

**Repertory Grid Technique & George Kelly's Personal Construct Theory**

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**Introduction RGT**

Repertory Grid Technique stems from George Kelly’s Personal Construct Psychology (PCP, or Personal Construct Theory, PCT). The difference between personal construct psychology and theory is not very clear. In Kelly’s words, it is “personal construct psychology” in his original theoretical publication “The Psychology of Personal Constructs (1955)”. But it is not another “psychology”. It is only a perspective, a research approach or a theory in psychology.

Kelly is not a theoretical psychology researcher, but more a clinical psychologist in his whole life, and almost remained in the US Midwest (mainly Kansas). Kelly started his clinical practice after WWII, until his retirement in 1960s. From his clinical experience, he created a psychotherapy approach called “Role Construct Repertory Test” or “Rep Test”, and his personal construct theory.

Kelly’s contribution is not popular in psychology main streaming. Most of applications remain in clinical psychology and education psychology. (Easterby-Smith et al., 1996)

But since 80s, RGT has been increasingly extended to a variety of domains, including organizational development, education, business and marketing, cognitive science, knowledge management and expert system building.

Why RGT became so popular in many different fields? In my personal experience, it is really an interesting and useful data collecting and analyzing method.

The RGT provides a way to access an individual's unique set of personal constructs, and therefore enables the researcher to access an individual's view of reality.

**Kelly's Personal Construct Psychology**

Before my introduction the process of RGT, I had to introduce its theoretical foundation briefly. But before the theory, it is very important, to know the theory development approach for Kelly’s personal construct theory.
The first article (I select) is from Adams-Webber (1980). He is Kelly’s Ph.D. student. In Adams-Webber’s words:

“Kelly's initial formulation of his system began as an attempt to develop a coherent rationale for all the working assumptions and concrete procedures which he had invented during twenty-five years of clinical experience. When he finally stated all the basic principles of this “model”, Kelly found that he had constructed a general theory of how people go about interpreting and anticipating their personal experiences.” (Adams-Webber, 1980:2)

I analyzed Adams-Webber’s words. There are three components in Kelly's theory development process:

1. First, Kelly's 25 years of clinical experience.
2. Second, by his experience, he came out some working assumptions and procedures.
3. Third, he then developed a coherent rationale for all assumptions & procedures. = basic principles of his “model” = constructed a general theory

This is a interesting article, and there are some examples how he learning (or constructing) the theoretical concepts in clinical practice. This kind of process also shows Kelly’s pragmatism tendency.

Because I will focus on Kelly’s Repertory Grid Technique in this presentation, so I will not dig in Personal Constructs Theory too much. But there are some BELIEVES or ASSUMPTIONS we should know before using RGT.

**Everyone make sense in his own constructs system.**
Kelly believed that individuals act like scientists, they are inquiring the world to make sense of where they living. In order to make sense of their world, people develop their own constructs. When people experience something or someone, they will confirm with their previous predictions based on their existing construct system. If the predictions success, these constructs may reinforce. If not, these constructs may change.

**Constructs are implicit and difficult to express.**
Kelly believes that everyone's construct system is often unarticulated or implicit, and the exploration and elaboration of these systems is therefore difficult. It is why Kelly developing RGT for an alternative approach to traditional interview technique.
The Subject is himself the investigator, researchers just assisting. Kelly believes that a clinical practice is an investigative project designed to elucidate problems in the client's life. The client (subject) is the principal investigator. The therapist is the role of a research supervisor. And a course of therapy is planned as a program of active experimentation in which the therapist assists the client in constructing hypotheses and testing them.

“Thus, the way in which Kelly employed personal construct theory to structure the process of psychotherapy was as a sort of “psychology of science” to help guide therapist and client in the conduct of personally meaningful inquiry. The goal was that the client, with some methodological assistance from the therapist (Landfield, 1971), would develop into a more effective “personal scientist” (to use Mildred Shaw’s excellent term) (Shaw, 1980).

I believe that there is a pragmatic constructing process for Kelly theory building, the useful ideas will keep remain and improve for the next clinical therapy. It is hard to say which one coming first? the theory or the technique? Kelly build up his assumptions and techniques from his 20 years clinical experience. Kelly developed his research technique, Repertory Grid, to fulfill his theoretical assumptions.

**Repertory Grid Technique Process**

In this section, I will introduce the RGT process form an example. This example is part of my thesis research. My research topic is about the back-of-the-book indexer’s indexing behavior.

The human indexing behavior is a cognitive process and difficult to observe or interview. There are some researches conducted by THINK-ALOUD method. But in my cases, my subjects didn’t have any indexing project in hand for me to conduct a think-aloud research.

Interviewing is a common data collecting method in information behavior research. But I found there are some issues when I conducted some interview in my pilot studies.

- Indexer cannot represent his/her tacit/cognitive activities or knowledge well. There are some validity and credibility problems.
- Indexer’s responses were just surrogate of his/her experience; its might be partial or incomplete.
- Indexer would modified his/her statement in different interview context.
So my solution is conducting a RGT research to investigate indexer’s behavior, especially about his mental strategy. My using RGT method is under some assumptions:

- As an interview technique
- It is both qualitative and quantitative
- The meaning was constructed by interviewer & interviewee
- Rating grids could be analyzed by multivariate statistics techniques & software.

RGT is a powerful quantitative statistics analysis tool. Why I using RGT as a qualitative method? There are some reasons:

- It is idiographic: RGT applied on few or an individual
- Interview technique: RGT interview as a constructive interaction
- It could be analyzed in multiple approaches:
  - Depth interview: interviewer have to ask & compare the same activities frequently for eliciting & rating
  - Interpretation: the eliciting of elements & constructs depends the collaborative interpreting & meaning-constructing
  - Descriptive statistics: some descriptive statistics model could help researcher grouping or classifying. e.g.: Factor Analysis, Principle components analysis, clustering analysis, etc.

Although there are variations of RGT process in different applications and researches, they all contain 4 basic stages:
1. Eliciting elements, to identify the entities in the area of construing to be investigated.
2. Eliciting constructs, to identify the distinctions which can be applied among these elements.
3. Rating Grid (matrix) of elements and constructs.
4. Analyzing and explaining the results.

**Conducting RGT for Indexing behavior research**

1. Elicit elements

In my research, my objective is to understand the behavior of entity-selecting/building. So I select one book-indexing case, and sampling entities from that book. The ideal sampling Size is 6~12 elements (Easterby-Smith, M, 1980). Eliciting 15~20 elements will take 2 hours of interview.
I prepare some Element cards for face-to-face interview. I made those ELEMENTS on 4*6 index cards. It’s front is Entity & Page number, in the back is content copy of referred text. I also using RGT software, ReplV, as my interview facilitating tool. The software can suggest transcript sequence, record constructs, rate grid matrix, and analyze in real-time.

After analysis process, I identify 4 different indexing-approaches and 2 strategy dimensions.

**Results**

In this practice, the feedback from the subject (indexer) is positive. It represents the real strategies he used in that case. There are some strategies he never thinking about it before this interview. Those strategies could not explicit before RGT practice