

The Repertory Grid Interview

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

Skills Overview

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

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

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

Eliciting Constructs

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

Now practise asking the 'magic question' in two of three different ways. The basic question is 'Tell me something that any two of these have in common that makes them different from the third,' but it's worth having some alternative phrases, such as 'In what way are any two of these similar but different from the third,' or 'Can you put any two of them together and the third one is different?' As you're asking the question, lay down

three element cards at random; not in a straight line, but at random and shuffle them around on the flat surface.

Note: write the names of the elements in big writing so they occupy most of the card, because some people will try to write the two poles of the construct on the element cards. Also, it's really important to present the triad of elements so that the interviewer can see two against one – whether it's on the table or into a computer. Giving people a printed list of all the elements and asking them to concentrate on just three is very difficult.

Propositional Constructs

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

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

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

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

Some other hints:

1. Don't be afraid of the silence – it means that the interviewee is thinking;

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

Managing the Cards and the Recording

By this stage you should be reasonably comfortable with presenting triads, asking the question, and recording. You've probably learned that you need to give yourselves plenty of physical space – a good horizontal surface at the appropriate height for writing. It is also a good idea if you can sit so that the interviewee can see what you're doing – it symbolises the fact that this is a *joint* exploration. The next stage is to learn how to impose some order on the process, especially managing the cards. A useful hint: if there are no other pressing reasons dictating the number of elements you have, then use nine. Then you can write a 3 x 3 matrix – 123, 456, 789 – and use this to order your triads. So you'll have 123, then 456, then 789, then 147, 258, 369, and if you need more you can go diagonally 159, 267, 348, and so on. This makes it much easier to control the cards, because you're not searching for the next triad, and it also has the advantage of giving you every element in the company of every other element in the shortest time. So, if you feel you need it, give yourself a practise with nine elements.

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

Laddering

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

Laddering Up

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

you?' and you might get an answer like 'Because I've always felt at a disadvantage compared with my brothers.'

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

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

Further note, on recording and process management: the reason for using a large card for each construct and writing the construct about two-thirds of the way up is that you can write the answers to the laddering up questions above the construct – I usually write a small arrow pointing upwards to show that's what I've done. Note that the answers to the Why questions won't usually be phrased as a bipolar construct, just a comment; for nearly all purposes this is enough. Also, if you get an answer like the one cited above – *because there were subjects I would have liked to have studied and I would have been good at* – you can ask what the subjects were; learning to follow up clues like this is one of the signs that you're becoming a skilled interviewer. And you don't have to start the laddering process with the first construct produced – look for one which you think is likely to be easy and interesting for the interviewee.

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

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

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

Laddering Down

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

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

Time to Take Stock

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

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

Frequently Asked Questions

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

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

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

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

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

Q3. How many constructs ought I to expect?

Answer: it depends on the subject, on your purpose, and your analysis method. A very rough guide is that when someone's talking about a topic that's familiar but not heavy with emotional investment or technical complexity – for example, managers giving constructs about their colleagues as quoted above – I would expect somewhere between twenty and forty primary constructs. On the other hand, I have a session about a particular psychological typology that I'm planning a book about, and I keep adding to it as I think of more constructs and it's up to 85. The number of constructs you should be *content* with – a slightly different question, I know – depends on whether your purpose will permit you to use the 80/20 rule: 'let's see how many we get in a couple of sweeps over the territory'. Where it really matters is if your analysis is going to include a frequency count of the number of constructs, and/or a content analysis which includes a frequency count. The basis of an analysis of frequency count is the reasonable assumption that people won't have many constructs about topics where they have little experience: for example, I can probably muster no more than four constructs about the sea, but if I stand next to an Aussie surfer I can hear that he's got a very sophisticated construct system. If the surfer were (God forbid!) to try to teach me to 'read' the sea as he does, then a simple robust evaluation of the success of his teaching would be the increase in my constructs. To take another example, if in my corporate culture survey interviewing managers about their

colleagues 60% of their constructs were about conflict and there were none about innovation, I'll need to be pretty sure of my ground before I confront the management committee with this interesting result. To summarise this point: if you are going to draw significant conclusions from the number of constructs, you must give yourself a good sample and/or the opportunity for each interviewee to dig really deep.

Q4: Do you have any guidance on sample size?

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

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

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

Moving On or Stopping Here?

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

However, if your purpose is to reveal the interviewee's constructs as they are used, you need the next stage, which is to turn each construct into a scale, and rate each element on each construct. This will give you a matrix which you can analyse and perhaps develop further. (The Hints on Feedback and Analysis should be read in conjunction with this hint, which is mostly about administration).

Construct Rating

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

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

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

A Few Final Points

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

- You *must* practise in a safe place, otherwise you'll get into a horrid muddle, but the learning curve is steep, especially if you have someone to give you feedback.
- Learn to do a 'pure' interview – that is, one where you know that you have suggested none of the content – because then you'll be able to make sound decisions about adapting the process.
- Let the works show – the sooner your interviewee sees the point of it all, the easier it will become for both of you.

- Don't forget to 'sign off' by asking if the interviewee has had any further thoughts. Sometimes the experience can cause the interviewee to re-structure their insights and you'll get some little gems.
- Most important of all - don't forget that Grid is a structured conversation. It is much more than a matrix of figures to be analysed.
- Select a set of elements. The elements are concrete examples of the domain you wish to explore – for example, working with a client who had problems in making satisfactory relationships, the elements would be people with whom the client had relationships.
- Take the elements in groups of three, and ask the question: 'Can you tell me a way in which any two of these people are different from the third, in terms of?' (The 'in terms of' phrase, called a qualifier, directs the client to consider the elements in a way appropriate to the purpose. So in this case the qualifiers might be '... in terms of how you feel about them, ... in terms of how they felt about you, ... in terms of how you behaved to each other,' etc.) This two-against-one question produces a bipolar scale – for example *had a sense of humour - I never saw him smile*. This scale is a construct – note that it comes entirely from the interviewee. The interviewer has set up the parameters for the conversation, but has suggested none of the content.

Keeping Grid Free From Interviewer Bias

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

- Don't supply the contrast pole yourself. If the interviewee says 'These two had a sense of humour,' we don't say 'And the other one didn't?' We say 'How would you describe the other, by contrast?'
- Don't summarise the interviewee's constructs, either verbally or when you're writing them down. If the interviewee says 'She could almost always find two or three new ways of looking at a problem,' that's what you write. You don't write 'Creative problem-solver.' And try to avoid asking the interviewee to summarise a construct, even if there are lots of words, because s/he may say 'Creative problem-solver.' What you have in the first phrase is a detailed, behavioural description of the element – and you'll probably get a similarly specific description of the contrast pole – and later on you could find yourself needing that specificity.
- Don't imply that you're judging the interviewee's constructs, or waiting for a particular type of construct to appear. Yes, you do want to elicit constructs that are relevant to your purpose – that's what the qualifiers are for – but in the early stages of a Grid interview you should respect the fact that the two-against-one process is not how most people are used to thinking and your first goal is to get them comfortable with it. Once they are comfortable with it, you can remind them of the qualifiers (for example 'Could you look at these three in terms of'), or you can ask 'Does that construct relate to the purpose?' I once did a series of Grid interviews with managers and part-way through one of them said that he recognised the process because another consultant had used it on him a few weeks ago. I was playing it strictly by the book – I was a pair of eyes and ears and a pencil – and he said 'You haven't asked me to say anything about decision-making yet.' I said that was up to him, whereupon he said that the previous consultant had said 'Most managers have said something about decision-making

by now,' which he'd taken as a criticism. That's the kind of thing I mean when I suggest that you shouldn't imply that you're judging the constructs.

- A related point - it's not for you to judge the importance of someone's constructs. For example, a researcher interviewed a number of people and wrote 'We stopped the interviews after eliciting twelve meaningful constructs.' My question – who decided that they were meaningful? You, or the interviewee? And what exactly do you mean by 'meaningful?' It's not your job to decide that. Much better is to elicit the constructs until the interviewee runs out; do a spot of laddering to change the focus and then ask if that has prompted any more constructs, and then ask the interviewee to sort the constructs into high, medium, and low priority.

Don't Construe Other People's Construing

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

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