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Personal Construct Psychology Methods for Qualitative Research

Viv Burr, Nigel King and Trevor Butt

Abstract

Personal construct psychology (PCP) has always been better known for its methods than its theory, but many researchers are not aware of the range of qualitative methods offered by a PCP approach. We argue that PCP methods have been overlooked as tools for the qualitative researcher and that they satisfy some key requirements of much qualitative research, such as the capacity to provide in-depth insight into personal experience, to establish a 'democratic' relationship between researcher and participants and to represent the participant's 'voice'. We illustrate several of these methods, drawing on research examples. We show how they enable participants to articulate their experience, and how they may be used as part of an in-depth interview. We conclude that Personal Construct methods provide opportunities for qualitative researchers to create innovative ways of researching personal experience.

Keywords: personal construct psychology; PCP; role repertory test; interview; constructivism; identity

Introduction

Personal construct psychology (PCP) (Kelly, 1955) has always been better known for its methods than its theory, but many researchers are not aware of the range of qualitative methods offered by a PCP approach. The Repertory Grid, arguably PCP's most well-known method, has been principally used as a quantitative, statisti- cal

technique. Employed in a wide range of fields, it has been used not only by PCP researchers but also by many others not adopting this theoretical framework. For example, Jones, Harris, and Waller (1998) used grids to study expectations of   an exercise prescription scheme, while Hewitt (2005) used both PCP theory and repertory grid method to investigate music teachers' perceptions of their students' abilities. Although this and other PCP methods are now being acknowledged as offering great potential for qualitative work (see, for example, Fransella, 2005), PCP methods are still relatively underused by qualitative researchers. In this paper, we will make a case for PCP methods as useful and flexible qualitative methods   that are congruent with other theoretically related approaches, namely constructivism and broadly phenomenological approaches. We will argue that PCP provides opportunities to extend and enrich the methods currently predominantly used by qualitative researchers and we will illustrate this through examples.

PCP was devised by Kelly, who was working as a clinical psychologist in the USA during the Great Depression of the 1930s. He saw PCP as an alternative to the mainstream psychologies of the day, behaviourism and psychoanalysis, with which he became dissatisfied. PCP focuses on subjective experience. It asserts that events may be interpreted by people in a potentially infinite variety of ways, and Kelly (1955) called this 'constructive alternativism'. The meanings with which a person endows events, how they 'construe' them, are seen as key to understanding their thoughts, emotions and conduct. Events are construed through a system of meaning that each individual builds for themselves. This 'construct system' is a lens through which the world is perceived, and consists of a set of bipolar dimensions or 'constructs', such as friendly vs. hostile, interesting vs. dull, etc., which the person uses to interpret

their experience (although this process often lies outside of immediate awareness). Kelly devised the repertory grid and other methods to enable him and his patients to gain insight into their construing. PCP clinicians and researchers have since developed a considerable number of further techniques; these may be used within a PCP theoretical framework, but can also be adopted in a   wider range of approaches that sit at the intersection between constructivism and phenomenology.

In its epistemological framework, PCP can be understood as one of a number of approaches that Madill, Jordon, and Shirley (2000) refer to as 'contextual constructionism', which is distinct from both realism and radical constructionism: 'reality' is not singular, and is actively constructed through our interpretative processes. While one account of reality can thus be regarded as no more 'accurate' than another, some accounts may be more useful or facilitative for the person. This is a key idea within PCP, and is consistent with Strauss and Corbin's development of grounded theory (e.g. Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In its emphasis upon individual experience and knowledge as a useful construction, PCP is grounded in both pragmatism and phenomenology (Butt, 2005). PCP is phenomenological, in that it is concerned with the world as it is perceived by the person, the 'phenomena' that present themselves to consciousness.

PCP theory and methods are epistemologically compatible with approaches that take seriously subjective experience and/or that challenge deterministic or essentialist models of the person. PCP rejects causality and determinism as explanatory concepts in human behaviour and experience; rather, it attends to the constructive processes giving rise to our experience and its methods are specifically designed to

attend to the nature of subjectivity. PCP focuses upon the 'voice' of participants in gathering research data by being careful to describe events in terms used by participants themselves; in giving verbal and written labels to the constructs, care is taken to adopt the words and terms used by the participant, which helps to privilege their 'voice' in the findings and to ensure that the interpretative process remains in their control rather than being taken over by the researcher. This bears witness to the clinical origin of many PCP methods, where exploration of the client's world view is the focus, rather than finding answers to specific research questions. PCP methods are therefore well suited to qualitative research where such exploration is the aim. Research, like therapy, is a joint interpretative process but in PCP methods, the participant's perspective always remains the priority. Whereas other methods of analysis, such as Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith & Osborn, 2003), rely principally upon the researcher's interpretation of an interview transcript some time after the interview. A characteristic of PCP methods is the greater time spent during data gathering in agreeing construct labels and their meanings with the participant.

There are a number of further distinctive features of PCP methods. PCP's clinical origin has led to the development of a variety of techniques particularly effective for addressing issues of change. Much PCP research continues to have a clinical focus, however this renders its methods particularly appropriate for action research where change is the desired outcome, for example in community psychology. PCP methods can be particularly effective in researching experiences that are hard for participants to articulate; the elicitation of a person's bipolar constructs typically entails the comparison of two or three concrete examples from their experience (termed

'elements'). This focus on concrete events can enable participants to overcome the difficulties of expressing abstract ideas, and offers the researcher strategies for accessing accounts which reach beyond socially desirable or common sense responses.

The aim of analysis in the case of different qualitative approaches may vary, for example, to describe commonalities in lived experience, to identify culturally available narratives of a particular experience or to give legitimacy to the experiences of relatively powerless groups; nevertheless, a very common method of data collection is the in-depth interview. However, interviewing requires much skill. The interviewer needs to use probes and prompts effectively to gain relevant material (King & Horrocks, 2010). More importantly, where the research topic is one that is psycho- logically and socially complex, as is often the case in qualitative research, it can be difficult for people to articulate and report their experience in response to interview questions. Consider the following research questions: What is attractive or sexually appealing to a person? Why do people want to have children? Why do women want to be thin? Often we cannot simply say or feel unable to do more than draw upon currently socially available narratives. Of course, PCP methods are not unique here. Literature on interviewing about difficult and sensitive topics (e.g. Lee, 1993; Mercer, 2008) suggests that getting to hard-to-reach meaning is inevitably time-consuming; it requires the researcher to build rapport with the participant, to explore more accessible aspects of experience first and to use multiple probes to 'get below the surface'. Techniques other than interviews, such as photo-elicitation and audio diaries, have been used in research on 'difficult' areas to enable participants to have greater agency than they would in a conventional interview

(Johnson, 2011; Pink, 2007; Sargeant & Gross, 2011). PCP methods have three potential advantages over such strategies. First, they are intrinsically participant-led, but are used in collaboration with the researcher. This avoids the uncertainty about 'doing it right' that some participants may feel when left on their own to produce the required material. Secondly, PCP methods are less reliant on the verbal fluency of participants than interviews, audio diaries or visual methods, where people are asked to explain the meaning of what they have produced. Thirdly, PCP methods tend to be very efficient; in our experience participants are generally able to carry out the tasks required by the methods described below in a relatively short period of time.

In the remainder of this paper, we will illustrate several methods, chosen to indicate something of the range of issues that PCP techniques may be used to   address.

Interviewing using the Role Construct RepertoryTest

Conventional interview methods can raise particular challenges when participants find it difficult or threatening to speak about their experience. This can often be the case with research in health and social care settings. Qualitative researchers using interviews must find appropriate and facilitative techniques that can enable such participants to fully contribute their views. For example, Kelly (2007) developed a number of concrete visual aids to enable children with learning disabilities to take part in her research and Conolly (2008) developed effective task-based interviews in her work with excluded children. The use of concrete or specific examples from experience can be a simple but powerful technique and is one of the things that PCP methods can bring to the interview. Through inviting interviewees to draw

comparisons between different people, events or things, they may be enabled to reach for meaning that is not immediately apparent to them.

The first stage in completing a repertory grid is the elicitation of constructs, and for this, Kelly (1955) typically used the 'Role Construct Repertory Test'. Despite its name, it is not a 'test' at all but a particularly fruitful method for encouraging reflection on experience. It is in itself a potentially powerful qualitative method, yet few researchers consider using it without the subsequent completion and analysis of a grid. The person is first asked to think of, say, a number of people with whom they have some form of relationship, including some that they like and some they dislike. Together with 'self' this list of people constitutes the 'elements' to be used. The interviewee is then presented with three elements, chosen at random, and asked to consider ways in which two of them are similar and different from the third. An answer might, for example, be 'Maria and Yasmin are kind, but John is harsh'. In this example, 'kind vs. harsh' is a construct. The constructs are written down with one 'pole' of the construct on the left and the other on the right. This process of comparing elements and recording the emerging constructs continues until the interviewee feels they have articulated all the dimensions of meaning important to them. Constructs are labelled using the participant's own words, as outlined earlier. The process of completing the Role Construct Repertory Test can itself be one that enables the interviewee to reflect upon their perception of themselves and their world, and more can be learned by probing further on the nature of the contrasts that are so meaningful to the person.

This inspection of the constructs is done as a joint endeavour between inter- viewer

and interviewee. It is a 'democratic' process in which the suggestions of the researcher are just that -they are not privileged interpretations. Throughout the interview, participants are encouraged to reflect on their experience and the participant's own perceptions of the emerging material are continually fed back into the process. It is important not to regard the constructs as revealing 'the truth' about the person. Like data gathered through other qualitative methods, and consistent with a contextual constructionist approach, they are a product of a particular interaction, a 'snap shot' of the person's world view taken at a particular time and in a particular context.

Used in this way, the role repertory test produces a different kind of interview from the traditional, semi-structured format and enables it to quickly focus on important aspects of experience that might otherwise be hard for the person to reach for and articulate. Although hand-written notes on emerging construct dimensions are normally taken during the interview, transcriptions of audio recordings allow for these to be later checked and elaborated. In some research contexts, audio recording interviews can be experienced as threatening by participants (Holt & Pamment, 2010) and in such circumstances, although producing less rich data, the constructs emerging from the role repertory test can simply be recorded by hand during the interview.

In order to show in more detail how the method may be used in qualitative research, we will illustrate this through a small pilot study on women's identities conducted by two of the authors. The research illustrates how the role repertory test interview can be an effective tool in enabling researchers and participants to explore potentially

sensitive personal issues, core values and personal change through topics that are familiar and interesting to participants.

Our personal experience and informal discussion with friends and colleagues   had suggested that clothes, and shoes in particular, are a rich source of personal meaning for many women today and that these meanings are connected to their sense of self and to their public persona. We therefore conducted a small pilot study to investigate the personal identity meanings that a range of shoes held for women (Burr & King, 2009).

Although, on the face of it, the topic may seem frivolous, we will show that this focus on concrete aspects of everyday experience can be a powerful way to explore issues which might not emerge so freely if addressed directly. Personal identity is a complex and elusive matter; what kind of person we feel ourselves to be, and what is central to this self-concept, can be difficult to articulate. For example, in researching the nature of performing everyday professional identities, one of the authors has found that interview probes simply lead to more detailed descriptions of abstract, official versions of professional roles (Ross, King, & Firth, 2005). The focus on specific and concrete things and events that is characteristic of PCP methods effectively ameliorates these problems.

Three women between the ages of 30 and 45 took part, who we will call Margaret, Bridget and Lucy. We asked each participant to compare images of various shoes and to talk about the similarities and differences that they perceived. Using shoes as the 'elements' quickly led to the emergence of important identity issues for the

participants, and these were then further explored through interview probes. We presented each participant with a selection of three images at a time, asking in what way any two are similar and different from the third- Kelly's operational definition of a construct. We asked the women to think not only about the shoes but about the kind of person or personality they suggest. We repeated this with different combinations of images and made notes of the similarities and, importantly, the contrasts that participants reported. For example, when shown the images of three pairs of shoes, Bridget identified one pair as 'sexy'. The logical opposite of 'sexy' is 'not sexy', but when prompted with 'as opposed to …?' she responded 'old-fashioned'. We then went back over our notes with the women, checking and clarifying the nature of the constructs that had emerged, agreeing labels for the constructs using their own words and phrases, in each case exploring their opposite or 'contrast' term and using probes to further explore particularly interesting issues. The constructs that were identified and agreed for each of the participants are shown in Table 1.

This method gave us insight into what appeared to be very important aspects of participants' sense of self; many of the constructs that emerged during the interviews were highly salient to personal identity and not simply 'just about shoes'. We will focus here on three examples from our findings, which illustrate how the repertory test interview can be used to explore sensitive issues like sexuality, as well as other important identity issues such as core values and personal change.

The opportunity to reflect upon their own construing produced some of our richest findings. For example, Bridget produced a dimension of 'girliness' vs. 'dominatrix, fancy dress'. She said 'girliness' implied sexual orientation: 'a girly shoe with a heel

and the rest of it sends that message that that's a straight woman, whereas other shoes send other messages'. Another construct important to her was whether a shoe gave her leg and body a pleasing shape or made her look 'dumpy' and this was mainly about the height of the heel. When considering a pair of flat-heeled, knee-length boots, she initially did not see these as 'sexy' when compared to a pair of high-heeled boots. However, reflecting upon this, she developed her meaning of 'sexiness'; returning to the issue of sexual orientation, she said: 'they can be sexy in other spaces', meaning gay or bisexual spaces. She saw the high-heeled boot as 'out on the town' and heterosexual, saying that it would have a different message in the gay/bi space: 'people would interact with you differently and would make assumptions about you because of the heel'.

Margaret's interview raised an issue that turned out to reveal something about her core values. When shown three images including one of a knee-length high- heeled boot made of an animal print fabric, she immediately said 'the odd one out is obviously the animal print boot'. The others were 'comfortable, everyday wear' but the boot had a high heel and would be harder to walk in, she said. At first the difference seemed to be only about comfort. Margaret was encouraged to reflect further on this construct and we asked whether, if she tried on the animal print boot and it was actually very comfortable if she would wear it. She said no, because of the animal print which for her was bad taste and had 'connotations of people in the past doing real things [to animals]'.

This issue was further explored and Margaret elaborated, saying she had not really thought about it before and found it hard to articulate:

I suppose it's a bit like all the issues surrounding wearing, you know, they used to wear foxes, fox stoles around the neck. It's not killing animals because you need them to, for the leather or something or to eat, it's, erm … I'll have to think about it, it's not something I can really just sort of reel off …

When probed as to whether the relevant construct for her was using animals for fashion vs. for practical necessity, she said: 'It's like not giving a damn. It's more than that. It's not giving a damn for the lives of creatures'.

Lucy mostly showed a preference for 'sensible' and 'comfortable' footwear, and explicitly linked this to the way she saw herself. Much discussion took place around some knee-length, very high-heeled red leather boots. Comparing these with other shoes and boots enabled Lucy to tease out and develop important personal meanings for her. She saw the boots as attention-seeking, not consistent with her sense of self, and being highly 'sexualised' in dominatrix style. Reflecting on this judgement, when later comparing the boots to another shoe, enabled her to elaborate on how she felt about herself as a woman.

I think it's because that one looks, I've got images kind of 'helpless woman' type per- son who wears the shoe and for me, I just can't see myself, I could see myself being quite dominatrix type thing, but not 'helpless woman.'

She revealed that she 'secretly liked' the red boots and later chose this image as one of her favourites – very much at odds with others she had picked. When

probed about this, she made an interesting distinction between the woman she is and the woman she sometimes would like to be:

> I don't think I'd ever, ever wear it, at all, [laughs] but I think that represents the person I'd sometimes like to be – that's more confident and not caring about what other people think.

These examples show how the repertory test interview, by focussing on concrete examples, can be helpful in exploring potentially sensitive topics such as sexuality, enable access to hard-to-reach for meanings and provide rich data through encouraging participants to reflect on their own construing. This is arguably of particular value in research contexts where the participants may find it hard to articulate their experience, and young people in particular may find 'vehicles' such as fashion, tele- vision or music particularly engaging routes to the examination of personal issues.

Pictor technique

Pictor is derived from a method used by Hargreaves (1979) in family therapy. Clients were asked to spatially arrange family members (designated on separate cards) to represent relationships between them and then interviewed about their arrangements. It has been employed quite extensively by King and colleagues at the University of Huddersfield, mostly in the context of research exploring inter-professional working in health and social care settings.

Ross et al. (2005) used this method to investigate the working relationships between

social workers and district nurses. Each participant was asked to consider a particular case that relied on collaborative working. They then arranged cards representing known individuals from different agencies, and interviews were used to elicit their construing of these individuals and the relationships between them. The interview findings were subsequently used in clinical development and in teaching. This technique has since been used in studies investigating the roles and identities of nurses, patients and carers in the context of palliative and supportive care (King et al., in press; King, Melvin, Ashby, and Firth, 2010).

Pictor charts can be used to elicit bipolar constructs; for example, by asking a participant to identify what aspect of relationship a particular arrangement of arrows represents and then to define what would constitute the opposite to this. However, most existing studies using Pictor have adopted a more phenomenological constructivist approach, and this is what we illustrate below. This demonstrates how methods derived from PCP do not necessarily compel researchers to use Kelly's original theory to frame their work. An example of a Pictor chart is shown in Figure 1.

Summary of case

The case represented here was provided by 'Pauline', a social work team manager, based in an acute hospital. It relates to an elderly male patient who had multiple complex needs, following a series of health problems. Due to his illness, he lacked mental capacity and also had a high level of physical dependency. His main carer was his wife, and by the time of his last admission to hospital he had moved into a nursing home.

_____

Figure 1 about here

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 Pauline began her account at the point where the patient had been admitted to hospital in a very poorly state. She arranged the arrows in two very clear groupings. The first is an 'inner circle' around herself and the hospital social worker. These represent the professionals who were involved in looking after the patient (plus his wife) during his admission, and in particular who were involved in assessments and arrangements to facilitate his discharge from the hospital. The participant ('team manager') has placed her arrow behind and overlapping with that of the social worker indicating that at this stage, her involvement was only in terms of supporting the social worker in a supervisory capacity. Despite the large number of people involved in the case (from eleven different professions or services), Pauline stated that everything ran very smoothly within this inner circle: in her words, 'all this was pretty standard'.

The second grouping on Pauline's chart is a wide semi-circle around the inner circle. This tells the story of what happened after the patient's discharge. The patient died very soon after returning to the nursing home, and by this time Pauline had been made aware of concerns (from his wife and the hospital staff) about the care he had been receiving there prior to his admission, indicating neglect. At this point, Pauline decided to instigate a formal investigation of abuse regulations. The arrows in the outer semi-circle represent those who became involved in the case through this investigation. To some extent, the arrows here are arranged to show the temporal progression of the investigation, running clockwise. Key stages are shown

on arrows alongside individuals: the initial complaint, the 'strategy meeting' and the final 'case conference' at which a verdict on the nursing home's care was delivered. The investigation concluded that the nursing home was guilty of 'neglect and acts of omission'. In contrast to her supporting role in the events covered by the inner circle of the chart, Pauline describes her own role (and that of her team) as 'pivotal' to the investigation stage.

How Pictor was used

There are a number of aspects of how Pauline used Pictor that are worth particular attention. Firstly, it is striking that she did not put the patient at the centre of the chart, but rather herself and the social worker. In part, this may reflect the patient's lack of agency in the case; because of his physical and especially his mental condition, he is very much someone to whom things happen. Indeed, a large part of Pauline's account is about 'things happening' after his death. Also, Pauline's connection to the case herself is not directly through the patient (who she never met) but through his social worker. With the lengthy consideration of the com- plaints procedure, this is at least as much a story about the social work team led by Pauline as it is about the patient and his wife.

This case in Pauline's account has two quite distinct stages, and the nature of her involvement is different in each. The flexibility of Pictor allows her to represent this not only in terms of where the arrows are placed but also in terms of how she uses them. The inner circle shows a network of collaborating professionals, working with the patient and each other. The outer semi-circle, in contrast, shows a temporal sequence, illustrating the formal steps through which the complaint of abuse has to

progress. In talking about this part of the case, Pauline emphasises the rigid nature of the requirements upon her and her colleagues, and her use of the Pictor arrows helps her to emphasise this to the interviewer. Both Pauline and the interviewer referred directly to the chart many times during the interview. While talking about the complaint process, Pauline also added several arrows that she had not at first included. This underlines a key strength of the use of Pictor to explore complex collaborative cases; the way it serves as a focus for the discussion and a stimulus to the participant's reflection on their experience.

Perceiver-element grid (PEG)

The PEG (see, for example, Procter, 2005) is a version of the repertory grid and is used to help people to explain how they see other people, as well as how they think they are seen by them, and to articulate the nature of their relationships with others. It can be especially useful in a dyadic or group context. A matrix is drawn up with enough rows and columns for each person in the group. Each person's name is then entered BOTH across the top (the 'elements') with one name at the head of each column) AND down the left hand side (the 'perceivers'), again with one name in each row. Each person is given a copy of the blank matrix and asked to complete it. They are asked to say for each of the 'perceivers' how they think that person perceives each of the others (the 'elements'). Each response is written in the appropriate cell of the matrix. A fictitious example is provided in Table 2. In this example, John and Jane are exploring their relationship with each other and have each completed a grid. They have completed the four boxes in the matrix by writing about:

·   How they see themselves,

·   How they see the other person,

·   How they think the other person sees them and

·   How they think the other person sees themselves.

The result is a rich 'map' of interpersonal perceptions, and when pairs or members of a group are asked to share their grids with each other, this can be the start of a process of reconstruing others and of changing the nature of their relationships with them. While such change may not be an immediate research goal, understanding how we see others and are seen by them is highly relevant to fields such as inter-professional working and inter-cultural perceptions. It could also fruit- fully be used to elaborate on the findings gained from the other methods, such as Pictor. For example, in the research on how different types of community nurse understand each other's roles mentioned above (King et al., 2010), a particular relationship that seemed interesting on the Pictor chart could then serve as the focus of a perceiver-element grid.

The Salmon Line

Salmon (2003) initially devised this to investigate the teaching of design and technology in UK schools. A Design and Technology teacher was concerned to find out why some students seemed unable to improve their performance, and the research aimed to find out whether the answer might lie in the perceptions of Design &Technology (D&T) held by the students compared with the teacher. But, instead of sim ply interviewing the teacher and students about D&T, Salmon used an innovative method, allowing the construing of the participants to emerge through a concrete

technique. The teacher and his students were each asked to consider all class members in terms of a construct 'very low ability at Design &Technology' vs. 'highest possible ability'. Each person arranged the class members (designated by names on cards) along a straight line representing the construct. They were then questioned about their reasoning and about what would be necessary to move individuals along the dimension towards 'high ability'. Interesting differences between the teacher and his students soon emerged. For example, students usually saw 'being female' as an obstacle to change, a factor that the teacher surely must address and take into account in his attempt at improving performance.

Like the Perceiver-Element grid, the Salmon Line can work well as a supplement to other techniques, to explore specific constructs in more detail. In Ross et al's. (2005) research into role perceptions and relationships between District Nurses and Social Workers, the use of Pictor revealed 'good team-working vs. bad team-working' to be a salient construct. These two poles were then placed at either end of a Salmon Line, and each interviewee was asked to position others they interacted with in the course of their work somewhere on that dimension. The interviewer then explored with them the factors they perceived to be preventing those near the negative pole from moving towards the positive, and what might be done to address them.

Once elicited, constructs can be further explored by a variety of other PCP techniques in order to examine, for example, the relationships between constructs, participants' core values or difficulties around personal change. There are many PCP techniques that we have not covered here – we have focussed on those that we feel

have particular potential for the qualitative researcher. For more information about other PCP methods, the reader is referred to Fransella (2003). The Internet Encyclopaedia of PCP at http://www.pcp-net.org/encyclopaedia/main.html provides useful explanations of key theoretical concepts.

Conclusions

Our experience is that participants find such PCP methods engaging and interesting, and indeed they may be more flexible and intuitive to use than traditional repertory grids. We have argued that, compared with more widely known qualitative methods, PCP methods have a number of advantages; they enable participants to quickly focus on key issues through the use of concrete examples; participants' reflections on their experience and on their own responses produces data that are particularly rich; they help to avoid common sense or party-line responses; and as such are especially useful when exploring sensitive issues. Where appropriate, a PCP approach can enable the researcher to handle data from larger samples than is usual in qualitative research by searching interview transcripts for construct dimensions rather than, say, performing a thematic analysis.

PCP techniques can enable us to research how a person or group of people perceive the things, people and events in their lives. Techniques such as the Salmon Line and Pictor are simple but effective ways of enabling people to articulate their construing in a concrete way through visual imagery. Some PCP techniques, such as the role repertory test, are particularly useful in attending to the nature of self-hood while others such as the PEG attend to construals of relationships. In common with narrative psychology and social constructionism, PCP emphasises the

relational nature of selfhood. And there is no reason why PCP techniques, with their underlying constructivist epistemology, should not be used by discourse analysts in researching the social construction of the self. We believe that PCP techniques provide opportunities for qualitative researchers to create innovative ways of researching personal experience; they enable the researcher to explore a wide range of issues concerning experience, subjectivity and identity and we have argued that in many cases they can produce richer research findings than the conventional in-depth interview.

Reflecting on the use of PCP methods

For researchers new to PCP methods, there are two main ways in which these may be experienced as rather different from conventional interviews. Firstly, the methods themselves impose a degree of structure on the interaction between researcher and participant; they all require certain tasks to be carried out in a certain order, for example, labelling arrows and laying them out in a chart for Pictor or completing each of the cells in the PEG, and this may seem restrictive to qualitative researchers new to these methods. In our experience, however, these techniques very rarely feel restrictive in practice, and indeed they facilitate a participant-led approach.

Secondly, data gathering with PCP methods tends to have a very lively and dynamic feel to it. Participants quite often report that they found the experience not only 'interesting' or 'revealing' but also 'fun'. This reflects the active role participants play in these techniques; they are 'doing something' more than just sitting down and answering questions.

While recommending PCP methods, we acknowledge that they have challenges and potential drawbacks. One dilemma can be deciding how much to intervene in the process of generating data. For example, with Pictor, there is evidence that some ways of laying out the arrows tend to produce richer descriptions of collaborative working than others (Bravington, 2011). The researcher might, therefore, want to draw on this in the guidance they give about how to use the technique, but there is a delicate balance to be struck: too much intervention by the researcher might undermine the essential participant-led nature of PCP methods.

A further possible weakness is that PCP techniques may seem rather game-like, and might be perceived as failing to take the participant's experiences seriously. We have, however, only noted this reaction on a very few occasions, and participants have gone on to use the technique in question effectively. The best way to minimise the risk of this is to explain in language accessible to the participant group why using a particular technique is useful for the particular research project in which they are involved.

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Fig 1: Pauline's Pictor chart

Table 1 Constructs elicited with Margaret, Bridget and Lucy

	Margaret	Bridget	Lucy
Constructs	Younger - older	Streamlines, neat - garish, in yer face	Comfortable – not comfortable
	Fashionable- not fashionable	Sexy - a parody of sexiness	Confident feminine – helpless feminine
	Practical, comfortable - for appearance	Heterosexual – gay/bi	Safety - fun
	Not leather - doesn't give a damn	Comfortable, functional – not practical	Toned down sexual – overtly sexual
	Classical - not classical	Young - older	Informal - formal
	Elegant - sloppy	Can wear any time – an 'occasion' shoe	Not making a statement – making a statement
	Not worn to look sexy – worn to look sexy	Gives my body a pleasing shape – doesn't	
	Everyday wear - dressy	Sexy – old fashioned	
	Cool – not cool	Extravert - introvert	
		Contemporary – looks cheap/trashy/low cost	

Table 2. Example of a PEG.

		Elements	
		John	Jane
(a) John's grid			
Perceivers	John	I see myself as trying hard to be as helpful as I can to Jane, but my efforts are not appreciated	Jane doesn't ask for help when she needs it and doesn't like to get constructive criticism
	Jane	I think Jane sees me as someone with a lot of experience- she's possibly a bit over-awed by me	I think Jane doesn't have a very high opinion of her own abilities- she may lack a bit of self-esteem
(b) Jane's grid			
Perceivers	John	In my opinion, John sees himself as the only one who is capable of getting things done	I think John sees me as a bit stupid
	Jane	John is always trying to interfere and tell people what to do. He undermines my confidence	I think I'm capable and quite innovative. I'm good at working out my own way of doing things