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Published paper

Birdi, B. (2011) *Investigating fiction reader characteristics using personal construct theory*. *Aslib Proceedings*, 63 (2-3). 275 - 294. ISSN 0001-253X
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/00012531111135709>

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Investigating fiction reader characteristics using personal construct theory

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Structured abstract

Purpose

Using the public library context, presents research identifying perceived characteristics of fiction readers and their associated genres, with a particular emphasis on the reader of Black British and Asian fiction in the English language.

Design/methodology/approach

Applies personal construct theory and the associated repertory grid to a mixed method study involving fifteen repertory grid interviews, conducted with Librarianship Masters students at a UK university.

Findings

Findings regarding the perceived profile of the reader were similar to those reported in previous sociological research, but new constructs emerged regarding certain perceived characteristics of both readers and genres.

Research limitations/implications

Method and findings provide a starting point for future research in materials portraying, and originating from, minority ethnic communities. With more repeated constructs and a larger sample size, future research could statistically investigate the significance of potential trends and apparent relationships between data.

Practical implications

Provides new data regarding the nature and readership of minority ethnic fiction, informing the improvement of its provision and promotion by public libraries.

Social implications

It is hoped that longer-term effects will be to increase both public and professional understanding of fiction written by members of minority ethnic communities, and of its potential contribution to the wider body of literature in the English language.

Originality/value

Applies personal construct theory and the associated repertory grid technique to a new area of research and practice, with new data having been generated concerning the perceived characteristics of fiction genres, and of their readers.

Keywords: personal construct theory, repertory grid, fiction reading and readers, public libraries, minority ethnic fiction.

Classification: research paper.

Investigating reader characteristics using personal construct theory

Recent research conducted by the previous UK government suggests that society is increasingly affected by segregation and minimal contact between communities in the UK (BBC, 2006). A recent study of the 'decline of Britishness' found that white focus group participants referred to a 'perceived separation' between British Muslims and the white British population, and again to 'parallel worlds' they inhabited (ETHNOS, 2006:10). In the wake of terrorist attacks in the UK, few would deny that relations between some Muslim and white communities have become strained. Yet the issue is equally relevant to all British minority ethnic communities (ETHNOS, 2006): sociologist Grillo (2007:979) refers to an overall 'incompatibility of different ways of living', and cites Sartori's (2002) description of an 'excess of alterity' within contemporary Western society.

Operating within this complex environment, the field of public librarianship has been selected as the context for this paper, both because of the intended function of the public library to provide services and reading materials to all members of society (CILIP, 2004), and its perceived role in ameliorating relations between communities (MLA, 2005). It presents findings from a recent study which is part of doctoral research into the reading and promotion of minority ethnic genre fiction in public libraries.

The emergence of 'minority ethnic fiction'

Berry (1976) emphasised the importance of delivering a 'culturally competent' library service, suggesting that minority cultures are not understood in any depth by library staff, and that in addition staff 'seldom learned the languages or collect the literature of these minorities'. Datta and Simsova (1989:43) later commented that readers from minority ethnic communities felt that the library service 'does not care or that it lacks the competence necessary to supply them with the books they want'.

The subject of this paper moves away from the specifically linguistic provision of multicultural resources, to the provision of materials in the English language, and their capacity to reach a wider readership. Historically, fiction in the English language was almost exclusively canonical in nature and Western in focus, a body of work that was central to the cultural dominance of the British Empire. This cultural hegemony is felt by some to exist even today, as although Britain has lost much of its global power, the continued recognition of the literary canon means that 'the weight of antiquity continues to dominate cultural production in much of the post-colonial world' (Ashcroft *et al.*, 1989:7). However, the form of this dominance is changing and, as it is no longer possible to deny the achievements and

impact of post-colonial authors, in particular from South Asia and Africa, there has been a move to incorporate their work within the Western body of literature. As Ashcroft *et al.* suggest, 'the centre has sought to claim those works and writers of which it approves as British' (7). This idea of 'incorporation' is taken further by Rushdie in an essay written in 1983 (Rushdie, 1992), in which he writes of the 'ghetto' into which he and other authors felt themselves to have been placed, writing in the English language, but 'occupying...a position on the periphery' (61) of the body of English literature.

In an exploration of the African American novel, Thompson (2006) further explores this idea of readership, suggesting that although Black fiction is inevitably linked to racial identity, it is not necessarily the case that every African American will seek to read the genre, nor that non-African American readers would not be interested in reading it. As he states, 'race could be among a variety of factors why a patron would want to enjoy reading Black fiction' (xv).

In a UK study of library services in predominantly white areas, Mansoor (2006) found that public library staff from areas with a diverse ethnic profile agreed that library stock should reflect all cultures, but that the views of staff from areas with predominantly white populations were more divided. Overall, however, the concept of multiculturalism, or pluralism, whereby 'incoming' cultures sit alongside existing cultures, was welcomed by respondents as a notion of public library service and stock provision, in particular because of its perceived capacity to increase mutual tolerance and understanding of cultures. This idea was reflected in Kendall's earlier (1992) exploration of multiculturalism in UK public libraries, in which she stated that stereotyped views in predominantly white areas can be challenged by the provision of material by minority ethnic authors.

Research into the capacity of fiction reading to increase intercultural understanding has tended to focus on interaction between children and young people. Elkin and Triggs (1985) claim that the reading by children of multicultural fiction provides a 'route into empathy', and Mar *et al.* (2006:708) suggest that fiction reading is a 'tool' with which to educate children and adults 'about understanding others'. Usherwood and Toyne (2002) reported in a study of the value and impact of reading imaginative literature that adult interviewees felt that fiction reading improved their ability to relate to other people, even that it had increased their understanding of people from other backgrounds and cultures.

Introduction and aims of the study

The overall aim of this research was to conduct an exploration of the concepts underlying different reader ‘types’, and thereby to form a more detailed profile of the reader of minority ethnic fiction. This will be achieved via the following objectives:

- To use a subset of genre classifications commonly used in public libraries to apply personal construct theory and the associated repertory grid technique, in order to investigate the perceived characteristics of the readers of (in particular) minority ethnic English language fiction
- To use the above theory and technique in order to investigate the perceived characteristics of the fiction genres themselves.

Theoretical framework: Personal Construct Theory

Originally presented by George Kelly in 1955 in his groundbreaking work ‘The psychology of personal constructs’ and then developed in the context of clinical psychology, the significance of this approach is today widely acknowledged (Tyler, 1981; Fransella, 2005). Underpinning the new ‘personal construct theory’ was the idea that ‘a person’s processes are psychologically channelized by the ways in which he anticipates events’ (Bell, in Fransella, ed., 2005; Kelly, 1955). In his work Kelly describes this constructivist approach, by which there is no such thing as objective reality.

The principal underpinning this research, therefore, is that our perceived meaning, or interpretation, of these experiences is the influential aspect, and not the event itself. As Banister et al (1994:73) suggest, ‘Kelly’s focus is on the individual as the maker of meaning’. Exploring this constructivist approach in a little more detail, we can look to what is now described as ‘constructive alternativism’, which acknowledges that there are different ways of seeing, of interpreting the same event, and that others are likely to interpret, or construe those events differently from ourselves. The researcher can therefore explore individuals’ construct systems and judge them according to their usefulness in explaining the situation, and not in terms of an absolute truth which, Kelly would argue, does not exist in any case.

The repertory grid

Initially described as the ‘role construct repertory test’, the repertory grid is the most well-known aspect of Kelly’s personal construct theory. In brief, this method is based on three interlinked processes, conducted in the order as stated:

1. The definition of a set of elements
2. The eliciting of a set of constructs to differentiate between those elements

3. The relating of the elements to the constructs (from Bell, in Fransella, ed.,2005).

Repertory grids are generally administered using either dyads (pairs of elements) or triads (groups of three elements), and requesting of the respondent either the difference between, or the opposite of, combinations of these elements. It was Kelly's belief that all constructs are bipolar, in other words that an individual never affirms something without simultaneously denying something else. As Fransella et al suggest, 'this makes the notion of a construct quite different from the notion of a concept...It is in the contrast that the usefulness of the construct subsists' (2004:7-8). In this way, the grid remains entirely personal, as for example two respondents who each give the construct 'is a younger reader' may, when asked to express the polar construct, give quite different responses, such as 'is an elderly reader', or 'is a middle-aged reader'.

Use of the repertory grid in previous research

There is a considerable body of research into the use and value of the repertory grid technique and the wider application of personal construct theory, and aspects of this work can be reviewed in order to inform and justify the present study. The main application of personal construct theory in Information Science has been in information retrieval research. McKnight has used the repertory grid technique and personal construct theory in a number of studies, for example in investigating six researchers' perceptions of texts, and the ways in which they construed those texts (Dillon & McKnight, 1993), and as a means of 'externalising an individual's view of information space' (McKnight, 2000: 730). McKnight describes the repertory grid as an effective means of obtaining 'an individual's view of the various information sources that make up his information space' (McKnight, 2000:732).

Zhang & Chignell (2001) conducted a US/Canadian study that investigated the effects of user characteristics on users' own models of information retrieval systems. The repertory grid was felt to be relevant to research into mental models as it 'identifies individual constructions of experience as the source of a person's behaviour' (447), and enabled an investigation of the ways in which different types of users had different mental models, an issue which the authors felt had not been addressed in previous studies. In the UK, Crudge & Johnson (2004) evaluated the use of the repertory grid technique in eliciting a user's mental model of search engines, and concluded that it is an appropriate technique for 'user-centred determination of evaluative constructs' (794). Furthermore, due to the users' own formulation of constructs, the method was felt to be an effective means of reducing 'unacceptable levels of bias' (802).

The limitations of previous research

Moving beyond personal construct theory, also informative in the development of this study has been previous research in fiction reading, both within the fields of information science and librarianship, and English literature. Spiller (1980) and Yu & O'Brien (1999) investigated public library fiction borrowers (n=500 and n=300 respectively), and each found that a prior knowledge of the author and, to a lesser extent, the genre, were the main considerations in book selection. Outwith the public library environment, Ross (2001) conducted a study of 194 'enthusiastic readers for pleasure' (7), and similarly found that 'the single most important strategy for selection that readers used was to choose a book by a known and trusted author' (14).

It could be summarised that the primary focus of previous research has been on the more 'superficial' aspects of fiction selection, and not on the deeper attitudes and values underlying this process. This research will build on previous research in two principal ways. Firstly, it is investigating in greater depth the attitudes of the individual reader and his or her perceptions of the readers of different fiction genres, acknowledging the complexity of each of these. Moving beyond an exploration of single factors such as the author or book cover, the study is using personal construct theory in order to conduct a more reflexive, holistic investigation of the profile of the fiction reader (in particular the minority ethnic fiction reader). Secondly, many repertory grid studies have involved a relatively small group of participants (sometimes n=1). The methodology involves a complete repertory grid interview with construct elicitation and rating for fifteen participants, in order to increase the validity of the data. In addition, previous research has not tended to combine the analysis of qualitative and quantitative data in order to investigate reader attitudes and perceptions, but this study has been designed with an additional qualitative element of the textual commentary which can be used alongside the quantitative data, in to explore these attitudes and perceptions in far greater depth.

METHODOLOGY

An examination of previous use of the repertory grid technique revealed that it has been associated with both qualitative and quantitative research. Banister et al (1994) suggest that the grid is 'most commonly dealt with quantitatively and often with scant regard for its theoretical background, in a somewhat free-floating fashion' (72), whereas other commentators refer to it as a qualitative method (Marsden & Littler, 2000; Procter, 2002). In fact, the technique can be applied both quantitatively and qualitatively, and a repertory grid can contain both qualitative and quantitative data (Fransella, 2005).

Selected in part for its versatility, the repertory grid was employed in the present study both qualitatively and quantitatively, as follows:

- *Qualitatively*: as a means of facilitating a qualitative interview and exploring the emerging themes (constructs) and the participant's perceptions of those themes.
- *Quantitatively*: as a means of enabling participants to distinguish quantitatively between constructs, and of enabling the researcher to calculate (for example) the frequencies of construct elicitation, and the mean of the various construct ratings.

The research was designed to include a further qualitative element in addition to those listed above. A digital recording was made of each of the fifteen interviews (with the full signed consent of each participant), and the transcriptions of these interviews were used as a means of further exploring the perceptions underpinning the constructs and ratings of the repertory grid. Using this additional element the researcher can understand in more detail the process by which each participant elicited and rated each construct and, crucially, can investigate tensions arising between the 'raw' data in the repertory grid and the commentary, for example considering where constructs or ratings appear to contradict the commentary.

Sample population

Kelly (1955) originally developed the repertory grid for use with a single participant, and certainly it has been used to good effect in this way in more recent studies (Botterill, 1989; Botterill & Crompton, 1987). However, the flexibility of the technique in collecting and analysing group data has also been noted (Bannister & Fransella, 1971; Pike, 2003).

A purposive sampling method was used for the repertory grid interviews, an essentially strategic means of reaching the most relevant sample population. The study was seeking to investigate the perceptions of librarianship postgraduate students, both in terms of their experience as library staff (each of them had previously worked in an academic, special and/or public library for at least one year) and their own perceptions as readers. Their appropriateness as participants related to the anticipated relevance to them of the elements (fiction genres) and the overall concept of fiction reading, within the overall context of librarianship (Banister et al, 1994).

Fifteen repertory grid interviews were conducted in February-March 2008 with Librarianship Masters students at the University of Sheffield. Each interview involved the elicitation and rating of personal constructs, plus a subsequent discussion of the experience of participating in the process, and of aspects of the participant's previous public library work. All interviews

were digitally recorded, transcribed and one third of participants were involved in a subsequent member checking process.

The selection of elements

Whereas certain repertory grid studies have used ‘personal elements’, whereby the interviewee is asked to identify his or her own list of elements before eliciting constructs, the present study used ‘provided elements’, in other words a list provided by the interviewer for consideration by the interviewee. This method was felt to be more appropriate for this study, as the grids can be more easily compared when elements are identical across each interview (Goffin, 2002; Fransella et al, 2004).

Eleven elements were used for the repertory grid, namely ‘the reader of’ ten fiction genres (listed below) and ‘myself as reader’ as the final element, used for rating purposes only and not within the triads. The wording of the elements was critical to the overall success of the study; as Fransella et al (2004) suggest, the majority of previous repertory grid research has employed role titles for its elements. Similarly, Wright & Lam (2002) found that elements were more effective when worded as ‘-ing words or doing words’ (113), so as actions rather than as abstract concepts which may not be as easy for the participant to understand, or to relate to. The decision was therefore taken to word the elements as roles with specific actions related to them, as shown below:

- Reader of Science Fiction/ Fantasy fiction
- Reader of LGBT fiction
- Reader of War/Spy fiction
- Reader of Romance fiction
- Reader of Lad Lit fiction
- Reader of Crime fiction
- Reader of Chick Lit fiction
- Reader of Asian fiction (in English)
- Reader of Literary fiction
- Reader of Black British fiction.

The inclusion of the additional element ‘myself as reader’ in the rating process has two main advantages. Firstly, it adds depth to the research data, enabling the researcher to understand a little more about the participant, how he or she views himself or herself as a reader and the context in which he or she frames his responses. Secondly, as each interviewee was asked to

state which of the ten fiction genres he or she chose to read, these data can be compared with data from the 'myself as reader' rating to see if participants viewed themselves as 'typical' readers of the genres in question. For example, if an interviewee states that he or she usually reads Black British fiction, we can look at the ratings he or she gave for each construct for that particular element, to see where similarities and differences lie.

Triads selected for the repertory grid

Given that the focus of the research on minority ethnic fiction, it was important that the triads offered to participants included sufficient representation of the elements 'Reader of Asian fiction in English' and 'Reader of Black British fiction.' As Banister et al (1994) suggest, the elements can be chosen either randomly or systematically, therefore a systematic approach was adopted by which all participants were given the same set of ten triads, in twice in the process, that all were sufficiently rotated and that there was sufficient inclusion of the minority fiction genres, and it also increased the consistency of the overall approach. The triads are listed below, in the order that they were presented to participants:

1. Reader of: Crime/Black British/Romance fiction
2. Reader of: Lad Lit/Crime /Chick Lit fiction
3. Reader of: Black British/Asian fiction in English/Literary fiction
4. Reader of: Lad Lit/War & Spy/Crime fiction
5. Reader of: Asian fiction in English/Black British/LGBT fiction
6. Reader of: Black British/Literary/Science fiction & Fantasy fiction
7. Reader of: Science fiction & Fantasy/Asian fiction in English/Lad Lit fiction
8. Reader of: LGBT/Romance/War & Spy fiction
9. Reader of: Asian fiction in English/Black British/Science fiction & Fantasy fiction
10. Reader of: LGBT/Chick Lit/Romance fiction.

As each triad was presented to the participant, he or she was asked to describe a way in which two of the three elements were alike in some way, but different from the third. Having elicited this construct (the implicit construct), the polar construct was then requested, in other words a way in which the third element is perceived to be different from the other two. During the elicitation process, the implicit and polar constructs were recorded in the grid by the researcher, and when all triads had been presented and all constructs noted down, the grid was passed to the participant so that each construct could be rated.

The rating of constructs

Kelly's original repertory grid used a binary ranking system, by which the participant would be asked to tick each element to which the construct applied. However, this approach has been found to limit the data analysis (Bannister, 1959; Fransella et al, 2004), and certainly the pilot research for this study would confirm this. A second possible means of rating the constructs is the rankings method, by which participants are asked to allocate a number within a stated range (e.g. 1-10 if 10 elements in the grid) to each element in order to indicate strength of feeling. Yet this method can also be restrictive in that it can 'force the elements to be uniformly distributed across the construct' (Fransella et al, 2004:59), by insisting that participants use each number only once. Pope & Keen (1981) also suggest that ranking the constructs can be tedious and time-consuming for participants.

For the present study it was decided to use an ordinal scale, whereby participants are given a number within a range such as 1-3, 1-5, 1-7, etc. Unlike the previous method, different elements can be given the same number for the construct in question, and other numbers may not be selected at all. Banister et al (1994:77) report that the use of a scale in this way can lead to a 'slightly more subtle picture' in the data analysis, as the figures selected will be more relevant to the individual. A 7-point ordinal scale was selected, with possible values ranging from 1 to 7 inclusive. The numbers selected by the participants have no meaning in themselves, but provide a means by which to position elements in relation to each of the constructs, thereby resulting in 'a slightly richer picture' (Banister et al, 1994:77).

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The research findings presented in this paper consist of the grid data - namely the constructs elicited during the repertory grid interviews, and their grouping and ratings – and the qualitative data collected during the interviews as a whole. From the fifteen repertory grids that were administered a total of 128 constructs were provided of a possible total of 150, with a mean number of constructs of 8.5 per interviewee. In order to manage and interpret this large volume of data, thematic analysis was used to group constructs initially by codes relating to similarity of meaning, and then to count the frequency of different code occurrences as a means of identifying key areas for the analysis (Crabtree & Miller, 1999).

Thematic analysis involves the development of a coding template that identifies a series of hierarchical (and parallel) themes in the data through repeated reading of the interview transcripts. As shown in **Table 1**, the themes have been organised into high-order and low-order codes, the first which correspond to broader themes in the data, and the second which represent more narrowly focused themes. An equal emphasis has deliberately been placed on

the range as well as the frequency of themes, in line with the intended focus of personal construct theory.

Combined constructs

Perhaps inevitably, a number of the constructs elicited contained multiple aspects, such as ‘Would tend to be a middle-aged woman’, which could be grouped either under ‘age’ or ‘gender’. Where possible and where appropriate, this multiplicity was reduced via the laddering technique, described by Tan & Hunter (2002:7) as ‘drilling down into the construct in order to determine the research participant’s underlying assumptions and interpretations of the label associated with the construct’. In its simplest form, it involves the careful use of questioning to enable the participant to elaborate on the elicited construct, and as such is of value in conducting the present study. However, for some triads it was clearly very difficult for participants to prioritise in this way, and they felt that each aspect was of equal importance in expressing the construct. For the grouping of such cases, it was felt to be misleading to simply ‘remove’ part of the construct, and where such a construct could reasonably be assigned to more than one category, it would be ‘dual categorized’, as per the recommendation of Cassell and Walsh (2004:66). It is for this reason that the total number of construct frequencies given in the analysis is 142, rather than 128.

Breadth and depth in construct analysis

It is important to note that the analysis of constructs should not only take into account the most frequently elicited, but should also consider the breadth of participants’ views. Goffin (2002:218) makes the point that ‘the most frequently mentioned constructs are not necessarily the most important’, and in their study of barriers to women’s progression in the publishing industry, Cassell & Walsh (2004:66) describe concerns they felt when using the frequency of constructs as an indicator of relevance:

‘...this raises an issue of how we were using numbers in that we were assuming that because a construct was used by a larger number of interviewees it had more salience to the respondents as a whole...But where does this leave us epistemologically?’

Adopting a constructivist approach as per Kelly’s original theory (Kelly, 1955) the focus of the analysis of repertory grid data should remain on the individual and how he or she construes the world in which he or she lives. As Cassell & Walsh (2004:66) suggest, ‘it could be argued that aggregating responses to be able to say things about groups does deviate from Kelly’s stance’. However, for the analysis of the present study, a pragmatic decision has been

taken to continue to aggregate data in order to interpret the large number of responses collected, while at the same time maintaining an interest in range as well as frequency.

Further construct groupings

In an attempt to understand the range of constructs elicited and what they can reveal about the perceived and actual characteristics of the readers of minority genre fiction, thematic analysis was used to group constructs initially by codes relating to similarity of meaning, and then to count the frequency of different code occurrences as a means of identifying key areas for the analysis (Crabtree & Miller, 1999). The initial set of themes (factors) perceived to influence the reader of genre fiction was n=29. The second stage of analysis identified five broad themes (high-order codes), within which more narrow and focused subordinate themes (lower-order codes) were also identified. The first two of these themes relate directly to the personal profile of the reader, and the last three to his or her reading interests and preferences. The sections which follow will present each theme and its respective codes with supporting data from the interview transcripts and construct ratings, further sub-dividing the constructs into ‘generalisable’ and ‘idiosyncratic’ themes.

In conducting this analysis, care was taken to avoid wrongly grouping constructs which may use similar terms, but have quite different meanings. For example, a distinction was made between the descriptions of readers as ‘looking for an easy read’ and those who were ‘looking for a light read’: the polar construct of ‘easy’ was ‘challenging’, whereas that of ‘light’ was ‘serious’, which clearly relate to two quite distinct aspects of fiction reading. The template is given in **Table 1** below:

Table 1. High-order and lower-order codes (themes) identified by thematic analysis, with their frequencies

Themes	Frequency
PERCEIVED PROFILE OF THE READER	
1. Gender	19
2. Age	8
3. Class	2
i. Income	2
ii. Education	1
4. Membership of a minority group	9
PERCEIVED CHARACTERISTICS OF THE READER	
1. Is an avid reader	3
2. Would define him/herself as a fan of a genre/specialist	2
3. Browsing habits	3
4. Looking for a mainstream read	3

5. Interest in contemporary novels	2
6. Feels obliged to follow fashion in reading choices	2
7. Others' perceptions of this reader i. <i>Is highly thought of by other readers</i> ii. <i>Would experience prejudice in searching for a book</i>	3
PREFERRED NATURE OF PLOT	
1. Looking for an easy (non-challenging) read	14
2. Looking for a light read (for pleasure)	7
3. Interest in escapism (not reality)	12
4. Looking to identify with the plot/characters	7
5. Looking for a predictable plot	6
6. Looking for a happy ending	4
7. Looking for thrills/entertainment	2
8. Looking for humour in plot	1
SUBJECT INTERESTS	
1. Interest in ethnicity i. <i>Interest in other cultural backgrounds</i> ii. <i>Concern for author's cultural background</i>	8
2. Interest in other people i. <i>Interest in another person's lifestyle</i> ii. <i>Interest in personal issues and complex relationship</i>	3
3. Interest in societal issues	3
4. Interest in sexuality i. <i>Interest in plots with homosexual characters</i>	1
PREFERRED GENRES	
Interest in multiple genres	7
Interest in romantic novels	6
Interest in myth/fantasy	1
Interest in historical context	1
Total number of constructs elicited (including dual categorisations)	142

Examples of two of these lower-order themes are shown below, in **Table 2**.

Table 2. Examples of two lower-order codes (themes) from the analysis template

Theme	Constructs	Polar constructs
Interest in societal issues	Is likely to be from, and interested in, British society Is interested in societal issues Is interested in society	Is not likely to be from, or interested in, British society Is not interested in societal issues Is not interested in society
Interest in multiple genres	Would be interested in multiple genres Would be keen to try other genres Would read other genres too, would not necessarily be looking to identify with content Is interested in multiple genres Is interested in all genres of	Would not be interested in multiple genres Would not be keen to try other genres Would tend to read only this genre, would be looking to identify with content Is looking for one genre only in selecting fiction Is interested in just one genre of

	fiction Would read any genre Is interested in multiple genres	fiction Would only read one genre Is interested only in one genre
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Generalisable themes

As **Table 1** illustrates, just six of the themes were elicited by the majority of respondents (n \geq 8), three of which are briefly explored below:

- Gender (n=19)
- Membership of a minority group (n=9)
- Interest in ethnicity (n=8)
- Age (n=8).
- Looking for an easy/challenging read (n=14)
- Interest in escapism/reality (n=12).

Gender

As illustrated above, the most frequently cited construct (n=19) related to the perceived gender of the element (genre fiction reader) in question. It is perhaps unsurprising that gender was so frequently considered by respondents, given that it is one of the primary factors by which we categorise ourselves and others in society (Gross, 2005). In addition, although gender stereotypes have been found to have little empirical support (Durkin, 1995; Gross, 2005), research suggests that they remain prevalent in many societies (Williams & Best, 1994). Specifically in the field of fiction reading, previous research has suggested that gender is frequently used to differentiate between reading groups. Tepper (2000:255-256) reports, for example, that reading is ‘a past time that is closely linked to gender...men and women have different preferences for the types of books they read’, and that there remains today ‘a large gender gap in reading...the gap is striking when we examine fiction reading’.

Table 3. Mean ratings of ‘gender’ constructs and fiction reader elements (1=male, 7=female)

	n	Minimum	Maximum	Mean
Gender Sci-fi/Fantasy fiction reader	12	1.00	4.00	2.25**
Gender LGBT fiction reader	12	4.00	6.00	4.25
Gender Romance fiction reader	12	5.00	7.00	6.58***
Gender Lad Lit reader	12	1.00	4.00	1.92**

Gender Crime fiction reader	12	3.00	5.00	3.83
Gender Chick Lit reader	12	1.00	7.00	6.25**
Gender Asian fiction in English reader	12	4.00	6.00	4.17
Gender Literary fiction reader	12	3.00	5.00	4.08
Gender War/Spy fiction reader	12	1.00	3.00	2.00***
Gender Black British fiction reader	12	4.00	5.00	4.17
*p <.05				
**p<.01				
***p<.001				

Table 3 shows the mean ratings for the perceived gender of different reader types; significance levels for mean scores are derived from sign tests evaluating whether the mean ratings deviated significantly from the midpoint of 4 on the scale 1-7, i.e. showing no preference for male or female. As the findings show, participants felt that the readers of Romance fiction (mean = 6.58, $p < .001$) and Chick Lit (mean = 6.25, $p < .01$) were far more likely to be female than male. Conversely, the readers of Lad Lit (mean = 1.92, $p < .01$), War/Spy fiction (mean = 2.00, $p < .001$) and, to a slightly lesser extent, Science-fiction/Fantasy fiction (mean = 2.25, $p < .01$), were more likely to be male than female. These findings generally correspond to previous research in the field (Kraaykamp & Kijkstra, 1999; Tepper, 2000).

Respondents had less strong feelings regarding the Crime fiction reader, who was slightly more likely to be male (mean = 3.83, ns), and regarded the four remaining genre readers (LGBT fiction, Asian fiction in English, Literary fiction, Black British fiction) as almost equally as likely to be male as female, with ratings ranging between 4.08 (ns) for Literary fiction, and 4.25 (ns) for LGBT fiction. Interestingly, the means for the readers of Asian fiction in English and Black British fiction were identical, at a midpoint 4.17 (ns), although the range of scores for each differed slightly (4.00-6.00 for Asian fiction in English, 4.00-5.00 for Black British fiction), and suggested that participants felt that the readers were somewhat more likely to be female than male.

Exploring the constructs in a little more detail, it is useful to consider definitions of the wider term ‘stereotype’, which is described by Tagiuri (1969) as a means of categorising an individual ‘according to some easily and quickly identifiable characteristics such as age, sex, ethnic membership, nationality or occupation, and then to attribute to him qualities believed

to be typical to members of that category’, and later by Hogg & Vaughan (1995) as ‘widely shared assumptions...based on group membership, for example ethnicity, nationality, sex, race and class’. Given these and similar definitions, it is also unsurprising that in addition to gender the concepts of ethnicity, age and class were also included in the constructs elicited, the first two of these within the five most frequently elicited.

Membership of a minority group

The constructs elicited by nine participants related to the reader of the particular fiction genre being either a member of a minority group, or being specifically ‘non-white’. In one case, the minority described was sexual *or* ethnic (RG14), and in eight cases was exclusively ethnic. Eight of the nine participants described the readers of ‘Asian fiction in English’ or ‘Black British fiction’ in terms of belonging to a minority group, which is unsurprising given the above definitions of stereotyping. Interestingly, however, when presented with the triad ‘Reader of: Asian fiction in English/Black British/LGBT fiction’, RG14 separated ‘Reader of LGBT fiction’ as she felt that the main prejudice would be towards this reader and not towards the reader of the first two:

‘I would say that...someone reading those [Black British fiction/Asian fiction] could be from that background or, you know, an outside person, not in that group but would probably read those out of interest and would want to find out, but I still think there’s quite a lot of prejudice around gay literature and things like that, and while stereotyping, the people who would read that are probably within that, you know, group, whereas these two [Black British fiction/Asian fiction] probably more people from other groups would try.’

Age

Another frequently elicited construct related to the perceived age of the readers of different fiction genres. The readers of ‘Lad Lit’, ‘Chick Lit’, ‘Science fiction/fantasy fiction’, ‘LGBT fiction’ and, to a lesser extent, ‘Black British fiction’ and ‘Asian fiction in English’, were most commonly described as more likely to be younger, whereas the readers of the more established fiction genres – ‘Crime fiction’, ‘Romance fiction’, ‘War/spy fiction’ were usually described as more likely to be older, as the following comments illustrate:

‘Again, I think in some ways those two [Black British/Asian] are more likely to be younger, actually...and again, that [Literary fiction] would be a mixture of ages, I would think.’ (RG06)

‘In my experience the readers of Crime fiction and the readers of Romance fiction tend to be middle-aged, or older women, who won’t necessarily pick up Black British fiction.’ (RG02)

The construct ratings suggested that the readers of Black British fiction or Asian fiction in English could be younger *or* older, with a midpoint mean rating of 4.14 for Asian fiction in English, and 3.86 for Black British fiction.

Idiosyncratic themes and their ratings

As stated above, the analysis of constructs elicited for this study has taken into account not only the generalisable constructs, but also the full range of participant constructs - however idiosyncratic or atypical they may be - as per the intended original focus of Kelly’s (1955) personal construct theory.

As **Table 1** illustrates, many constructs were elicited by a small number of participants – in five cases by one participant only - but are nonetheless of potential relevance to the overall interpretation of findings. These can be grouped according to the five high-order codes identified by thematic analysis, and two such examples are given below:

Perceived profile of the reader

Regarding the reader’s profile, two participants referred to his/her perceived class, two to his/her perceived income and one to his/her perceived educational attainment, with the following constructs:

Class

‘More likely to be middle-class’ [Asian/Black British fiction, not LGBT fiction] (RG06)

‘Would tend to be middle-class, white, middle-aged’ [LGBT fiction, not Romance/War & Spy fiction] (RG02).

Income

‘Is likely to be (younger), with a reasonable income’ [Chick/Lad Lit, not Crime fiction] (RG05).

‘(Not looking for humour,) not likely to be SINK [Single Income No Kids]’ [Chick/Lad Lit, not Crime fiction] (RG08).

Education

‘More likely to be educated to degree level or higher’ [Literary fiction, not Black British or Sci-Fi/fantasy fiction] (RG12).

Considering the five constructs listed above, each could be described as referring either directly to class, or to one or more of the factors determining an individual's perceived class status. It is notable that one third of participants described a relationship between fiction reading and class, which may at first appear to be two quite unrelated concepts. However, a body of research has been conducted into the sociology of reading which provides some empirical evidence of this relationship: Sharon (1974, in Kraaykamp & Dijkstra, 1999: 205), for example, found that US readers from higher socio-economic status groups 'preferred more complex and prestigious genres, like biographical and historical novels, whereas the lowest status groups were more interested in religious reading and romantic fiction.' A French study conducted by Bourdieu (1984) suggested that Romance fiction and Crime fiction were popular among working class people, whereas those from the upper classes preferred what he described as 'modern authors', a term he regarded as equivalent to '(contemporary) literary fiction'. Similarly, Van Rees et al (1999:354) suggest that 'literary books' and 'popular books' (traditional genres such as Romance fiction or Crime fiction) refer to 'highbrow' and 'lowbrow' reading respectively. In an attempt to determine why readers from 'the higher social strata' (228) are perceived as preferring 'more complex and prestigious books' than those from the lower classes, Kraaykamp and Dijkstra (1999) conducted a national survey of Dutch fiction reading, and found unsurprisingly that readers with a higher educational attainment (one of the indicators of class) read more complex books than those who did not. They also found that social motives and status were meaningful for book reading preferences, indicating that the reading of 'complex and prestigious books...serves as an alternative pathway used to gain social status' (228).

Although three of the above constructs were not elicited with specific reference to Asian or Black British fiction, in developing the profile of the minority genre fiction reader it is useful to look at the grid ratings for these two elements by each of the five participants. Participant RG06 felt that the readers were equally likely to be middle class, giving each genre a '5' rating, where 1 is 'not likely to be middle class', and 7 is 'very likely to be middle class'. Similarly, RG02 felt that the readers were equally likely to be 'middle class, white and middle-aged', also giving each genre a '5' rating.

Regarding the perceived income of the two readers, RG05 gave both a '4' rating, suggesting that they were each no more likely to have a particularly low or high income. Focusing on a different aspect of income, RG08 suggested that the two readers were not particularly likely to be 'SINK' (Single Income, No Kids), giving each a '3' rating, where 1 = 'Not likely to be SINK', and 7 = 'Very likely to be SINK'.

Participant RG12 gave quite different ratings for each of the two minority fiction genres for the construct ‘More likely to be educated to degree level or higher’: where 1 is ‘Not likely to be educated to degree level or higher’ and 7 is ‘Very likely to be educated to degree level or higher’, he rated ‘Reader of Asian fiction in English’ as ‘1’, and ‘Reader of Black British fiction’ as ‘4’. This is perhaps surprising, given the perceived links in the findings between literary fiction and minority genre fiction (examples below), and the perceived relationship in previous research between literary fiction reading and class/education:

‘I suppose again with stereotypes that would make me consider that those [Black British fiction, Literary fiction] are more sort of literary and middle class again ... I suppose ‘high brow’ is the word I’m looking for, yes. I mean, I don’t think like that but I think that would be the perception...’ (RG06)

‘To be honest, most of the Asian fiction in English and the Black British fiction that I could say I was familiar with, they kind of cross over into Literary fiction.’ (RG07)

Perceived characteristics of the reader: *Looking for a mainstream read*

Two participants, considering the first triad ‘Reader of: Crime/Black British/Romance fiction’, separated the Black British fiction reader from the other two, as they regarded him/her as less likely to be looking for a ‘mainstream’ novel. In her construct ratings, RG03 felt that both readers were equally likely to be ‘less mainstream’, with a rating of ‘5’ on a scale where 1 is ‘More interested in plot than style, looking for entertainment’, and 7 is ‘More interested in style than plot, not so mainstream’. Having described the Black British fiction reader as less likely to be looking for a mainstream novel, RG10 changed her mind when rating all elements for this construct, giving both genres a mid-point rating of ‘4’. As she commented while rating the element ‘Asian fiction in English’ for the construct ‘Looking for a mainstream novel’ (1) / ‘Not looking for a mainstream novel’ (7):

‘It’s difficult, because it doesn’t tell you anything about what the story’s about, just knowing that it’s Asian fiction... what’s mainstream to them isn’t necessarily mainstream to someone else. So it’s really hard...! I’m going to give it a really non-committal ‘4’.’

A third participant (RG11) felt that Black British fiction was ‘a bit more mainstream’ than Asian fiction in English, although the final stated construct was that the Asian reader ‘Is more likely to be a member of a minority group’ than the readers of Black British fiction or Science fiction/fantasy fiction.

In the examples described above, neither Black British fiction nor Asian fiction in English were regarded as clearly belonging to ‘mainstream’ fiction. Yet what is ‘mainstream’, in this context? Two not entirely unrelated interpretations seem to emerge from the above repertory grid interviews: firstly, the term could describe a novel which is more concerned with plot and entertainment than literary style – more in line, perhaps, with the traditional genres of Romance fiction, Crime fiction, War & Spy fiction, etc. Certainly, Nicholls (1995) would agree that ‘mainstream’ fiction can be distinguished from other fiction of ‘seriousness’, although a US fiction guide for booksellers and librarians, subtitled ‘A guide to mainstream fiction, 1990-2001’ (Pearl, 2002: ix) gives an alternative name for ‘mainstream fiction’ as ‘literary fiction’, which ‘may have genre elements (e.g. historical, adventure)’, but may equally be more complex in terms of plot and/or style. Interestingly, Pearl (2002: xviii) also comments on the ‘recent trend’ in mainstream fiction of ‘the appreciation for literature exploring other cultures and countries, including the immigrant experience’, a grouping into which both Asian fiction in English and Black British fiction could reasonably be incorporated.

The second apparent interpretation is that ‘mainstream’ could refer to the reading material of the ‘majority’, whether in terms of an ethnic majority or simply its overall popularity with the reading public as a whole. This would be in line with the Oxford English Dictionary (2010), which defines the term as ‘the prevailing trend of opinion, fashion, society, etc.’, and certainly this would be in line with the interpretation of Participant RG11.

DISCUSSION

Repertory grid interviews were conducted with fifteen participants, from which 128 discrete constructs were elicited. Although the conflict between constructivist theory and the aggregation of personal constructs was acknowledged, a pragmatic decision was taken to group the data in order to interpret this otherwise unmanageable quantity, concentrating on the range as well as the frequency of responses. An adapted version of thematic analysis was used to subdivide the data into 29 themes, six of which were found to be generalisable (elicited by the majority of respondents).

Three of the six generalisable constructs and their ratings appeared to correspond to definitions of stereotyping given in the literature (Tagiuri, 1969; Hogg & Vaughan, 1995), with particular reference to the genre fiction reader’s perceived gender, age and membership of a minority group. Interestingly, although clear views emerged regarding the gender and age of the more ‘established’ fiction genres such as Romance fiction, Crime fiction and War/Spy

fiction, participants indicated that the readers of minority genres Asian fiction in English and Black British fiction would be almost equally likely to be male as female, and that their age group was no more clearly defined. Stronger views were held regarding these readers' membership of a minority group, and a link was frequently – although not inevitably - made between minority ethnicity and one's preference for minority fiction.

The 29 grouped constructs (lower-order codes) were further rearranged into five new categories (high-order codes) according to certain characteristics of the reader, related either to his or her personal profile or to his or her reading interests and preferences. The deeper level of investigation facilitated by the repertory grid technique used in this study revealed far more about both the reader and genre fiction than had been possible in the previous study. In an attempt to understand not only the frequency but also the range of constructs elicited and what they can reveal about the readership of minority genre fiction, a further qualitative exploration was then made of the idiosyncratic constructs elicited as per each of the five groupings. This stage of the analysis was felt to be more in line with Kelly's (1955) original personal construct theory than the previous, aggregated approach to analysis.

Findings regarding the perceived profile of the reader were similar to those reported in previous sociological research, indicating for example that a relationship was perceived by one third of participants between fiction reading and class. A lack of certainty again emerged regarding the readers of genres 'Asian fiction in English' and 'Black British fiction' and their class membership (including levels of income and education), but it does appear that the link made in previous research between a higher social class/educational attainment/income and Literary fiction is also perceived by some to exist with reference to these two minority fiction genres.

New constructs emerged regarding the perceived characteristics of the reader, for example that neither Black British fiction nor Asian fiction in English were regarded as clearly belonging to 'mainstream' fiction, whether the term was interpreted as 'non-serious' fiction such as the more established genres Romance fiction, Crime fiction, etc., or as 'majority' fiction, enjoyed by the reading public as a whole.

In exploring the readers' preferred plot it can be inferred that, given the similar ratings frequently made across the constructs to the two genres and Literary fiction, the minority fiction genres are perceived as sharing similar characteristics to a more established, perhaps culturally broader genre which includes both classic (older) and contemporary novels. All

three readers were felt to be likely to be looking for a more ‘challenging’, ‘mind-exercising’ reading experience, and to be generally more interested in literary style than the plot itself.

Applying personal construct theory and the associated repertory grid technique, this study has generated valuable data concerning the perceived characteristics of fiction genres, and of their readers. Public library staff with an understanding of the nature of the readers of fiction written by members of minority ethnic communities, and of the nature of the material they choose to read, are arguably more likely to devise effective reading promotions – and sustainable reading practices – via which to celebrate cultural diversity.

In conclusion, the study presented in this paper has demonstrated that the repertory grid is an effective means of generating and exploring a series of constructs relating to the characteristics of fiction genres and their readers. By examining tables of constructs and their frequencies, the study has facilitated the understanding of those constructs and the values and attitudes underpinning them. Although valuable in qualitative terms, the main limitations of this research have been the difficulty of comparing participant ratings given that so many different constructs were elicited (n=128 before grouping), that there was a relatively small number of repeated constructs, and that the sample size was too small for meaningful statistical analysis (n=15). In order to statistically investigate the actual significance of potential trends and apparent relationships between data, further research is required. This will involve the rating of a series of identical (provided) constructs by a larger number of participants, in order to test the extent to which the constructs differentiate between individual readers and genres. Furthermore, this second phase of the research will progress from investigating the idiosyncracies of individual participant response to a primary focus on the generalisability of the population response.

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