Reperatory grid technique
An interpretive research framework

David Marsden
Napier University Business School, Edinburgh, Scotland, UK

Dale Littler
Manchester School of Management, UMIST, Manchester, UK

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Abstract Examines some of the underlying assumptions, research objectives and practical applications of the reperatory grid technique (RGT) in consumer research. It explains why the use and evaluation of the RGT should be grounded in the assumptions of the theory from which it derives, George Kelly’s personal construct psychology (PCP), and examines the way in which it is both congruent with and can contribute to the development of the emerging interpretive paradigm in consumer research. The specific questions that the RGT can help to answer about consumer behaviour experience are identified and illustrated with the findings from a short empirical study. Overall, it is argued that when the RGT is employed within the guidelines of PCP it provides a useful interpretive research framework for exploring some of the similarities and differences in the content and structure of consumers’ subjective meaning systems.

Introduction
Although the reperatory grid technique (RGT) has widely been employed as a qualitative method in consumer research over the last 30 years (for reviews, see Hallsworth, 1988; Jankowicz, 1990), its overall empirical contribution to the field forms a less than integrated body of knowledge and the theory from which it derives, George Kelly’s (1955) personal construct psychology (PCP), has been largely ignored (Earl, 1986; May, 1981; Stewart, 1990). Indeed, the RGT has attracted much criticism over the years for, among other things, generating “utterly valueless” and “irrelevant” information from consumers (Sampson, 1972; Gordon and Langmaid, 1988), for its “inherent complexity” and “slavish adherence” to the notion of bipolar constructs (Reynolds and Gutman, 1984; Frost, 1982), and, finally, for not being based on an “adequate theory” of human behaviour (Grunert et al., 1995). The consensus appears to be, therefore, that the RGT has “limited use” as a qualitative method in consumer research (Rice, 1993). In response to these criticisms, Chisnall (1992, p. 178) contends:

Further consideration of construct theory in the marketing sphere is called for; the intellectual attractions of Kellian techniques need to be tested in some length before they can be expected to win support of practical researchers.

In this paper, however, it is argued that the failure of the RGT to reach its full potential in consumer research is, to some extent, a product of the limited and somewhat confused way in which qualitative methods in general have traditionally been used and evaluated in the field (cf. Murray and Evers, 1989). In particular, it is argued that various operational and conceptual misunderstandings have resulted from the attempt to incorporate, or graft, the
RGT onto the dominant “positivist” paradigm in consumer research (Fransella et al., 1988). As we shall see, this is because PCP actually derives from the alternative “interpretive” paradigm which is based on a different set of assumptions about the nature of consumer experience (ontology) and ways of representing it (Marsden, 1997). Traditional positivist textbook criteria (e.g. “objectivity”, Hallsworth, 1988) are largely irrelevant and not helpful in clarifying the usefulness of the RGT, therefore, because as Shrivastava (1985, p. 77) reminds us the evaluations of research methods “need to be grounded in the assumptions of their underlying paradigm”. In an attempt to provide the first step towards meeting this end, the aim of this paper is to examine the way in which the RGT can be used as an interpretive research framework for exploring consumer behaviour experience and is structured as follows. The first section examines the relationship between the assumptions of PCP and those of the interpretive paradigm. This provides the basis for the second section which first identifies the research objectives of the RGT and then illustrates these with the findings from a short empirical study. Some of the general benefits and limitations of the RGT are then discussed in the final section.

**Basic assumptions**
In order to fully understand and properly evaluate the repertory grid technique (RGT) in consumer research it is important to examine the assumptions of the theory that underpins it, George Kelly’s (1955) personal construct psychology (PCP) (cf. Maykut and Moorehouse, 1994). These not only provide the guidelines for using the RGT in practice, but they also help to understand the criticisms made against it because as this section will show although traditionally employed within the positivist paradigm the assumptions of PCP are consistent with those of the interpretive paradigm (Reason and Rowen, 1981). Very briefly, the interpretive paradigm emerged in consumer research in the early 1980s in response to growing criticisms of the deterministic theories of consumer behaviour (e.g. cognitive, behavioural, trait) and reductionistic methods of inquiry (i.e. quantitative) associated with the traditional positivist paradigm (Kassarjian, 1994). While the former were criticised for depicting consumers as passive organisms simply responding to marketing stimuli the latter were accused of ignoring much of the complexity and richness of experience (Dholakia and Arndt, 1985).

In response to these criticisms, interpretive researchers began to systematically explore the nature and form of consumer subjectivity (e.g. Hirschman, 1986), particularly regarding the process of meaning construction, the nature and form of individual and shared meaning systems and ways of representing these phenomena through naturalistic (e.g. qualitative) research strategies (O’Shaughnessy and Holbrook, 1988). However, although some contend that the interpretive paradigm is now well established in consumer research (e.g. Holbrook, 1995), many scholars continue to question both the “trustworthiness” of its assumptions and the “usefulness” of its knowledge
products (Joy, 1994). To what extent, therefore, is PCP congruent with, and more importantly, in what ways can it contribute to the further development of the interpretive paradigm in consumer research?

Process of meaning making

First of all, PCP is consistent with the interpretive paradigm’s focus on exploring the psychological processes that people use to make sense of their material and social environments as Mick and Buhl (1992, p. 318) point out: “Philosophers such as Merleau-Ponty and Sartre and psychologists such as Allport and Kelly have observed that people structure their goals and means in an effort to create coherence in their lives” (cf. Ritson and Elliot, 1995). In contrast with the dominant deterministic theories of consumer behaviour, therefore, PCP maintains that a person’s understanding of the world is the result of an active, constructive process rather than a passive reaction to some external reality (Mahoney, 1988; Ross and Nisbett, 1991). Importantly, however, PCP suggests that this understanding is achieved through the process of contrast and similarity, what Kelly (1955) termed “construing”, as Eden and Jones (1984, p. 779) explain:

We construe situations by seeking to differentiate them from others and see them as similar to others; it is only through such a process that we give meaning to events, that they have significance.

Psychologically, then, contrast is essential to understanding and clarifying a person’s subjective meanings (Duck, 1994). Interestingly, many interpretive researchers recognise the importance that contrast plays in the process of meaning construction such as Hall (1997, p. 17) who contends that “we use the principles of similarity and difference to establish relationships between concepts or to distinguish them from one another”. Semiotic theory, for example, suggests that the meaning of a word (the signifier) is not produced by the word itself or the concept it refers to (the signified), but by its binary opposite in the wider language system (e.g. day) to which it belongs (O’Shaughnessy and Holbrook, 1988). The attraction of the general notion of construing, however, is that it abandons the classical tripartite division of experience into rational, emotional and behavioural components as reflected, for example, in the plethora of cognitive (Lazarus, 1991) and affective (Zajonc, 1984) “prime-mover” models of consumer behaviour (for a review, see Barry and Howard, 1990). Moreover, it also contrasts with the interpretive paradigm’s focus on emotional experiences (e.g. Holbrook, 1995) which tends to reinforce this reductionistic world view because as Banister et al. (1994, p. 89) point out: “Construing is not thinking or feeling but an act of discrimination that may take place at many levels of awareness, from intuitive thought to verbal, which then enables us to anticipate future events”. The process of construing, therefore, involves the unification of all our senses and it is when this process fails to make sense of the world or is in transition that we experience emotions
(Burr and Butt, 1992). The first contribution that PCP can make to the interpretive paradigm, therefore, is that it offers a more holistic understanding of the process of meaning making (Neimeyer, 1993).

**Content and structure of meaning**

The second feature of PCP concerns the term that Kelly (1955) gave to understanding the personally meaningful distinctions with which a view of the world is constructed: “bipolar constructs” (Gammack and Stephens, 1994). If construing is like erecting a psychological structure, rather like the scaffolding erected around a building allowing an interpretation to be made about it, then bipolar constructs are those pieces of scaffolding comprising the structure itself (Dalton and Dunnett, 1992; Dover, 1983). One of the main assumptions of PCP, however, is that subjective meanings not only take the form of bipolar constructs, but that these constructs are organised into a system of superordinate (most important) and subordinate (least important) relationships (Earl, 1986; Droge and Calantone, 1984). A person’s decisions are said to be guided, therefore, by the organised set of constructs they have available for describing, categorising and evaluating different phenomena as Nystedt (1983, p. 104) explains:

The abstract structure is considered as a general structure that a person carries with him or her from situation to situation. It represents an individual’s knowledge of the past, attitudes, beliefs, common categories, values, and rules that he or she shares with other people in society, his or her individual rules and values, and [their] long-term expectations and goals.

Thus, bipolar constructs not only represent the basic building blocks of meaning making, but they also form the basic structure of a person’s map of reality (Dallos, 1992). Although the RGT has been criticised for its “slavish adherence” to bipolar constructs (Frost, 1982), the idea of construct systems is very similar to the interpretive paradigm’s focus on meaning frameworks and knowledge structures (for a review, see Mick and Buh, 1992). Again, for example, Hall (1997, p. 18) argues that our meaning systems are not just a random collection of concepts, “but concepts organised, arranged and classified into complex relationships with one another”. Since the interpretive paradigm has been criticised for being pitched at a very abstract metatheoretical level (e.g. Foxall, 1995), the second contribution that PCP can make to its further development is that it offers a concrete analytical basis for exploring both the nature and form of consumers’ subjective, and as we shall see next, intersubjective meaning systems (Zinkhan and Biswas, 1988).

**Commonalities of meaning**

The third characteristic of PCP relates to the social context of individual construct systems (Dallos, 1992). As with the interpretive paradigm, because of PCP’s focus on the individual’s subjective consciousness it has been criticised for being “solipsistic” (Hunt, 1994 and Rice, 1993 respectively). In terms of the interpretive paradigm, for example, while this criticism frequently ignores the emphasis it places on shared, or “intersubjective”, meanings (O’Shaughnessy...
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and Holbrook, 1988), it nevertheless tends to be legitimised by a lack of conceptual clarity. For instance, while Bennett (1996, p. 426) contends that: “Interpretations are themselves assumed highly individualistic and not generally agreed”, Louden and Della Bitta (1993, p. 33) maintain that: “Because the experiences of people differ, any given situation will be interpreted somewhat differently by each individual”. To some extent, however, the advantage of PCP is that it avoids the accusation of solipsism because it maintains that people are similar not simply because they have had identical experiences, which would be almost impossible, but rather because they construe their experiences in a similar way (Neimeyer, 1993). Or as Duck (1994, p. 125) puts it, people may have formed the same conclusions and interpretive maps of the world having had different experiences:

Psychological similarity is founded on the similar construction of experience (experience = subjective interpretation), not on similarity of experience itself (experience = events).

And in the usual case of events substantial overlap in individual's subjective interpretations of experience is ensured by their common membership in cultural, social and language communities (Berger and Luckmann, 1971). The third contribution that PCP can make to the interpretive paradigm, therefore, is that it clarifies the conceptual basis for examining the commonalities between consumers’ subjective meaning systems (Droge and Calantone, 1984). In saying this, however, a valid criticism of the interpretive paradigm in general and PCP in particular is that they are essentially descriptive and adhere to a conservative view of social organisation (Burrell and Morgan, 1979). Consequently, they do not consider the nature of “contested meanings” (Potter and Wetherell, 1987), that is to say, the way in which certain interpretations of the world are used to legitimise the interests (e.g. economic) and goals (e.g. political) of particular groups and sections in society (Brown, 1995; Murray and Ozanne, 1991; Thompson and Hirschman, 1995). As we shall see in the next section, therefore, although interpretive theories and methods such as PCP and the RGT are useful for exploring the micro-processes of meaning construction, organisation and interconnection they are limited in terms of understanding the social context of construing at the macro level of abstraction (Burkitt, 1991).

Representing meaning
And the final element of PCP concerns the relationship between its underlying methodology, the RGT, and the naturalistic research orientation (i.e. qualitative) of the interpretive paradigm (cf. Smith et al., 1995). As noted earlier, although the RGT was designed in harmony with PCP in order to explore the system of beliefs, rules and reasoning procedures that are at the heart of the construct system that composes the self (Winter, 1992), the RGT has traditionally been employed within the dominant positivist paradigm in consumer research (Stewart, 1990). For example, the RGT is usually employed in the preliminary stages of the research process prior to the construction of standardised questionnaires (e.g. Hallsworth, 1988). This has caused much
confusion, however, because according to Viney (1987, p. 194) it has resulted in researchers “tending to either deceive their data contributors or to introduce an alienating distance instead of maintaining the close interpersonal relationship that Kelly recommended”. Similarly, Fransella and Bannister (1977, p. 112) point out that the RGT is “diametrically opposed” to such objective research strategies:

...on the question of whether we should seek to understand the dimensions in terms of which the person makes sense of his or her world or whether we ought simply to compound his or her dimensions onto predetermined dimensions.

Thus, Gould (1991) suggests that it is better to view the RGT as a participatory exercise where researchers and participants talk “with” and not simply “to” one another (Fewtrell and O’Connor, 1995). Again, the emphasis the RGT places on language as the medium of psychological inquiry is very similar to the interpretive paradigm’s rejection of the idea that consumers can be studied like physical matter in chemistry or physics and that researchers must consider the meaning of phenomena from the consumer’s perspective (Ozanne and Anderson, 1989).

One of the main advantages of the RGT however, is that it avoids the criticism frequently made against interpretive researchers in terms of their adherence to the “incommensurable thesis”, which is the view that different theories and methods (e.g. qualitative, quantitative) are mutually exclusive and that there is no common basis for evaluating or incorporating one with the other (Heath, 1992; Kavanagh, 1994). As it is increasingly recognised that both qualitative and quantitative methods may potentially supplement and be supplemented by the other in the research process (Sampson, 1972), the attraction of the RGT is that it incorporates the virtues of both approaches as Hall (1983, p. 36) points out:

An approach to the evaluation of personal experience which involves a degree of quantification and at the same time leaves intact the phenomenal world of the individual is the use of personal constructs and their evaluation using the repertory grid technique.

In summary, it is argued that the assumptions of PCP complement and help to develop those of the interpretive paradigm in terms of its focus on the process of meaning construction (construing), the structure of individual and shared meanings (bipolar construct systems) and its advocacy of pluralistic methods of inquiry (RGT). As we shall return to later on, however, it was noted that although PCP and the RGT are useful for understanding the micro processes of meaning construction and organisation they are inadequate for understanding the ideological dimensions of subjectivity. Moving on, since it is unlikely that theoretical progress of interpretive research frameworks will be achieved in the absence of complementary applications (Foxall, 1995), it is necessary to indicate how the theory of PCP translates into the guidelines for using the RGT in practice.
Research objectives
Although the assumptions of personal construct psychology (PCP) have been largely ignored by consumer researchers this section identifies the way in which they provide the concrete guidelines for implementing the repertory grid technique (RGT) as well as interpreting and evaluating its research findings (Fransella et al., 1988). Indeed, when these are compared with the way in which the RGT has traditionally been employed in consumer research it is not surprising why it has attracted so much criticism. As discussed below in turn, the RGT comprises four research stages or procedures: element selection, construct elicitation, element comparison and data analysis. The findings from an exploratory study are used to illustrate each of these stages, the implications of which are discussed in the final section.

Element selection
Representing the focus of inquiry of a study, the first stage in using the RGT is to choose a set of elements which are consistent with the objectives of a study and the targeted (sub)system of constructs (e.g. product) to be elicited from participants (Stewart and Stewart, 1981). In consumer research, for example, the elements have usually taken the form of various products or services such as cars (Tan and Dolich, 1980), food and drink (Hallsworth, 1988) and financial services (Smith and Harbisher, 1989). However, while most of these studies focus on single product or service categories the assumptions of PCP suggest that researchers should first of all identify the way in which consumers themselves organise and categorise different products and services because as Van Raaij and Verhallen (1994, p. 61) point out: “Often consumers’ perceive product service classes differently from producers” (cf. Reynolds and Darden, 1974). This assumption is congruent with what interpretive researchers have variously termed “consumption constellations” (Solomon, 1988), “behavioural domains” (Van Raaij and Verhallen, 1994) and “product sets or classes” (Gutman, 1982). When using the RGT within the interpretive theory of PCP, therefore, it is recommended that a variety of products and services be used as the elements so that consumers’ self-organised frameworks can be explored because we might find that they differ from traditional product classification systems (Edwards and Johnson, 1985; Thomas, 1969). As shown in Table I, in order to illustrate the type of information the RGT can generate when used within the interpretive theory of PCP 30 different generic products and services (e.g. television, restaurant, shoes) were chosen as the elements in the exploratory study.

Construct elicitation
The second stage of using the RGT is to conduct personal interviews with consumers in order to elicit the content and hierarchical structure of the subjective meanings, in the form of bipolar constructs, that they attach to the set of elements (Dalton and Dunnett, 1992). The RGT is essentially made up of three interviewing methods: triading, laddering and pyramiding, which are
1. Newspaper  
2. Pension  
3. House/flat  
4. Television set  
5. Insurance  
6. Holiday  
7. Watch  
8. Chocolate bar  
9. Current account  
10. Savings account  
11. Eggs  
12. Tea  
13. Pub  
14. Plasters/bandages  
15. Radio/Hi-Fi  
16. Headache pills  
17. Soap  
18. Toothpaste  
19. Shoes  
20. Deodorant  
21. Trousers  
22. Jam/marmalade  
23. Restaurant meal  
24. Shampoo  
25. Shirt  
26. Fruit/vegetables  
27. Alcoholic drink  
28. Cereal  
29. Soft drink  
30. Kettle

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Repertory grid technique</th>
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<tr>
<td>Elements: 30 generic products and services</td>
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Table I.

designed to elicit an individual’s bipolar constructs at different levels of psychological abstraction (Banister et al., 1994). The first of these methods, “triading” (Kelly, 1955), simply involves randomly selecting three elements (e.g. restaurant, newspaper, shoes) and asking the participant to describe in a short phrase or sentence how two of them are alike and different from the third (e.g. “Good staff service is important for the restaurant and shoes but not for newspapers”). In order to elicit the more abstract values associated with these constructs, however, the “laddering method” can be used which involves asking the participant which pole of the construct they prefer and why it is important to them (e.g. “Good staff service lets you browse, really decide, not make spur of the moment decision”) (Hinkle, 1965). Conversely, the concrete benefits associated with each construct can be elicited using the “pyramiding method” which involves asking the participant what defines their preferred construct pole (e.g. “Courtesy, attentiveness, respect, and helpfulness make for good staff service”) (Landfield, 1971).

As shown in Figure 1, therefore, even an apparently bland or descriptive construct can be elaborated using the three methods associated with the RGT because as Easterby-Smith (1980, p. 8) points out: “In this process the question why tends to produce constructs of greater generality, while the question what or how tends to produce more specific constructs”. And it is important to emphasise here that there is nothing “sacrosanct” about the use of the three elicitation methods since they are best used as a catalyst within a conversation (Pope and Denicolo, 1993). In consumer research, however, these three methods have rarely been used together and, as a result, has resulted in the RGT being criticised for eliciting “irrelevant” information from consumers (Gordon and Langmaid, 1988). Although the laddering method has increasingly been used in the area of means-end chain analysis (MEC) (see Olson, 1995), again researchers have focused on only single products and services while the meanings elicited from consumers are typically represented as uni- rather than bi-polar constructs thus diminishing the richness of analysis (cf. Stewart, 1991). In line
with the assumptions of PCP, therefore, it is suggested that when using the RGT to conduct interviews with consumers all three elicitation methods should be employed together so that as much of the content and hierarchical structure of their construct systems can be explored. And from this we might find that the constructs consumers attach to different groups of products and services might vary from those used in traditional classification frameworks (Jankowicz, 1987). In terms of the exploratory study, then, a cluster sample of 90 consumers were interviewed in their homes using all three methods. Before describing the results from this study, however, it is important to explain how the RGT can be used to identify the interrelated sets of constructs used by consumers to describe, evaluate and categorise different products and services.

**Element comparison**

The third stage of using the RGT involves each consumer completing a repertory grid questionnaire so that the structural relationships between their bipolar constructs and the set of elements can be further examined (Banister et al., 1994). This is an important stage because as noted earlier it is in the structural similarities and differences as well as the content of consumers’ construct systems that provide the analytical basis for identifying market segments (Riley and Palmer, 1972). The example shown in Table II, which is taken from one of the interviews in the exploratory study, represents the most common form of repertory grid questionnaire design which simply involves asking consumers to rate on a scale of one to five, with three being neutral, each element on each of their personal constructs (for a review of alternative grids, see Bell, 1990). In the example, for instance, we can see that the construct poles
## Summary of findings

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<th>Category two</th>
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<tr>
<td>Products and</td>
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<td>services</td>
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<td>Pension</td>
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<td>Evaluative criteria</td>
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<td>– Reputation</td>
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<td>– Promotion</td>
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<tr>
<td>Search strategies</td>
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<tr>
<td>– Planning</td>
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<tr>
<td>– Shopping around</td>
<td>– Type of shop</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>– Recommendations</td>
<td>(large ones)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>– Information</td>
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<tr>
<td>Values</td>
<td>Major buy</td>
<td>Minor Buy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Financial/security</td>
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<tr>
<td>related</td>
<td>social identity</td>
<td>related</td>
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This participant associated with the elements shirt and shoes included: “The appearance is important”, “After sales service isn’t important” and “I buy label/brand names”.

It must be remembered here, however, that the rating figures carry no inherent meaning in themselves, but simply provide a way in which consumers can position the elements in relative terms on each of their construct dimensions thus providing the researcher with a richer picture of the overall structure of their construct system (Stewart and Stewart, 1981). Again though, in consumer research repertory grid questionnaires have rarely been used and when they have the questionnaires are typically made-up (sic) of a set of “objective” (i.e. standardised) constructs (e.g. Hallsworth, 1988). As noted earlier, this is clearly contradictory to the assumptions of PCP because it is unlikely that the same set of constructs will have the same meaning for each individual consumer (Eden and Jones, 1984). In response to this criticism, therefore, it is suggested that the constructs used in repertory grid questionnaires should be idiographic, i.e. those elicited from the individual consumers, as was the case for the 90 questionnaires completed in the exploratory study.

### Data analysis

In order to examine some of the similarities and differences in the content and structure of consumers’ construct systems the final stage in using the RGT involves some form of quantitative analysis of the repertory grid questionnaires at both the individual and group level (Jankowicz, 1990). The
latter presents a considerable methodological hurdle in particular because with any such analysis it is vital to preserve as many of the original constructs elicited from participants as possible (Mick and Buhl, 1992). Fortunately, however, a variety of computer programmes exist for performing such analyses (for a review, see Bell, 1990). One of the most popular of these is Slater’s (1977) grid analysis package (GAP, 1980) which offers a variety of programmes for analysing, by principal component, different designs of repertory grid questionnaires. The one used in the exploratory study, for example, was PREFAN which is designed to analyse groups of questionnaires aligned by the elements only (Riley and Palmer, 1972). Very briefly, PREFAN combines the information from individual repertory grid questionnaires into a single “great grid”, with the number of elements equal to those common in all the grids and the number of constructs equal to the sum of those in each grid.

This great grid is then subjected to a principal component analysis, the output of which represents the elements as they are categorised by the group as a whole whilst the constructs of each individual are listed separately in terms of the amount of variance they account for on each component (Easterby-Smith, 1980). The constructs with the highest variance can then be identified, grouped into similar themes and used to define each of the components (Metzler and Neimeyer, 1988). Although such reductionistic quantitative techniques may appear to sit uneasily alongside the assumptions of the interpretive paradigm, they are nevertheless very useful for helping to organise the information collected from participants in the personal interviews (Burr and Butt, 1992). For instance, with each participant yielding on average 21 constructs in the interviews for the exploratory study, this meant PREFAN analysing a combined repertory grid of 30 elements by 1,574 constructs. And as we shall see later, the overall “trustworthiness” (Hunt, 1994) of this form of analysis is achieved by making visible and oscillating between “the overview provided by the data analysis and the rich detail directly available from both the data matrix and interviews with the informant” (Taylor, 1990, p. 117). According to Parkinson and Lea (1991, p. 74), therefore, PREFAN is congruent with the interpretive assumptions of PCP because:

The technique is idiographic in the sense that participants generate their own personal constructs, but nomothetic in that the ratings based on these personal constructs can be intercorrelated in order to explore interpersonal consistency in the use of distinctions between [the elements].

In summary, the RGT consists of four research stages each of which is designed to meet certain objectives. The selection of elements is important for understanding the way that individuals categorise products and services while construct elicitation identifies the content and hierarchical structure of the meanings attached to them. Repertory grid questionnaires, on the other hand, enable researchers to explore in more detail the overall relationship between the elements and the individual’s constructs. Now that the main stages of the RGT have been outlined, some of the findings from the exploratory study are described next.
Findings
As summarised in Table III, the findings for the first objective of the study using the RGT which was to understand participants’ self-organised product and service categories, identified three distinct categories which accounted for nearly 70 per cent of the total variance in the combined repertory grid. The three highest loading elements on the first component, for example, were house/flat, television and pension while the three highest loading elements on the second and third components were shirt, trousers and shoes; and pub, newspaper and alcoholic drink respectively. This shows that participants organise products and services into related categories despite the fact that they are often analysed separately. In terms of the second objective, which was to identify the decision making strategies that participants associated with the different categories, participants’ five highest loading constructs (greatest variance) were identified on each of the three categories and grouped into generic themes (cf. Metzler and Neimeyer, 1988). Since the same construct could not be used more than once on any of the three categories, in total 15 constructs were taken from each participant’s repertory grid questionnaire, which constituted 86 per cent of the total number of constructs. The most frequently mentioned constructs on the first category of products and services were found to relate to the type of buy, “major”, various evaluative criteria (e.g. staff service) and an extensive set of search strategies (e.g. planning). For example, the constructs used by participants for the latter category included: “Think about it a lot more versus buy on impulse” and “Have to be very selective before buying versus more trial and error”. The first category of products and services, therefore, was defined by “rational” decision making processes (cf. Lazarus, 1991).

In contrast, the most frequently mentioned constructs on the second category were characterised by a limited set of search strategies (e.g. experiment) and extensive number of evaluative criteria (e.g. looks). For example, the constructs relating to looks included: “Appearance is important versus function is important” and “Appearance/style/colour are important versus looks/style aren’t important”. The second category of products and services, therefore, was defined by “symbolic/emotional” decision making processes (cf. Holbrook, 1995; Zajonc, 1984). Finally, the most frequently mentioned constructs on the third category related to the type of buy, “minor”, and a limited set of evaluative criteria (e.g. value for money) and search strategies (e.g. habit). For example, the constructs used by participants for habit included: “Stick to same makes versus will try things for a change” and “Only buy ones I know versus buy whatever takes my fancy”. The third category of products and services, therefore, was defined by “behavioural” decision making processes (cf. Foxall, 1995). Moving onto the third objective of the study, which was to identify the values that participants associated with the different categories, the highest loading construct from the five identified
<table>
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<th>Constructs</th>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>Fruit and veg</th>
<th>Restaurant meal</th>
<th>Shoes</th>
<th>Deodorant</th>
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<th>Savings account</th>
<th>Holiday</th>
<th>Pension</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Needs a lot of thought</td>
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<td>2 Need to compare prices</td>
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<td>3 Quality is important</td>
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<td>4 Look out for bargains</td>
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<td>5 Speak to friends/family before buying</td>
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<td>6 Need to read magazines, reports before buying</td>
<td>6</td>
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<td>7 Polite staff service is important</td>
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<td>8 Value for money is important</td>
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<td>9 I buy what I'm used to</td>
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<td>10 I buy label/brand names</td>
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<td>11 After sales service is important</td>
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<td>12 Is a gamble purchase</td>
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<td>3</td>
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<td>13 Need to consider a lot of criteria before buying</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>14 Need as much information as possible before buying</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>15 The appearance is important</td>
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<td>16 Buy everyday</td>
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<td>5</td>
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on each category were traced back to the original interviews and the laddering method. From this analysis each category was found to be characterised by a distinctive set of values.

For example, the values relating to the constructs identified on the first category of products and services were predominately “financial” oriented such as those relating to information: “Spend a lot of money, can waste savings”, “Risk of getting ripped off”. The values associated with the constructs on the second category, however, were associated with participants’ identities and roles such as those relating to looks: “Says something about you”, “How it makes you feel, confident”, “Important to keep yourself smart, will slide if let it go”, “What others think of you is important”. And the values identified on the third category concerned time constraints and the utilitarian performance of the products and services, an example of the latter being those connected with convenience: “Save time and cost”, “Time is money”, “Can’t be bothered looking around”. Finally, in terms of using the RGT to identify segments of consumers the advantage of the above analysis is that participants can be compared in terms of the frequency with which they use the different constructs and values on each of the categories. For example, in the study it was found that the youngest participants (18-24) mentioned constructs relating to recommendations more frequently than any other age group on the first category, e.g. “Need to ask family for advice before buying versus don’t need advice” and “Get other peoples’ opinions versus don’t need opinions of others”. In light of this overall analysis, the final section discusses some of the general advantages and limitations of using the RGT as an interpretive research framework.

Discussion
The examination of the underlying assumptions and objectives of the repertory grid technique (RGT) in consumer research is timely because it serves a useful critical function by identifying the problems caused from attempting to use and evaluate it within the traditional positivist paradigm rather than the theoretical framework of personal construct psychology (PCP). Moreover, the consideration of alternative theories and methods can help to develop a more pluralistic culture in consumer research which in this case is the emerging interpretive paradigm. For example, at the conceptual level it was shown that PCP’s focus on bipolar constructs can help to understand the process of meaning construction as well as the organisation of individual and shared meaning systems. And as the findings described above showed, at the methodological level the RGT can produce a more holistic picture of consumer experience as it identifies the categories that consumers use to group different products and services, which are often treated separately, and is capable of eliciting a wide variety of constructs (cognitive, affective, conative) from consumers at different levels of psychological abstraction (benefits, values).

In addition, the RGT incorporates the virtues of both qualitative and quantitative analyses because whilst the personal interviews and idiographic
questionnaires are very useful for exploring consumers’ motivations, decision making processes and values, quantitative methods of analysis such as PREFAN are useful for organising and identifying the patterns, themes and categories in the data (cf. Webb, 1995). However, it is suggested that future studies need to consider alternative methods of analysis that are less manipulative and that preserve and make visible as much of the richness and diversity of consumers’ subjective meanings as possible. Similarly, whilst the elicitation methods associated with the RGT allow a degree of freedom in consumers’ responses they nevertheless impose a degree of structure on them in terms of the way the responses are elicited, recorded and analysed. For instance, by representing consumers’ subjective meanings as bipolar constructs the RGT only deals with tiny fragments of language. Although this is not unnecessarily restrictive because as Fewtrell and O’Connor (1995, p. 11) remind us, “Even in open conversation, sentences often express a speaker’s ideas in shorthand form”, the three elicitation methods associated with the RGT need to be developed so that they can be used within ordinary conversation, e.g. triading: tell me about your different experiences?, laddering: which experiences do you prefer and why?, and pyramiding: what characterises these experiences?

Also, since it is assumed emotions are the product of changes to a person’s construct system, future studies need to adopt more longitudinal research strategies so that this process of transition can be further examined. Finally, because PCP has little to say about the social context within which subjective meanings are constructed, the findings from the study appeared rather unremarkable in that they closely resembled those product categories and decision making dimensions used in traditional classification frameworks. However, when issues such as consumer socialisation are taken into account in terms of explaining the way in which meanings are produced and circulated in society these similarities would probably be less than surprising. If anything, they may actually be expected considering that the “person as consumer” is one of the dominant discourses in society (e.g. Thompson and Hirschman, 1995).

One way to achieve this is to use the RGT within a multi-paradigm approach to consumer research where interpretive methods could be used to explore the micro-process of meaning construction and organisation while more ethnographic and poststructuralist methods (e.g. discourse analysis) could be used to explore the wider social and political roles of meaning construction (O’Shaughnessy and Holbrook, 1988; Potter and Wetherell, 1987). Hopefully, these suggestions will help to further demonstrate how the RGT can be used within the theory of PCP to better understand the meaning of consumer experience.

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