

Repertory grid technique exercise

The aim of this technique is to reveal how your research participants see things from their point of view. As such, it is a technique that fits with the interpretivist approach to research. However, it is a highly structured technique – there is a very clear procedure to follow – and this makes it a good technique for novice qualitative researchers to try out before they attempt using other techniques. If it works well then you will discover some interesting information that you would probably not have discovered by using a questionnaire. This should help you to get a sense of what qualitative research is for and what we try to achieve when we undertake it.

The first stage is concerned with data collection. If time permits, afterwards we will consider how we might analyse the data we have collected.

Take your time and try to play the role of researcher sensitively and seriously.

1. You should have agreed to use one of your partner's lists – of names or holiday locations, or brands. Write each item from the chosen list clearly on a post-it note and number each post-it note. These items are now referred to as "elements".
2. You will now interview the student whose list you have following the instructions below.
3. Show your interviewee post-it notes 1 and 3.
4. Ask your interviewee in what ways 1 and 3 are alike and in what ways they are different. Prompt and probe your interviewee sensitively to try to get beyond the obvious. This is the stage at which it is important to be patient and imaginative. Keep thinking that *we want to get beyond the obvious*.
5. From this discussion, agree a list of "constructs". (A construct may be thought of as a quality used by people to "make sense of their world".) For example, your interviewee might say that the person on post-it note 1 has bad breath and the person on post-it note 3 does not. From this, you might agree that quality of breath is a construct and you write down "bad breath" and "fresh breath". Then you would carry on, writing down other constructs.

Note that what you write down should be agreed with your interviewee. Also, you should be writing down pairs of words. These pairs should be contrasting. Two people may be contrasted in that one has bad breath and one has fresh breath. This pair of words is what we are referring to as a construct. Always ensure your interviewee is happy with the two words you've written down. If necessary, remind them that the two words must be contrasting and negotiate about which words you should use.

6. Once you've exhausted discussion of post-it notes 1 and 3, show your interviewee post-it notes 2 and 4 and repeat the process again.
7. Once you've exhausted discussion of post-it notes 2 and 4, repeat the whole process with post-it notes 5 and 6.
8. You may carry on, using the pairs of post-it notes in this order:

1 and 4

2 and 6

3 and 5

Once you have done this then the interview is complete.

9. You should now have all the information you need to complete the grid itself. Write the names that are on the post-it notes on the diagonal lines at the top of the grid – these are the “elements”. Write the constructs down the sides of the grid, eg “bad breath” on the left and “fresh breath” on the right of the top row.
10. Now your grid is ready for use, and this involves your interviewee again. The aim is to get your interviewee to give each element a score out of five for each of the constructs. For example, element number one could be “myself” and your interviewee might give themselves a score of 5 on the bad breath-fresh breath scale. In this case, you write 5 in the square for element 1, construct 1.

You should end up with a grid full of numbers.

	Myself	Jethro	Elijah	
Bad breath	5	3	2	Fresh breath

The repertory grid technique allows you to get some insight into the interviewee's way of seeing the world, since they contribute to identifying the elements and the constructs. In some situations, this will be better than simply interviewing people. When you interview, you are likely set the agenda to a greater extent – it's your elements and constructs that you ask your interviewee about.

Hints

Almost anything can be an element, as long as it's not a construct! Nouns make good elements. Verbs can be more difficult. You should use the "-ing" form, eg "deciding", "delegating", "managing conflict".

It's easier if you try to keep all the elements of a similar form, eg all nouns or all "-ing" words. And try to avoid mixing abstract ideas with very concrete things, eg "the Olympic spirit" and "bicycle".

When agreeing the constructs, don't accept as opposites a word, say X, and not X. For example, good and not good is too vague. This could refer to good and poor performance, or to good and evil.

Try to be as specific as possible. You can ask your interviewee: "in what way exactly?". For example, "good performance – poor performance" is much less specific than "more than 20% above sales target – more than 10% below sales target".

Use a five point rating and encourage your interviewee to use the full range of scores. Your grid should have a few 1s and 5s on it when it's complete.

Source: Jankowicz, A.D. (2005) *Business Research Projects*.
See also Collis & Hussey (2003) p258; Bryman & Bell (2003) p131.

Repertory grid technique: analysis of data

There is scope for a lot of analysis of the data. Try this simple technique with your data.

We wish to see which two elements are most alike and which are most dissimilar. For each pair of elements, calculate the absolute difference between the scores for each construct. You can then sum the absolute differences to see which elements have the greatest difference between them overall and so may be said to be most dissimilar. The pair with the smallest difference may be said to be the most alike.

Here is an example.

<i>Elements</i>					
1	Harrogate	Brighton	Blackpool	Birmingham	5
Transport difficult	5	4	1	4	Easily accessible
Low quality accommodation	1	2	2	2	High quality accommodation
Lots to do	4	1	4	2	Few things to do

There are six pairings of elements possible.

Harrogate / Brighton	Harrogate / Blackpool	Harrogate / B'ham	Brighton / Blackpool	Brighton / B'ham	Blackpool / B'ham
1	4	1	3	3	3
1	1	1	0	0	0
3	0	2	3	2	2
5	5	4	6	5	5

In this example, the differences are not large. This is perhaps not surprising as only three constructs have been included. However, we can see that Harrogate and Birmingham were perceived by the research participant as the most similar, and Brighton and Blackpool as the most different.

We can of course use this research technique with a number of different people, using the same elements, but allowing each research participant to come up with their own constructs. We could then sum the differences for all our research participants and establish which of the elements they perceive as most alike (though the individual participants might think they are similar for different reasons, reflected in different constructs).