Personal Constructs and Career Exploration

(10% content trial version)

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New Zealand.


This is a trial version of the book showing just the first 10% of each chapter including 10% following each subheading. The Table of Contents, Summary, Fundamental postulate and corollaries, Conclusion and References included in full. Appendices are available at www.reconstrue.co.nz
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Personal Constructs and Career exploration.

Summary

This book presents some techniques derived from Personal Construct Psychology that the career practitioner could add to their repertoire of actions or “toolbox” or which individuals could use to explore career. The Preface commences with a rationale for career exploration as the focus of the book and then Part One outlines Kelly’s (1955) Personal Construct theory.

Part Two describes the methods and techniques. The techniques of Personal Construct Psychology (PCP) can be used in their own right, without accepting the theory. However, those who work within the PCP framework have become more insistent that users of the methods should at least have a fundamental understanding of the theory. This part of the book takes a hands-on approach whereby readers are invited to use the methods themselves as they learn about them. While the book focuses on career exploration the usefulness of the methods is not restricted to that domain. In addition to clinical and counselling psychology these techniques have been used to powerful effect in business research, consultancy and for elaborating concepts in the classroom. Hence the book should appeal to a wide range of practitioners and researchers. In Part Two we discuss first, the principal technique Kelly developed to explore personal constructs: Repertory Test. Self Characterisation technique, a further construct elicitation technique developed by Kelly is then described. This is followed by descriptions of other construct elaboration techniques developed by later constructivists. The value of these techniques lies in the extent to which the material derived comes from within the respondents themselves and their active involvement in the exploration and interpretation of the situation at hand. In summary, when at a loss for what else to do, it is useful for the practitioner to probe in terms of similarities and differences, priorities and preferences, reasons why, methods how, what would change if specific other circumstances changed, and in terms of the feelings, values and behaviours inherent in the situation.

Keywords: Career exploration; Human Resource Management; Constructivist theory and method; Personal Constructs, Research methods.
Preface

This book introduces readers to the use of Personal Construct Psychology (PCP) in careers exploration and careers counselling. Why the focus on career exploration? Career counselling is currently a growth industry. At the time of writing the first draft of this book a local Career Services office were employing new staff – on top of a surge in recruitment of career consultants six months previously. This office of Career Services surged from three to eight consultants over a one year period. Whereas fifteen years ago it would have been relatively rare to find a careers counselling service provided by tertiary education providers in the author’s home country of New Zealand, that is now not the case, nor is it unusual to find career counselling specialists working in private management consulting and employment firms……..

Therefore part one will commence with an introduction to PCP theory. Part two will provide an introduction to the main technique of PCP, Repertory Test (also known as the Repertory Grid) and also a secondary technique known as Self Characterisation. This is followed by an introduction to a host of construct elaboration techniques including Act and Value Laddering (the most powerful technique that I have found for career related values clarification and planning), Pyramid technique, FVB analysis, Social-Decision technology, Resistance to Change Grid and Implications Grids.
Part One: Theory and Rationale.

Chapter One
Kelly's Personal Construct Psychology (PCP)

George Kelly, the founder of Personal Construct Psychology first brought attention to his new theory when he published a book on the subject in 1955. Personal Construct Psychology (PCP) has not been a dominant theoretical force in psychology. It has nevertheless gathered popularity among a select and energetic group of psychologists and has become respectable with the greater body of psychologists. In recent years, however, constructivism as a family of theoretical and methodological approaches has gained enormous popularity among social scientists. I think it would be fair to say that PCP is the main constructivist approach in psychology and has created interest among non-psychologists too.

To begin with, only a few highly innovative investigators kept PCP alive until others gradually began to show interest. The approach founded by Kelly can now claim thousands of publications, many of them valuably practical. In 1988 a journal devoted entirely to Personal Construct Psychology was launched: The International Journal of Personal Construct Psychology, re-titled in the mid 1990's to become The International Journal of Constructivist Psychology. JAI Press also published a series of Recent Advances in Personal Construct Psychology issued approximately every three years.

There are a number of well-compiled and easily readable reviews, summaries and publications on Personal Construct Psychology. The most popular has possibly been that written by Bannister and Fransella, third edition (1986). For those involved in business and management, Stewart & Stewart (1981) popularised the theory and associated techniques. Those interested in a broad range of techniques may find Landfield & Epting (1987) most useful. Despite their age these publications lose nothing as excellent introductions to PCP. More recent introductions can be found in Burr & Butt (2004) and Jancowitcz (2003). There are now dozens of websites devoted to PCP some of which have downloadable chapters from books such as those mentioned above. One of these, www.enquirewithin.co.nz provides great insight into the many uses of PCP technology in business and management interventions and also provides access to pages from Stewart and Stewart (1981) Business Applications of the Repertory Grid.....

Constructive Alternativism

Constructive alternativism is a central tenet in Personal Construct Psychology and Kelly devoted the entire opening chapter of his original book to it. ......

The process of "constructing" reality.

The process of construction is based on our ability to recognise replications and patterns, such as melodic themes in music, or time-of-day patterns such as breakfast, lunch and tea......

Each person is a unique individual.

We are all very unique individuals who make sense of (construe) our worlds in completely
idiosyncratic ways....

** Constructs take the form of dichotomous dimensions. **

Kelly (1955) postulated that people tend to arrange thoughts dichotomously......

** Constructs are organised. **

It has been postulated that we structure the way we see the world in a pyramidal hierarchical organisation of higher order (superordinate) and lower order (subordinate) constructs.....

** We choose to view ourselves in accordance with one pole or another. **

Not only do we each possess a system containing an array of constructs through which we view the world, but also as hypothesis testing *scientists* we seek to develop and elaborate that system.....

** Constructs have different ranges of usefulness. **

Constructs are, to varying degrees, context related. Each individual is believed to use a finite number of constructs, some of which are used in specific contexts only......

** Development of a construct system is based on the individual's experience. **

People continually develop and grow psychologically. A personal construct system is a person's guide for living, which Bannister & Fransella (1980) described as.....

** Some constructs assist us to change and develop. **

Personal Construct Psychology is a general psychology of change. Variation within a person's construction system is limited by the degree to which its constructs can easily be applied to a number of contexts.....

** A person's construct system may appear fragmented. **

Kelly suggests that change is not and need not be logical, nor should we expect a person displaying a construct in one situation to display the same construct in another situation....

** People do use constructs in common **

Despite PCP’s emphasis on individuality, people may be similar to others to the extent that they view things in similar ways, construing along shared dimensions.....

** People negotiate their constructs with one another. **

People do spend a certain amount of energy communicating with others about their construals of the world and those aspects of their construals that are *similar* or *different*....
Chapter Two.

Formal Summary of Personal Construct theory.

Kelly formalised his theory in a fundamental postulate and eleven corollaries to that postulate. These are outlined below, but not in Kelly’s original wording. While acceptable in his day his wording is now considered sexist in nature.

**The fundamental postulate:** People are in the business of trying to make sense of their world. They are best understood, in turn, by understanding how they anticipate events.

**Construction corollary:** People anticipate events by recognising that there are replications, patterns and similarities in events that occur around them. On the basis of these patterns they construct a view of the world.

**Individuality corollary:** Each person's construction or view of the world is unique. No two people construe the world in precisely the same way. Even if people act the same way in the same situation, they do not necessarily act that way for the same reasons.

**Organisation corollary:** A person's thought process and construction of the world is not just a jumble. So as to handle the immense amount of information about the world they structure and organise it in a hierarchical fashion. In the superordinate reaches of their system they locate abstract notions that amount to their guiding philosophy of life. At lower levels they place more concrete actions, objects and symbols that reflect that philosophy of life.

**Dichotomy corollary:** People arrange their thoughts on bipolar continua, which are known as constructs. For example it is common for people to describe other people as existing somewhere on the continuum warm – cool.

**Choice corollary:** In terms of their own behaviour, people choose to approach that end of each construct that holds more implications for them. For instance, a business person who uses the construct warm --- cool may find that at work there is more to be gained by acting in a relatively cool manner. At home, with the family, there may be more to be gained by acting in a warm manner.

**Range corollary:** Some constructs such as warm vs. cool and good vs. bad are useful for describing a broad range of events. Other constructs are useful for making sense of a very narrow range of events (for example, seam bowler vs. spin bowler). Constructs that can be applied to a broad range of events are said to be permeable while those with a narrow range of applicability are said to be impermeable.

**Experience corollary:** Our view of the world is based on our past experiences. We continually put our view of the world to the test of experience, which may confirm or disconfirm our worldview. In this way our experiences lead us to either strengthen our worldview or change it.

**Modulation corollary:** The ability of people to readily change their view depends on the extent to which they use permeable vs. impermeable constructs. In some ways, this is a little
similar (but not identical) to saying that it depends on the extent to which they are broad-minded vs. narrow-minded. When faced with new situations, we generally try to make sense of them via the constructs that we use readily. If we use permeable constructs we are more likely to make viable sense of that situation and adapt to it. People who use impermeable constructs, in other words who are narrower in their thinking, may be less able to cope with change.

**Fragmentation corollary:** People do not just apply a single construct system. We use a variety of different construct sub-systems in different situations – we apply different construct systems to make sense of careers, people, motor vehicles, subjects at school, organisations and so on. Sometimes the different subsystems may even seem incompatible. The most honest and ethical business person that you know may be the biggest cheat on the sports field or golf course.

**Commonality corollary:** Despite the individuality corollary, people do share constructs, beliefs, values and ways of behaving. In many ways this is acknowledgment that we exist in groups, communities and cultures of shared values and shared ways of acting.

**Sociality corollary:** To the extent that we are able to understand another person's construct system, we may be capable of playing a role in relation to that person. For example, by being able to understand the construct systems of their children, parents are able to perform a role in relation to them. We indeed spend a good deal of energy trying to understand the construct systems of other people, and we tend to do this by discussing and negotiating similarities and differences with them.
Part Two: Methods and Techniques

Chapter Three
Repertory Test Technique

As in the case of the theoretical side of Personal Construct Psychology, a number of publications have reviewed the method Kelly (1955, 1963) developed to investigate and measure personal constructs. Additionally there are now a number of techniques and methods associated with Personal Construct Psychology (PCP). The current author acknowledges that the techniques described below, have previously been described in detail by Landfield and Epting (1987), Smith & Stewart (1977), Easterby-Smith (1980) and Stewart & Stewart (1981). Despite their age these sources lose nothing in their excellence as introductions to PCP. The methods have evolved over time, however, and more recent and more comprehensive coverage of an introductory nature can be found in Jancowitcz (2003) and Fromm (2004)....

The key features of Repertory Test/Grid technique exist under the headings **Eliciting Elements**, **Eliciting Constructs**, **Completing or Scoring the Grid** plus **Analysis and Interpretation**. Below, the technique is described under these four headings.
Chapter Four
Eliciting Elements

The usual point of entry with the Repertory Test Technique involves the elements. While Kelly originally used roles as elements there is no reason why actions, tasks, photographs, or objects cannot be used, provided they all relate to the same context and do not represent a mixture of contexts (for example, if people's views about careers are of interest, then use careers as elements, and not a mixture of, say, careers and people)…..

Element elicitation exercise.

Let us try some element elicitation right now…. 

Congratulations, you have just elicited eight elements in addition to the two already supplied.
Chapter Five
Eliciting Constructs

Typical construct elicitation follows what has become known as the triad method. This involves presenting clients with sets of three elements at a time and asking them to distinguish between them by describing a way in which two of them are similar, but on the same dimension different from the third. The resulting response is viewed as a bipolar construct that may be used as the basis for a rating scale that describes the extent of that attribute. Three elements are used at a time since this is deemed to be the minimum required to derive a similarity-difference polarity. The triads to be considered may be selected at random or arranged by the practitioner to test for discrimination between particular elements. While the triad method is typical the process can be simplified by using two rather than three elements. This, the dyad method, is often necessary with less educated and less fluent clients who may struggle with the complexities of the instructions that accompany triad method. Triad method is preferable if the client can handle it, since it provides more meaningful results…….

Construct elicitation exercise.

Let’s practise some easy construct elicitation…….

You have now generated 10 constructs that describe some of the ways in which you think about careers.
Chapter Six
Completing and Scoring the Grid

Having considered elements and elicited constructs, depending on the purpose, the procedure could cease there. However the richness of the technique lies in part in the matrix format and ability of clients to score each element in relation to each construct. Kelly originally only used the dichotomous responses whereby each element was ascribed to either one pole or the other. For instance, if you had elicited the construct indoor job vs. outdoor job you would have been asked to consider the 10 careers you generated and to state whether each one was indoor or outdoor. Such a method neglects the degree to which an element can be ascribed to a construct attribute and the possibility that it cannot be identified clearly with either pole……

*Grid scoring exercise.*

Appendix D represents a **Repertory Grid**…..
Chapter Seven
Grid Analysis and Interpretation

Repertory grids contain a large amount of information in a very flexible form and a whole range of matrix analytic tools can be used. Rep Grid data is a deceptive set of information since it’s format is so compact. Bell (1988) offered a formula for assessing the amount of information contained in a grid, whereby, if we have $n$ elements and $m$ constructs, the amount of information is $[n+(m \times 2 \text{ poles})]+(n \times m)$. Thus in the 10x10 grid that you have just completed there are 130 pieces of information to be digested. In a 15x15 grid there would be 170 pieces of information. Add to this the data collected from a small sample of just 10 people and there would be 1300 and 1700 pieces of information to digest respectively.

Since there is such an enormous amount of data contained in a grid, it is no surprise that methods of summarising construct/element relationships have been developed…..
Chapter Eight
Self Characterisation Technique:
Construct Analysis of Stories

Self Characterisation is a separate construct elicitation method in itself also originally
developed by Kelly (1955). All techniques derived within Personal Construct Psychology are
adaptable, and in the spirit of constructivism (Mahoney, 1988) demand adaptation to the
context at hand. Hence the practitioner might follow the procedure outlined below, but modify
parts of it as necessary for the particular client(s), and the particular situation they encounter.
In this light, the procedure outlined below represents an adapted, evolved version of those that
have gone before.

Procedure

1. Instructions.

These instructions to the client follow those used by Kelly (1955) and reported in Bannister &
Fransella (1981), although a gender neutral name has been adopted, compared to Kelly who
used Harry Brown.

Say to your client.....

The Characterisation.

The client is then requested to write the characterisation....

Analysis of the story

A suggested analysis procedure follows. It is a hybrid or evolved version of Kelly’s procedure,
and developments by those who have followed....

Method.
● Read the first sentence as if this was all there was....
Chapter Nine
Construct Elaboration Techniques

Hinkle's Theoretical Expansion of Personal Construct Psychology

Ten years after Kelly described Personal Constructs the first major expansion and definition of some aspects of the theory was attempted by Hinkle (1965) in the course of doing his Ph.D. Hinkle's subsequent dissertation describing a theory of Construct Implication and Change has not been published and hence comprehensive knowledge of the work must either come directly from a copy of the dissertation itself, or from reviews by other authors (for example, Bannister & Mair 1968).

Hinkle stated that his theory of construct implication arose firstly in response to an attempt to represent construct systems and subsystems visually. He visualised them as three-dimensional genealogical tables or pyramidal networks of linked constructs (see Figure 4). Secondly, he considered the extent and nature of the way constructs were linked to one another. Thirdly, he dealt with the question of construct definition. Responding to the question "what defines a construct?" represented an essential point of departure of Hinkle's work from Kelly's.

Hinkle's concept of "Implications"

Hinkle dealt in some detail with the various forms of implication that hold between two constructs. This draws attention to the complexity of construct interrelationships. He identified four commonly observed implicative combinations. Using the constructs A-B & X-Y these combinations are:

PARALLEL: A implies X and B implies Y. These could also be termed aligned constructs. For example:

(X) Challenging vs. (Y) Boring
(A) Work with people vs. (B) Work with things

ORTHOGONAL: A implies X but does not imply Y. Also, A and B both imply X but neither imply Y. This could also be termed a pyramid hierarchy. For example:

(X) Work vs. (Y) Leisure
(A) Job I like vs. (B) Job I don’t like

RECIPROCAL: A implies X and B implies Y, also X implies A and Y implies B.....
**Ladder Exercise.**

Try some laddering now. You can carry out laddering on the form in Appendix D, or perhaps on any piece of paper that you have at hand. It helps to use quite a large piece of paper…..

**Resistance to Change Grid and Implications Grid.**

**Resistance to change** procedure, developed by Hinkle (1965), involves…..

Hinkle also developed **Implication Grid** or **IMPGRID**…..

**Superordination - Subordination and Other Implications Procedures: Extensions of Hinkle's work.**

From the review on previous pages, it is apparent that **Superordination - Subordination** emerged as an important concept (or construct)…..
Chapter Ten
Landfield and Epting’s elaborations

Landfield & Epting (1987) made extensive elaboration of Hinkle's methods and developed a number of their own implications procedures. These two practitioners express some reluctance about the use of full-blooded Repertory Grid method, and it is interesting to note their pervasive use of the term Rep Test rather than Rep Grid. Landfield & Epting suggested that the practitioner use an abbreviated Rep Test that goes no further than the construct elicitation stage, since certain construct methods such as Hinkle's Laddering technique, and their own Implications Assessments, Social Decision Technology, Pyramid Procedure and FVB (Feelings, Value & Behaviour) Analysis, require only constructs.

FVB Analysis (Feelings, Value & Behaviour)

FVB Analysis, used to construe social contexts, is a close relative of laddering technique…..

Pyramid Procedure.

Landfield & Epting (1987) also describe a construct elaboration technique known as Pyramid Procedure….

Pyramid exercise.

You may wish to try Pyramid technique for yourself. Appendix E represents a Pyramid sheet…..

Social Decision Technology

Social Decision Technology is modelled on Hinkle's (1965) Resistance to Change procedure…..
Chapter Eleven
Conclusion

The main purpose of this book has been to suggest some techniques and prompts that the career practitioner or researcher could add to their repertoire of actions or toolbox. In some cases there may be good reason to use these techniques in a formal and full-blown manner. In other cases, however, an awareness of the techniques may simply provide a more systematic vehicle for probing a client’s career exploration. The main advantage of these techniques is the extent to which the material derived comes from within the clients themselves and is therefore personally meaningful to them. This contrasts with material that derives from within the career practitioner, within the assumptions of a psychological test or career exploration workbook which is delivered to others with the expectation that they will absorb it and learn from it. In other words, these techniques put events and concepts into the frame of their own context. A second advantage is the extent to which the techniques enable the active involvement of the clients. They are active in the exploration and interpretation of their career. It is much less the case that they are either passive providers of data for the expert’s analysis, or passive recipients of the practitioner’s advice. There is good evidence to suggest that active learning provides more benefit than passive learning, and should be encouraged at least as much as passive methods.

Repertory Test methods frequently provide people with a new way of viewing people and objects, according to Landfield & Epting (1987), from which novel interpretations and practical applications can often be derived. Those who become converted to personal construct methods have often been dissatisfied with other conventional methods. As stated earlier, Repertory Test can almost be construed as a structured brainstorm, whereby as much relevant context or situation specific information as possible is extracted from the individual. Furthermore, this is not just information about the context, but information about how the person thinks about, feels about and acts toward that context or situation. When the outcome of Repertory Test and associated techniques display the complete structure of superordinate constructs through to subordinate actions and concrete objects, the technique goes some way toward addressing the problem of linking inferred internal psychological processes with overt directly observable behaviour. Rather than inferring the presence of psychological constructs from overt behaviour, we can infer, or anticipate an individual's behaviour through firstly knowing what psychological constructs they apply.

It is worth repeating too, that the use of these techniques has a broad range of applicably. Despite the focus in this article, use of the techniques is not restricted to counselling or careers exploration. These techniques have been used extensively in research to determine how people make sense of situations and events. The techniques have been used in recruitment and selection, performance management, marketing, development of expert systems in information technology, business communication and many other applications. Readers are referred to www.enquirewithin.co.nz to see a listing of the broad array of applications of personal construct methods in the business and management context.

In conclusion, when at a loss for what else to do, it is useful for the practitioner or interviewer to enquire in terms of similarities and differences, priorities and preferences, reasons why and methods how, what would change if specific other circumstances changed, and the feelings, values and behaviours inherent in the situation.
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