

## THE REPERTORY GRID IN CAREER COUNSELLING: ROLE AND VALUE

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### Abstract

The potential role of Kelly's (1955) repertory grid in career counselling is discussed. Its value in helping students make career decisions, establish bases for future development, and learn how to make decisions in general is clarified.

### Résumé

Cet article explique le rôle potentiel du schéma du répertoire de Kelly (1955) par rapport à l'orientation en carrière. Il fait le point sur la valeur du schéma pour aider l'étudiant à faire des décisions de carrière, à établir une base pour le développement futur, et, en général, à apprendre comment prendre des décisions.

In the previous article, the repertory grid was characterized as a promising technique for systematically eliciting and organizing a client's career considerations and alternatives. While the previous article summarized how a grid is completed and enumerated the major types of information it provides, the present article is concerned with its potential role and value in career counselling programs.

### *Making Good Decisions*

One important function of career guidance is to help people make good career decisions. However, evaluating the effectiveness of guidance in this regard is difficult because the environment is contingent. Good decisions can lead to deadends; good plans can go astray. The goodness of a decision cannot be assessed adequately by future consequences. At best, one can only identify consequences that could have been avoided or obtained had a person planned better or made a wiser decision. In an uncertain environment, we can only hold deciders (and their counsellors) responsible for what they had power to control or take account of in making a decision. From this viewpoint, more intrinsic criteria must be used to evaluate the quality of career decisions.

Whatever set of criteria are established, few would question the criterion that one should decide upon a plan with full awareness of all relevant considerations and a careful evaluation of the advantages and disadvantages of different alternatives. (What counts as full awareness and careful evaluation are separate questions, beyond the scope of this paper.) In this context, the grid offers a systematic way to elicit and derive relevant considerations. From the alternatives elicited, counsellor and client can generate other

alternatives through information searches. From the constructs that are elicited, they can assess not only what is present, but what might be lacking. From the applications of considerations to alternatives, they can check validity, tighten or loosen criteria, and reframe and sharpen constructs that are too extreme, vague, or cryptic. From the relationships among constructs, they can reduce a multiplicity of considerations into manageable themes, assess the overall integration of considerations, and isolate conflicts. From the positive and negative aspects of alternatives, they can compare preferability (the potential of a career to be preferred, given the set of considerations) and expressed preferences, and gauge the stability of both over time.

Given a small investment of time (about an hour), a grid supplies an immense amount of information, more than an ordinary interview or even series of interviews, in my experience. By systematic elicitation, it heightens a decider's awareness of his or her basis for deliberation. An by systematic organization of data, it provides a way to make an overload of information (which is the peril of any complex decision) more manageable. In summary, a grid can play an important role in helping a decider to decide with fuller awareness of relevant considerations and promote a more systematic and careful evaluation of alternatives.

### *Establishing a Basis for Development and Future Directions*

A second major function of career guidance is to help students to consolidate a basis for future development, for living a better life (Van Hesteren & Zingle, 1977). It is not enough to help students to just make a decision, for future decisions will al-

most certainly be necessary. A more explicit set of beliefs and values will help to maintain personal direction in the face of distractions, dissuasive influences, shifting circumstances, and discouragements. And a more explicit set of beliefs and values can serve as a developmental basis for elaborating a given style of living.

Within a developmental context, the emphasis is not so much on a particular decision, but upon one's basis for making important life decisions. As Rawls (1971) has argued, a person's life plan is fundamental for a definition of good. It establishes the point of view from which a person's value judgments are made and eventually integrated into a consistent whole which makes up a life. Without an explicit set of, more or less, permanent desires and interests, there is no way for a person to exert conscious control over the way his or her life is elaborated. Without conscious control, at least one key criterion for good decisions is absent—full awareness of relevant considerations. Without awareness or the potential for conscious control there is little basis for resolving inconsistencies, modification, and the like.

In systematically eliciting career constructs, a grid makes explicit at least part of a person's basis for making important decisions. The elicited considerations provide a stimulus for a more penetrating dialectic between counsellor and client. For example, are the elicited considerations capable of elaboration over a lifetime, or are they self-limiting? That is, do they constitute long-term or short-term desires? Are they so concrete that it is difficult to know what they represent? Are they consistent or inconsistent, and if inconsistent, are they necessarily so? Are the considerations framed to resolve immediate personal dilemmas? If so, perhaps the client has to be helped to see beyond immediate problems to long-term consequences. In summary, a grid does not necessarily orient to developmental concerns. Rather, it provides a systematic basis or stimulus for developmentally assessing a client's set of considerations.

One grid technique that can be used to elicit deeper, more basic considerations is called "laddering" (Note 1). In this procedure, a person's elicited constructs serve as stimuli for eliciting more important constructs. For example, suppose one of a client's constructs was busy versus slack and the busy side of the construct was preferred in a career. A paraphrase of Hinkle's (see Reference Note 1) instructions would follow this general format.

Now you prefer a position that keeps you busy rather than one that is slack. What I would like to understand is why you would prefer a career that is busy rather than slack. What advantages are there in being busy, in contrast to the disadvantages of a slack career. (pp. 32-33)

A client might say that he prefers to be busy because it makes him feel needed rather than unneeded or dispensable. This new construct then serves as a stimulus for eliciting another construct, and so on, until the person indicates that a construct is self-explanatory, in no need of justification or support. When this core, terminal value has been reached, the person feels its value to be obvious and it does not make sense to proceed further. The sample above might have proceeded in the following way:

busy/slack  
 feel needed/feel unneeded  
 feel significant/feel insignificant  
 feel like I belong/feel like I don't belong  
 identify with job/don't identify with job  
 job is part of me/just a job, not part of me  
 meaningful/meaningless

Laddering makes more visible the way a person's core beliefs and values are extended to encompass the concrete particulars of a career. The translation of self-concepts into occupational terms, so central in Super's (1963) career development theory, can be readily traced. Aside from the identification of core considerations, the validity of a person's reasoning can be assessed. For example, might there not be other ways to experience meaningfulness in work, other than by keeping busy. Busyness, without several qualifications, appears to me to be a defective and restrictive way to instantiate a person's larger concerns. Also, conflicts involving busyness and slackness are apt to be resolved, when focusing upon larger issues. That is, the way a person makes concrete his or her larger concerns can, and in my experience often does, generate conflict. It is a fallible activity that requires considerable testing and working through.

The ways in which a beginning construct can be elaborated through laddering are highly divergent. For instance, being busy might implicate being productive rather than 'feeling needed'. Sometimes, laddering elaborates a personal problem more than fundamental values. For instance, one person might prefer to be busy because it keeps his mind occupied which in turn allows him or her to avoid thinking about self, and this in turn makes the person feel better. And, of course, many people would prefer a career that is slack because it allows more time for creativity, setting own directions, and so on. However a construct is elaborated through laddering, it facilitates a more explicit statement of a person's plan of life that stands behind or is implicit in a person's career considerations.

In laddering upward toward central concerns, it is sometimes difficult to comprehend exactly what is being said. This is hardly surprising since people

have little practice in communicating fundamental values. Fransella and Bannister (1977) offer three ways to help people clarify their construing. First, people might offer a paragraph of words to "get at" a distinction. Just asking them to repeat the reason again (so that you can make sure you understand) will often allow them to sharpen their discrimination and to state it in a few words. Second, eliciting the contrasting pole of a construct will often clarify the initial concern enough to be rephrased and sharpened. Third, offer interpretations of vague statements that are off the mark. In this way, a client is apt to find it easier to say what is on the mark. To these three tactics may be added reflection, accurate empathy, analogy, paraphrase, and the entire range of counselling responses that help reduce confusion.

Last, it is often helpful to not just ladder upward to central concerns, but to ladder downward to find out what exactly counts for a person to construe a career as, say, busy rather than slack. To ladder downward, a client might be asked: "How would you know when a career is busy rather than slack?" The importance of eliciting critical features is not just that they can be assessed for their adequacy, but that they can help a person to make better use of career information. Asking a person how he or she would know when something is X is a short step from asking what evidence a person has that a given career is X. Often, of course, a person has no evidence, but this lack was not clear enough previously to act on. In a way, laddering simply reveals what a person already knows, or more appropriately, uses without awareness. In another sense, however, laddering is an activity filled with discovery. It is not an activity in which a client is simply providing information to the expert. Rather, it is a joint venture in exploring how a client is construing self and the world, and can be just as involving and informative for the client as for the counsellor.

#### *Learning How to Decide*

A third major function of career counselling is to fortify individuals for decisions to come. That is, clients should learn how to go about making sound decisions; they should develop the confidence and competence to clarify values, generate alternatives, evaluate alternatives, gather information and, in general, engage in deliberative activities both systematically and productively.

There are currently several instructional models for teaching decision making (e.g., Gelatt, Varenhorst, & Carey, 1972). In this context, the advantage of the grid is, first, that it provides a concrete, compact point of reference for deliberation. All activities can be integrated in a systematic fashion by reference to the grid.

Second, using the grid is more like on-the-job training. A person does not need one set of activities to learn decision making and another set to make a career decision. One learns the major components of decision making by trying to make a career decision. Third, while a grid does not include all important components of complex decision making, it is reasonably comprehensive, offering a clear orientation to decision making in general as well as decision making for a special case. It is most useful in providing a systematic basis for engaging in further activities such as gathering information. Clients engage in further activities not because they are instructed to, or are told that it is valuable, or want to follow the model of the counsellor, but because the need for further activity becomes apparent, becomes more immediately visible.

Among the more salient aspects of decision making that a person would be expected to learn are the following. First, it is important to start with a reasonably complete, or at least extensive, set of alternatives. Alternatives may be added by the counsellor, by a search for related careers, by interest tests, and by friends and family. The most sophisticated deliberation procedures can only be effective if a reasonably complete range of alternatives is presented. Second, considerations provide the basis for distinguishing one alternative from another. Short-sighted considerations lead to defective decisions, and so on. Third, the application of considerations to alternatives can be defective due to invalid or incomplete information (requiring information search, interviews with people in desirable careers, or job experience, if available). Career attribution can also be defective due to loose criteria. All of the information available on careers will not help if a person's criteria are so loose that he or she applies a positive or negative attribution to most or all alternatives. To be effective, considerations must distinguish among alternatives. If they do not, they are irrelevant to the decision. Fourth, to make one's considerations manageable, they should be grouped into clusters or themes of constructs which seem to go together. Fifth, if constructs are loosely related or ambiguous, it may be helpful to work through exactly how each consideration is related or mutually involved. Sixth, conflicts can incapacitate a decider. But if conflicts are isolated and made explicit, there might be ways to resolve or minimize them. If not, one has a realistic appraisal of what will be gained and lost by alternatives. Seventh, it is desirable to check expressed preferences against preferability (see prior paper for a full description of this measure) to see if preferences reflect considerations. Preferences might be biased due to a restricted sample of considerations or other forms of distortion.

In summary, this list presents a relatively comprehensive orientation to important components of complex decision making. The advantage of more comprehensive techniques, such as the career grid, can be brought out most clearly by contrast. There now exists a seemingly endless series of guidance techniques, most lacking in scope. The use of numerous small range techniques for individuals and groups can lead to a fragmented program. In this context, the advantage of a comprehensive technique is that it can help promote a more integrated, coherent program.

A second advantage, implicit in the first, is that a comprehensive technique can systematically stimulate guidance activities, including numerous small-range techniques, without loss of integration and coherence. It is hard to become disoriented with a strong anchor for one's activities, as results from divergent activities would have to alter or confirm a career grid in some way to count as worthwhile results.

One integrative technique in this regard is to either supply additional constructs or add new, elicited constructs. In this way, counsellor and client can both see what effect they have on the basic organization of considerations. For example, suppose a counsellor decided to add the construct of high salary/average salary, since it is well known that practical matters become more important later in a career rather than in the beginning. By comparing this new construct to old constructs, one can see exactly how it fits in and what alternatives are advantaged. The results can be surprising and are certainly worth checking. For example, upon noticing that a central theme of considerations has to do with the worthiness of careers, a counsellor might suspect that a person is devaluing such a basic concern as enjoyment. This could be tested. In one of my first administrations of a career grid, the decider manifested a strong conflict between worthiness and enjoyment. All careers that were deemed worthwhile were also unenjoyable. All careers that were enjoyable were thought to be worthless. Given the idealism of many young people, this conflict is perhaps not as rare as one would expect.

A counsellor can also supply alternatives to test hypotheses. One important type of hypothesis, particularly for women, concerns occupational level. For example, upon noticing that a bright young woman has selected licensed practical nursing as a favored alternative, a counsellor might become concerned that she is limiting herself with an occupation that is below her level of personal capability. Consequently, the counsellor might add registered nurse, a master's level nurse in some specialty, and physician to her career grid. In this way, he or she could study how the client's considerations varied in accordance with occupa-

tional level. Correspondingly, to study horizontal rather than vertical expansions, a counsellor might add related careers that are on a similar occupational level.

A career grid, then, can integrate by the relatively comprehensive orientation to decision making it provides. It can integrate by its use as a monitor, with all client changes being reflected in the grid. It can also serve an integrative function as an endpoint of counselling, where change is assessed. For example, over the course of counselling, was conflict reduced? Were careers differentiated more fruitfully? Were preferences brought into stronger alignment with considerations? And so on. Client investment of time in maintaining a grid throughout counselling is minimal. All changes in construing alternatives could be made in the few moments of waiting time that usually precede individual counselling or groups.

In summary, a career grid is a relatively comprehensive guidance method that can be used in coordination with other methods, and that can play a valuable role in comprehensive guidance programs (e.g., Herr & Cramer, 1979). A grid focuses on the way a person makes sense of careers, on the implicit theory of careers that a person has constructed (Kelly, 1955). It is not a test in the traditional sense. Rather, it is best used as a cooperative venture, as an exploration of the interpretive system of the client. As a basis for cooperative involvement, a grid can be used to improve career decisions, to establish a developmental basis for future decisions, to learn how to make decisions in general, and to provide a systematic orientation to guidance activities.

#### Reference Notes

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