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Making the Most of Methods: The future for PCP?
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Introduction
It used to be the case that the Psychology of Personal Constructs was better known for its methods (or at least one of them: the repertory grid) than its theory. But now, in the UK at least, no personal construct methods are taught to undergraduates and few become familiar with PCP as a theoretical approach. Although we are focusing here on the UK as an example, we expect that the situation is similar in other countries. Some writers have previously tried to raise the profile of PCP by showing its compatibility with newer theoretical approaches. For example, given the obvious points of agreement between constructivism and social constructionism, some writers (e.g. Botella, 1995) have tried to bring these together in a synthesis. In this plenary we too will discuss the potential for raising the academic profile of Personal Construct Psychology but we will suggest that this can best be done by focussing once again on its methods. We argue that PCP is best 'advertised' to researchers using a variety of theoretical approaches by showing how its methods are sympathetic to these.

The fastest growing section in the British Psychological Society is that devoted to qualitative methods, which are becoming increasingly respected within the discipline. We will argue that there is an opportunity to enhance the profile of PCP among psychology academics by publicising the strengths of PCP methods AS qualitative methods and by showing how the assumptions underlying its theory are sympathetic to the epistemological approaches that have given rise to the use of qualitative methods.

We will argue that Personal Construct methods provide offer opportunities to extend and enrich the methods currently predominantly used by qualitative researchers, illustrating this with the use of some examples of existing research. Finally, we will briefly discuss some strategies for raising the profile of PCP among qualitative researchers.

Qualitative approaches and epistemology
The rise in qualitative methods in psychology is due to an increasing respect for approaches to psychological research that may be called subjectivist, interpretivist, constructivist or constructionist. Qualitative methods broadly address personal and social meaning rather than measurement or objective description, and they can broadly be said to have their roots in either social constructionism or phenomenology.

At one end of the spectrum are the group of approaches collectively known as discourse analysis (eg Wetherell et al, 2001), which aim to explore how different uses of language serve to construct people and events in different ways. At the other end lie a 'family' of approaches that could broadly be said to be phenomenological, and this is where we see the greatest potential for PCP methods.

Phenomenology attends to the 'lived experience' of the person. It does not deal in the positivist notion of 'causality' and attends to 'phenomena' rather than objective truth. It seeks to understand the world from the participant's point of view. Moustakas (1994) listed the common features of a phenomenological approach:

- Focus on wholeness of experience
- A focus on individual meaning rather than causal explanation
- Description of experience via first-person accounts
- Reflexivity of researcher

There are of course phenomenologists who would resist any suggestion that PCP is a phenomenological approach because it insists on seeing experience as shaped by a system of bipolar constructs: it imposes a pre-existing structure on individual accounts. Indeed Kelly himself resisted the linkage (though he probably misunderstood phenomenology). Moustakas helpfully proposes a loosely-knit family approach to phenomenology. Not all family members have every feature; but nevertheless they generally share some of a range of core features. For Moustakas, members of the family include:

- Grounded theory
- Empirical phenomenological research
- Heuristic research
- Ethnography and narrative approaches
- Hermeneutics

This list is not exhaustive, and we would include PCP in it.

The common feature in 'phenomenological' approaches is that, in one way or another, they aim to understand people's subjective experience, or their 'life world'. For example, Narrative Psychology (eg White and Epston, 1990) has its roots in phenomenology but also emphasises the constructive work that people do in creating narratives and acknowledges the socially constructed nature of narrative forms. It sees the person as actively constructing their world and sense of self (as does PCP), and this is done through stories or narratives. These narratives are constructed out of personal experiences and meanings that are selected by the person and arranged into meaningful structures. As Kohler Riessman (2004: 708) says: "Narratives do not mirror the past, they refract it." Furthermore, they do so by drawing on socially shared structures. These structures, like story plots, trajectories and so on, often have their basis in culturally shared narrative forms such as the tragedy or the romance. Coming from a different tradition, feminist psychology (eg Wilkinson, 1996) aims to give women and marginalised groups a 'voice' in what they see as a world of research findings dominated by a masculine, white middle class agenda and therefore emphasises attention to the experience and perceptions of those people

Qualitative methods are therefore the methods of choice for research based on epistemological positions that in one way or another emphasise the importance of subjective experience, which aim to be 'democratic', not privileging the interpretations of

the researcher, which allow space for the 'voice' of research participants, and which tend to reject essentialist, deterministic accounts of the person. And this is what PCP methods also aim to do: PCP methods are qualitative methods par excellence.

Qualitative methods: data collection and analysis
The aim of analysis in the case of qualitative approaches may be somewhat different, for example to describe commonalities in lived experience, to identify culturally available narratives of a particular experience, or to give legitimacy to the reality as lived by relatively powerless groups; nevertheless despite the differences between these approaches, the range of methods of data collection and analysis they use is remarkably narrow: what they have in common is a 'default position' of the depth interview (often semi-structured) as the data collection method of choice. Furthermore, it is commonplace for interview data to be analysed using a 'thematic' analysis, often Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis.[i] (IPA) (Smith, 1996). In the health field in particular, many researchers seem to rely exclusively on IPA. It is an excellent method, but it is one of many interpretative strategies that can be used. Others are Template Analysis (King, 2004) and Critical Narrative Analysis (Langdridge 2007).

Phenomenological interviews and analysis
Phenomenological interview methods can be thought of as ranged along a continuum from descriptive to interpretative (see Langdridge, 2007). At the descriptive end, a person is interviewed about a particular experience, say, that of mistrust. They would be asked to think about a particular time when they had experienced the feeling of mistrust and interviewed about it in detail. The interview is transcribed and then broken down into 'meaning units'. These stay as close to the text as possible, but are then slowly assembled into larger units in which the researcher tries to preserve the person's meaning in an attempt to capture the essence of the experience. Several participants are normally interviewed in an attempt to get as full a grasp as possible on the structure of the phenomenon.

But at the other, and more widely adopted, end of the spectrum is the interpretative pole. A great deal of qualitative research in psychology can broadly be assumed under this heading. In general, the idea is to gain access to the experiential world of the person; this might include descriptions of events and experiences they have undergone, how they felt about those things at the time and how, looking back, they feel about them now; in other words, the aim is to access how they make sense of what has happened to them. Again, a semi-structured interview is often used and the participants' accounts are then usually analysed for 'themes' that recur across different accounts, and these themes are taken as the researcher's 'interpretations' or 'readings' of the material which are then discussed in relation to theoretical concepts. The generic title of 'thematic analysis' may seem vague, especially to new researchers, and the procedure for doing a thematic analysis is often not made explicit, another reason why methods of analysis which are more prescriptive and have a clear identity, like IPA, have risen to prominence.

Now, depth interviewing is highly skilled. The interviewer needs to use probes and prompts effectively to gain relevant material. More importantly, where the topic under

investigation is one that is psychologically and socially complex, as is often the case in qualitative research, it can be very difficult for people to articulate their experience and report it in response to interview questions. Examples: What is attractive or sexually appealing to a person? Why do people want to have children? Why do they find their job satisfying (or not)? Why do women want to be thin? Often we cannot simply say.

The problem with depth interviewing is that sometimes the answers it gives us about psychologically complex experiences are disappointingly superficial; it can fail to unravel the subtleties and intricacies of experience because it is limited by the person's ability to conceptualise their experience at an abstract enough level to describe it. Or else the person falls back upon common sense ideas or those that are socially acceptable, or freely available in society, because the task of thinking through their own complex experience is too great. The result is that the answers we get are those that we might have predicted before we set out to do the research.

PCP: phenomenological qualitative methods
Good phenomenological methods usually recommend that the research participant focuses on the specific rather than the general. This is useful because it helps the participant to articulate complex experience by focussing on specific events, people or things. But too often, semi-structured interviews allow a focus on the specific to evaporate.
What PCP methods can bring to phenomenological interviewing is simple but powerful: the use of concrete or specific examples from experience. What this amounts to is a version of the phenomenological method of 'imaginative variation'- asking what would make a difference to the experience? And this is in principle what happens when we conduct a 'Role Repertory Test'.

It is often forgotten that this preparation for completing a Repertory Grid is itself a useful exercise in helping people reach for meaning that is not immediately apparent to them. And we don't necessarily have to resort to triads of elements either. So, what is it that is exciting or fearful about particular people or situations? We might begin by asking a person to consider a series of pairs, one of each that is, say, safe, and one dangerous: How is being with Emma and being with Sara different? Or what is one difference between being in a crowd alone and being accompanied by a trusted friend? When this is drawn up in a grid and the construct extended to other people or situations, patterns might begin to emerge for the person. I (TWB) certainly found this an excellent way of conducting a clinical interview with patients who felt overcome with anxiety that seemed to them initially to have no obvious predictors. The anxiety can become to be seen as meaningful rather than meaningless.

And the Repertory Grid itself is often overlooked as a potentially useful qualitative method. Richard Bell has often warned us against an over-reliance on grid analysis packages; psychologists routinely fail to realise the assumptions they are buying into. There are no dangers however, when research participants are themselves the analysts. Here the aim is not to find underlying principal components. Rather it is to encourage the person to think again about meanings that might suggest themselves on an inspection of the grid. What we have here is a grid-interview, or interview structured around the construction of a grid. In one such procedure (Butt, Burr and Bell, 1997), with the help of Richard, we investigated how people presented different aspects of themselves in

different social contexts. The elements were a succession of these self-presentations: "Can you tell me one way in which you act differently with Bob compared to with David?" In this way constructs were elicited and a grid drawn up. Each participant was asked to apply each construct in a variety of social contexts and then invited to reflect on their grid in an interview.

In these Kellian methods, we can see a strong and superordinate phenomenological component. The research participant's perspective and constructions are always the focus; there is never an attempt to type-cast it or to over-write it with the researcher's interpretations. The participants are encouraged to reflect on their experience, but unlike the ubiquitous semi-structured interview, they are given tools which might help them in this reflection.

We will now look at just three examples of PCP methods, some of which have successfully been used to supplement phenomenological investigation.

The Salmon Line
Phil Salmon devised this method initially 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 different perceptions of D&T that n=might be held by the students compared with the teacher. But instead of simply interviewing the teacher and students about their experiences of and feelings about of D&T Salmon used an innovative method, allowing the construing of the participants to emerge through a very 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 versus 'highest possible ability'. Each sorted out 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 scale to a better performance. Interesting differences between the teacher on the one hand and his students on the other 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.

Pictor technique.
For this we are indebted to Nigel King and some of his PhD students at Huddersfield who have successfully used this method. The Pictor technique is derived from Hargreaves (1979) and initially used in family therapy. Clients were asked to arrange family members (designated on separate cards) to indicate relationships between them and then interviewed about their arrangements.

Ross, King and Firth (2005) used these methods 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. Using the Pictor technique 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. These constructs were then further elaborated using the Salmon Line. The individual cards were placed along a line ranging, for example, from 'daily contact' to 'no

contact'. This was done to focus the participant on how different individuals could be encouraged to engage in more contact. The interviews were recorded and analysed using King's Template Analysis and the resulting themes were useful in clinical development and in teaching. King, Melvin and Ashby (in press) since used the Pictor technique in an investigation of the roles and identities of nurses involved in palliative care. They conclude: "The Pictor technique we used in this study proved very successful in helping participants reflect on specific cases, and they found the task to be enjoyable and stimulating. We feel it has great potential both as a research tool and as an aid to education and development regarding joint working."

The self characterisation sketch
Thirty years before the advent of narrative psychology and discourse analysis, Kelly proposed a careful and systematic analysis of clients' self descriptions. The self characterization is written in the third person, from the point of view of someone who knows you both intimately and sympathetically. It is a beautiful example of a phenomenological analysis. The researcher reads and re-reads the sketch in an attempt to establish what the phenomenologists call epoché – trying to put aside pre-conceived assumptions and to see things from the participant's point of view. Kelly recommends trying to see each sentence as central to the sketch. The sequence in which things are told and the transition from one area to another are examined for meaning, much as in some narrative analyses. He thus suggests a number of different 'readings' of the sketch to reveal different aspects of the self-story being told:

Observation of sequence & transition: The search for meaning beneath manifest content
Observation of organization:
Reflection against context: Examination of each sentence for its centrality in meaning
Collation of terms: Reading for pre-reflective meaning that is not articulated
Shifting emphasis: Kelly suggests that each part of the protocol should be read, emphasising different meaning units. So, the following passage should be read seven times, with alternative emphases on each line:

> On the whole he tries to impress people, especially his elders, with his knowledge, poise, and sincerity.
>
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> he tries
> to impress people
> especially his elders,
> with his knowledge
> poise,
> and sincerity

Restatement of the argument: the researcher tries to subsume the argument and discusses this with the client.

In addition, Kelly suggests an analysis of context, themes and construct dimensions.

Summary and conclusions

PCP methods enable the researcher to explore a wide range of issues within approaches that are broadly phenomenological and constructivist. They can enable us to research how a person or group of people perceive the things, people and events in their lives. Some, like the self characterisation sketch, explicitly attend to the nature of selfhood. Others, such as family grids, allow access to socially shared constructs and to construals of relationships; like narrative psychology and social constructionism, PCP emphasises the relational nature of selfhood. And there is no reason why PCP methods, like the self characterisation sketch, with their underlying constructivist epistemology, should not be used by discourse analysts in researching the social construction of the self. Techniques such as the Salmon Line and Pictor are simple but effective methods of enabling people to articulate their construing in a concrete way through visual imagery.

There are many PCP methods that we have not covered here: Laddering and pyramiding, as developed by Hinkle, Landfield and Fransella, Proctor's systemic bow-ties, Jones' core process interviews, Tschudi's ABC, Ravenette's 'Who Are You?', Denicolo's 'Snakes and Rivers' technique. The chapters by DeNicolo and Fransella in the Handbook are essential reading here. We have only focused on a small selection, demonstrating the strong phenomenological credentials of PCP theory and arguing that its methods are epistemologically compatible with the aims of qualitative research. Furthermore, we have argued that in many cases they may produce richer research findings than the usual semi-structured interview.

Finally, an important issue in widening the awareness and appeal of PCP and its methods
concerns dissemination of PCP research in publications and at conferences. This means emphasising PCP methods as qualitative methods in our writing, and it means publishing in a broad spectrum of psychology research journals, particularly those sympathetic to qualitative research. For example:

Qualitative Research
Qualitative Enquiry
Qualitative Health Research
Qualitative Research in Psychology

It also means presenting our work at conferences that are not limited to PCP or constructivist events, and again there are a number in psychology and related disciplines that explicitly invite contributions by qualitative researchers.

In a world where branding and marketing are everyday terms, we think it's time for PCP to 'pour some old wine into new bottles'.

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[i] 1. a semi structured interview, lasting about an hour, in which the subject focuses on the experience in question. This is taped and transcribed (can take up to 6 hours).
2. The researcher reads and re-reads the interview, making comments in the margin
3. These are then organized into themes in the other margin.
4. These are then listed and further organized. So steps 2-4 are a move from subordinate to superordinate themes as seen by the researcher.
5 A number of subjects may be interviewed, possibly 6 or more, and common themes sought.

Despite the theoretical and epistemological differences between these approaches, most have adopted the (unstructured or semi-structured) interview as their 'default' research tool and some form of thematic analysis as an approach to the resultant data.