how central or important the construct is in that grid. The most intense construct has the strongest correlation with the other constructs, and the least intense construct is the least connected to other constructs and is, therefore, the most peripheral in the overall system.

Percentage of Variance Accounted for by the First Factor (PVAFF) (Bonarius, 1965): Bonarius considered the PVAFF resulting from a factor analysis of grid ratings as an indicator of cognitive complexity or differentiation. It indicates the importance of the main dimension of meaning in the respondent's system, with higher scores indicating greater unidimensionality in the individual's construing. In contrast, if the first factor accounts for only a small percentage of variance then the individual is considered capable of construing in a more multidimensional manner. Thus, like Intensity, greater scores of PVAFF reflect greater conceptual integration, and lower scores reflect differentiation.

Cognitive Complexity (Bieri, 1955): This is a third index of differentiation, computed as the number of perfect matches in ratings of elements on each pair of construct dimensions, divided by the maximum possible score that could be obtained from a grid of that size. Fewer matches represent greater complexity. From this perspective, a cognitively complex person can construe events from different points of view rather than from a good/bad, black/white perspective.

Functionally Independent Construction (FIC) (Landfield, 1971, 1977): FIC is a variant on the cognitive complexity theme, and was devised to measure the degree of dissimilarity in an individual's allocation of grid elements on different constructs, or their application of constructs to different elements. A high FIC indicates that the person is using his or her constructs in a relatively independent fashion.

Within-construct differentiation

Ordination (Landfield and Cannell, 1988) was devised as a measure of hierarchical integration of the system, but some consider it to be a measure of flexibility with which a construct is used, or an index of discrimination in construing a set of figures (Neimeyer, Neimeyer, and Landfield, 1983). It is computed by multiplying the number of different rating values used on a given construct by the difference between the highest and lowest rating; the overall ordination score is simply the mean of the scores for each construct.

Extremity of ratings (Bonarius, 1977): Research by Bonarius suggests that the extremity of ratings is a joint function of the meaningfulness of the constructs and the elements, and could be reflecting psychopathology. The Gridcor program (Feixas and Cornejo-Alvarez, 2004) gives the percentage of extreme ratings provided by the respondent for constructs and elements, as well as a general average or total degree of polarization.

Element placement

Self-Ideal Discrepancy (Feixas and Cornejo-Alvarez, 2004) is a correlation between the self elements and the ideal elements. It is commonly used as a measure of psychological distress or impaired self-esteem, and is calculated as the distance between the self and ideal elements on the grid. This correlation gives a quantitative evaluation of how respondents value themselves in their own terms, as opposed to more traditional self-esteem scales that score the respondent according to items previously selected by the investigator.

Self-Other Discrepancy (Jones, 1961): Initially proposed as a measure of identification with others, the distance between the self and other elements on the grid also has been interpreted conversely as a measure of interpersonal isolation. The differentiation between the self and others is calculated by averaging the distances between the self and all non-self elements. Just as with the discrepancy between the self and ideal, the differentiation between the self and others can be seen in the distances and correlations matrices.

Applications

Kelly's repertory grid technique has played an integral role in the development of personal construct theory. Neimeyer (1985) estimated that more