Using the Repertory Grid Test
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INTRODUCTION

The repertory grid test, originally devised by Kelly [1, 2, 3, 9], has found widespread use in marketing research in Great Britain [4, 5, 6, 12, 13], although there is no published evidence of its use by American marketing researchers. It has been used to obtain objectively attitude scale items, or constructs (Kelly's terminology) in the language of the consumer; it has sometimes replaced intensive individual interviews and group discussions. Very little appears to have been written, however, on respondent performance and the nature of items generated.

In the test, stimuli in the form of cards depicting products or brands or actual packs, drawings, and the like are presented to respondents. The number of stimuli varies from a minimum of 8 to 10 to a maximum of about 30; 16 to 20 are optimum. An initial screening removes any stimuli unfamiliar to respondents. Stimuli are presented in groups of three, one triad at a time, according to a predetermined random order which ensures that identical triads are never repeated. The respondent is asked to state in which way two stimuli are alike and different from the third, and descriptions for likeness and difference are recorded on a specially designed grid sheet [9, 13]. For the second and subsequent triads the respondent is asked to mention another similarity/difference than the one already mentioned. The process is repeated until the respondent cannot provide any more new "items." For example, in the triad Dacron, Orlon, and cotton, a response might be: "Dacron and Orlon are man-made fibres, cotton is produced by nature." Slight variations from this standard approach are detailed in [13].

EARLY EXPERIMENTAL WORK

Experience with the repertory grid indicated that respondent performance varied considerably. Even with experienced testers, some respondents were unable to provide more than a half-dozen items, while others could generate more than 30. Research indicated [12] that respondent performance was not related to sex, age, or social class but to divergent and convergent thinking [7, 8]. It was hypothesised that:

Respondents thinking in a noticeably divergent way find the repertory grid exercise much easier to undertake (than respondents thinking in a noticeably convergent way) and are generally more imaginative and thus able to construe more items.

Further analysis of these early data led to a second hypothesis:

The number of descriptive items will greatly exceed the number of evaluative items, since the nature of the test leads respondents to discriminate between stimuli more in terms of physical differences than in terms of value judgments.

The implications of these hypotheses are, first, that if respondents who think divergently do not generate different types of test items, time and money can be saved by selecting only high divergers, because fewer respondents are required. Second, if mostly descriptive items are provided, additional exploratory research (individual interviews and group discussions) will be needed to locate relevant evaluative items. These two techniques appear to be less efficient at generating purely descriptive material, because they are relatively unstructured, so the repertory grid is still valuable as a source of descriptive items.

SUBSEQUENT EXPERIMENTAL WORK

Method

An experiment was conducted in order to test the hypothesis that performance on repertory grids is related

1 Divergent thinking is characterized by originality and the ability to score high on open-ended tests. Convergent thinking is characterized by the attempt to find a "right" answer. Convergent thinkers typically perform better on conventional intelligence tests. These two types [8] are similar to Getzels and Jackson's "high creative" and "high IQ" types [7].

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to divergent thinking\(^2\) and independent of sex, age, and social class. Twenty adult, high-divergent and 20 adult, low-divergent thinkers, well matched on sex, age, and social class, were screened from a larger sample. As a test of divergent thinking, respondents were asked to think of as many different uses as possible for five everyday objects [8]. The test was scored by ignoring obvious answers and giving one point for unusual responses (e.g., for a brick, “throwing through a jeweler’s window”). Scores tended to polarize well above or below 20. The mean test score for the high divergers was 32.5, \(\sigma = 8.9\); for low divergers, 12.0, \(\sigma = 3.4\).

As a rough validity check, a “sketches” test was administered [7]; respondents were given sheets of paper containing 9 circles about 1 inch in diameter and were asked to sketch as many different and unusual objects, within and including the circle, as they could. The sketches were independently scored by three judges based on the number of different figures. All respondents who scored as high divergers on the verbal fluency test did so on the sketches test as well.

The repertory grid test was administered to these 40 respondents, using the names of 12 drinks (printed on cards) as stimuli: tea, Ovaltine, Coca-Cola, coffee, Lucozade, water, drinking chocolate, milk, Ribena/blackcurrent, soup, orange squash, and milk shake.

**RESULTS**

The table shows divergency scores and grid scores for the relevant subgroups. The gross number of items refers to grid responses before removal of synonymous

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2 It appeared inappropriate at this stage to extend the hypotheses to cover convergent thinkers, since the concern was with establishing whether high-low divergency affected the number and type of grid responses (rather than high-low convergency) in that a high diverger need not necessarily be a low converger, or vice versa. Thus divergency alone was taken to be the independent variable.

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\(^2\) This is a point that appears to have been completely ignored by grid users. In his theoretical exposition, Kelly [9] suggested that people use constructs in order to construe the world around them. Such “units of understanding,” unlike concepts, are two-ended or dichotomous. The terms “black” and “white” are concepts if independently used, but if stimuli are categorized as black or white, this dichotomy is a construct. A high degree of logic in terms of opposites in this example may not always be present. For example, one may have a chalk-cheese construct.
not fizzy." In the strictest Kelly sense, the first is a proper construct, because it is two-dimensional, while the second represents a single dimension. Kelly would argue that, according to conventional logic, the opposite of "fizzy" can only be stated as "not fizzy." However, according to the psychology of personal constructs (dealing with how persons are actually supposed to think), other opposites for "fizzy" would include "flat" or "still." Thus "fizzy"—"still" is a true Kelly construct. A further distinction can be made in that the first construct is bipolar [11], whereas the second is unidirectional. For example, "opaque"—"clear" represents two continua: first, one of decreasing opaqueness, reaching translucency (the neither—nor midpoint) and, second, one of increasing transparency. "Fizzy"—"not fizzy" represents a single continuum of decreasing fizziness, with no midpoint.4

Examination of the Data

Items generated by both low and high divergers were listed and the duplication (about 50%) was removed. Three lists of items exclusive to low divergers, exclusive to high divergers, and common to both were divided into groups of items that were: (1) Kelly-type constructs or bipolar items and (2) unidirectional items. These were further divided by three judges according to whether items were descriptive or evaluative [11]. Most evaluative items were clearly recognizable. For the handful of borderline cases a thesaurus was consulted to establish whether or not descriptive words were synonymous with obvious evaluative adjectives, in which case the three judges unanimously assigned the items to either a descriptive or evaluative category. Examination of the data showed the following, after subdivision:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Exclusive to low divergers</th>
<th>Common to both low and high divergers</th>
<th>Exclusive to high divergers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of evaluative bipolar items</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of descriptive bipolar items</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of evaluative unidirectional items</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of descriptive unidirectional items</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total 36 54 106

The number of descriptive items generated greatly exceeded the number of evaluative items, consistent with other experience [10]. Test subjects, both high and low divergers, seemed to make attributive rather than value judgments. That is, stimuli were judged as belonging or not belonging to certain categories based upon their possession or lack of certain perceived, distinguishing physical attributes. Perhaps the instruction "Tell me one way in which two of these are alike and different from the third" suggests that a cognitive rather than an affective response is called for. A possible alternative instruction likely to generate more evaluative constructs is "Tell me one way in which you like two of these and dislike the third."

CONCLUSIONS

One hundred and eighty-six of 196 items derived from repertory grids were descriptive. Thus if evaluative items are likely to be of importance, these may be missed if repertory grids are used exclusively; repertory grid interviews are best used in conjunction with conventional qualitative research methods [10 p. 203]:

Without this wider context, there is a danger of ending up with a set of responses that are relatively superficial, primarily physical or functional rather than psychological. . . .

That point was borne out in this study.

Thirty-six items (18%) were exclusive to low divergers. Their exclusion might have resulted in some important items being missed, but where speed and economy are desired a decision can be made to undertake as few interviews as possible (e.g., if repertory grid interviews are undertaken in conjunction with individual interviews or group discussions).

On the basis of this limited evidence, the total number of items generated in repertory grid exercises is likely to divide fairly evenly between bipolar and unidirectional items. In utilizing scale items for attitude batteries, this distinction is something that should be borne in mind.

REFERENCES


