# It’s the way I tell them.

# A Personal Construct Psychology method for analysing narratives.

Kim Bradley-Cole

University of Winchester

<http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0853-6080>

Pam Denicolo

Emeritus, University of Reading

[https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9282-2129](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9282-2129?lang=en)

Max Daniels

University of Winchester

# Author Note

Correspondence regarding this article should be addressed to Kim Bradley-Cole, University of Winchester, Sparkford Road, Winchester, SO22 4NR. Email: [kim.bradley-cole@winchester.ac.uk](mailto:kim.bradley-cole@winchester.ac.uk)

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# Abstract

Qualitative research methods aim to produce some form of narrative for analysis and many alternatives forms of narrative analysis exist, mostly informed by social constructionist perspectives. This creates a dilemma for personal constructivist researchers, who now have access to a plethora of methods for understanding and intervening in people’s sensemaking processes but are faced with a distinct absence of a uniquely personal constructivist method for analysing the emerging narratives. This paper aims to outline a Personal Construct Psychology (PCP) (Kelly, 1955) view of the person as an agentic being and provide a contextualised, step by step guide for analysing personal narratives from a Kellian perspective that encompasses identification and analysis of constructs, metaphors, roles, implicit beliefs and emotions. Kelly advocated working with the ‘whole’ person by credulously exploring their lived reality through the entirety of their emotions, cognitions and behaviours, which goes beyond an extraction of narrative themes or phenomenological interpretations contained in the realm of the person’s known world. In PCP, language is regarded as symbolic, contextual, performative, and incomplete but, unlike social constructionist approaches, the focus favours the identification and explanation of internal identity processes, social cognitions, and personal meanings, rather than how language is utilised externally as a cultural tool. By articulating an explicit process, we aim to improve the accessibility of PCP as a full research process and overcome the current limitations posed by utilising qualitative analytical methods drawn from alternative epistemologies.

**Key words:** narrative analysis, qualitative methods, personal construct, constructivist, story.

# Introduction

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us...

Charles Dickens, A Tale of Two Cities

This introduction, with its series of contrasts, to a famous narrative serves to illustrate several of the main components of this paper. For instance, the moral of the tale is that people are responsible for their own choices and the actions they take within a world full of alternative viewpoints. This is echoed in a key tenet of Personal Construct Psychology (PCP) (Kelly 1955), that people are responsible agents each with a unique way of construing the world. Another tenet is that construing involves differentiating people, objects, events by noting similarities and differences within group by placing them along continua defined by contrasting poles, each defining the meaning of the other (worst-best, hope-despair, for example). PCP, as we shall elaborate later, provides a philosophical foundation and a range of methods for eliciting people’s perspectives or constructs, usually in narrative form.

Herein we seek to delineate a method of narrative analysis that can be used within research conducted through a personal constructivist theoretical and methodological lens, while others might judge whether it extends to a wider range of philosophical approaches. First, we situate the PCP worldview within the narrative and discursive domain, then provide a contextualised, step by step guide for analysing personal narratives from a personal constructivist perspective that encompasses multi-level exploration, identification and analysis of constructs, metaphors, roles, implicit beliefs, and emotions.

Narratives have long been recognised as the primary data source in qualitative research (Polkinghorne, 1995), yet during our own journeys as constructivist researchers, we have become increasingly aware of the analytic limitations caused by the absence of a distinctive personal constructivist method focused on exploring the unique meanings that people create within their individual, storied lives. This absence became starkly noticeable when we collated the range of methods in current use for our constructivist research methods book (Denicolo et al., 2016), reminding us of the number of process adjustments and compromises we had each been making in our own research by applying more general narrative, discursive or constructionist methods and then seeking more germane analysis techniques. In practice, most researchers opt for a purely thematic based approach using a theory-neutral position (Braun & Clarke, 2006), a phenomenological position (Smith, 1995), or a social constructionist grounded theory position (Charmaz, 2003). Each of these has limitations that compromise the real research potential of PCP methods, which are designed to reach a deep, not directly accessible level of understanding about the self and social cognition by bringing together our thoughts, actions and emotions into an overall experiential picture, or gestalt in which the total view is greater than the sum of all the components (Bradley-Cole & Denicolo, 2020).

There is a diverse and continuously evolving range of narrative, discursive and thematic methods used in qualitative psychology and it is not within the scope of this paper to add to the critique of various methods. Indeed, Kelly advocated theoretical flexibility and freedom, while we have ourselves previously used them to good effect. However, existing analytical methods do not, we feel, adequately unpack the personal and contextual stories that individuals craft to help them make sense of their lived experiences, which this paper now provides. That said, the development of a personal constructivist analytical approach designed to illuminate the richness of a person’s self-concept and their experiential lifeworld captured in narrative form includes aspects informed by all three approaches.

## A PCP worldview

When writing in the 1950s, Kelly pre-empted many of our contemporary taken-for-granted assumptions about social cognition. For example, some 30 years before Fiske and Taylor’s (1984) ground-breaking book, he recognised our use of schemas as a way of simplifying and giving order to our perceptual worlds, noting how resistant we are to changing our more deeply held schematic beliefs. He challenged accepted views on rational or response driven thinking and offered us a theory of human thought and action that actively embraced the perceptual reality of our irrational, often conflicting and counter-intuitive, sensemaking processes.

PCP is epistemologically congruent with other constructivist approaches in that it acknowledges that the human mind goes beyond passively collecting information from the environment, instead actively imposing meaning and order on the world it inhabits. However, in contrast to other constructivist schools of thought that contend that knowledge and reality are created through social encounters and relationships (see Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Burr & Butt, 1992; Vygotsky, 1962; Whorf, 1956), PCP favours the individual’s perspective. While recognising the impact that culture and social interactions can have on personal construing, personal constructivist researchers maintain the view that the individual has choice between accepting or rejecting cultural/group norms and collective interpretations of the world. The following two quotations illustrate the differences in emphases between socially oriented approaches and the personal orientation of PCP respectively:

For the constructivist or naturalist, knowledge is composed of those constructions about which there is some consensus (or at least some movement towards consensus) amongst those competent to deal with the substance of the construction. Lincoln (1992, p. 381)

Successive revelations of events invite the person to place new constructions upon them, whenever something unexpected happens.... The constructions one places on events are working hypotheses which are about to be put to the test of experience. Kelly (1955, p. 72)

Kelly wrote at a time when behaviourism and psychoanalysis dominated psychology and, in much the same way as we have alluded here to the limitations of other analytical approaches, he himself felt that these two key schools of thought diminished the experience of what it is to be human. Arguably, he might have agreed with Freud (1856 – 1939) on the value of introspection to access inner, mostly subconscious beliefs that influence the self-concept. He might also have agreed with Jung (1875 – 1961) on the role of experiential internalisation in individuating people. However, he disagreed with both the behaviourist and psychoanalytic schools on the role of choice and the location of expertise. For Kelly, the person is not a ‘tabula rasa’, nor are they controlled by external forces or unconscious impulses. Instead, we are self-determined, active sensemakers who have freedom over our own choices in the process. We exist within an individually derived, yet inextricably interrelated, web of experiential and perceptual contrasts that form an associative mental map (our construct system) of how we see the world, which in turn influences our interpretations (our constructs) and decisions (our choices). From this perspective, our lived sense of reality is both ‘framed’ and ‘caged’ by our personal histories and construct systems (Ryle, 1975). In PCP, the person themselves is the expert in their own life, is agentic and has an active choice over their own development, which is summed up nicely in his often quoted saying that “No one needs to paint himself [sic] into a corner; no one needs to be completely hemmed in by circumstances; no one needs to be a victim of his biography” (Kelly, 1955, p. 15).

In PCP, the central placement of the person, and the privileging of idiosyncratic experiences, is not undertaken in isolation of their social context (Dalton & Dunnett, 1992). The overarching aim is to understand the person within their social context, in other words, to understand how they intra-individually make sense of their social existence rather than aiming to understand social or cultural processes inter-individually, which is the prime focus of other discursive approaches (Wiggins, 2017). In PCP, the person is seen as being dynamically situated within their social environment, so that they both draw their own meaning and understanding from it (i.e., construe it) and share those meanings and understandings with others within it. The main aim of PCP research is to understand how individuals, alone and in groups, construct meaning for themselves. To this end, PCP researchers make several core assumptions about a person, namely: they are responsible agents, their understanding grows through reflection in and on action, and they are active meaning seekers who are capable of self-direction and potentially open to change and development.

## PCP as a narrative psychology

While Kelly (1955) resisted attempts to compartmentalise PCP within existing philosophical domains, PCP is a theory of both human thinking and doing that aligns itself most closely with interpretivist and phenomenological approaches (Butt, 2008; Denicolo et al., 2016). Kelly (1955) developed his theory of personal constructs before the start of the cognitive approach in psychology as an alternative to the deterministic perspective of behaviourism. Then qualitative research existed in a narrow, disregarded fringe at the edge of serious scientific endeavour and the domain of phenomenological psychology had yet to take root (Spinelli, 2005). It is important to recognise this environment because, along with the theory’s original focus towards therapeutic intervention rather than research, it helps explain why Kelly paid little attention to the holistic analysis of constructs elicited from narrative accounts when he extensively explained how to analyse the more structured Repertory Grid. Kelly died in 1967 so we must look beyond Kelly’s original work to find commonalities in thinking among later constructivists working in the narrative space.

Although the earlier psychologists such as Freud (1856 – 1939), Jung (1875 – 1961), and Adler (1870 – 1937) were interested in the content of narrative accounts of people’s lived experiences, the field of narrative psychology is credited as beginning in the 1980s with the narrative turn (Hiles & Cermak, 2013). Constructivists including Bruner (1986) highlighted the loss of the richness of the lived experience rendered by the earlier shift to cognitivism and encouraged the idea of the person as storyteller, reorienting research towards understanding the construction of meaning through narratives. Sarbin (1986) regarded the narrative as a new root metaphor, or organising principle, for psychological study and his view that humans are both authors and actors in their own self-narratives mirrors Kelly’s position. Sarbin suggested that narratives provide a richer way of exploring psychological lives than experimental methods, because they enable elaboration of the meanings embroiled in everyday interactions and interpretations.

Kelly’s (1955) seminal work was based on a main proposition, termed the Fundamental Postulate, that “A person’s processes are psychologically channelized by the way in which he [sic] anticipates events”(p. 320), with consequent eleven corollaries (outcomes of the main proposition). His assertion that each person is a scientist [man the scientist metaphor], developing hypotheses/ predictions, trying them out, and adapting them in the light of results, underpins the range of data collection methods he devised and then encouraged others to develop further. The additional metaphor of “humans as storytellers” was proposed by Howard (1988, p. 270) and further developed by Mair (1989) who contended that PCP was especially story-valuing. Mair playfully invited us to consider re-wording the Fundamental Postulate and corollaries to incorporate our propensity to story our lives. We provide extracts to demonstrate his ideas:

* Fundamental Postulate: a persons’ processes are psychologically channelized by the *stories that they live* and the *stories that they tell.*
* Individuality corollary: individuals differ in the stories they live and the stories they tell,
* Experience corollary: *A person’s story varies* as he [sic] successively construes the replication of events.
* Sociality corollary: To the extent that one person construes *the stories* of another, he [sic] may play a role in a social process involving the other person.

Bruner (1991) also saw culture as the subjective context within which meanings are interdependently negotiated by “indigenous participants” (p. 17). Bruner (1987) elaborated on the intrinsic use of narratives as a way of continually interpreting and reinterpreting our experiences in an active effort to make sense of the world we inhabit, which is aligned with the purposeful and anticipatory stance on thinking that is inherent within Kelly’s (1955) Fundamental Postulate. As constructivists, Kelly, Sarbin and Bruner all place the person centre stage (as autobiographer/ scientist) in the experiential flow of their own life. They, along with others, recognise that narratives are not just separate entities that are told to a listener, they are also self-scripts that help us create and interpret our experiential worlds.

## The role of discourse and language in PCP

Polkinghorne (1995) described the narrative as a linguistic form of situated, purposeful action that enables us to organise holistically separated events into an experiential flow. While PCP shares with other discursive approaches the view of language as contextually located and productive (Willig, 2008), it approaches narratives from a different start point and desires different outcomes from narrative data. Bruner (1991) distinguished between “the narrative mode of *thought* from the forms of narrative discourse” (p. 5). The field of discursive psychology adopts a social constructionist position and so focuses on discourse, whereas PCP is oriented towards thought, although its perspectives on the influence of social roles would arguably encourage consideration of both aspects. Discursive psychology is interested in understanding what the narrative text is doing as a social and action-oriented performance, whereas PCP is interested in understanding the person intra-individually as an agentic being who uses narratives as way of creating, maintaining, and sharing personal meanings.

How people tell their stories is influenced by who they are telling their stories to (including to themselves) and the context in which they tell them. To illuminate this point, we invite you to compare what you might say in a short biography for a book jacket or a conference programme or a submission to join a social committee or describe to a new family member. Then ponder what those different audiences might ‘hear’ in your story, and how their own experiences and circumstances might filter your intended meaning. This demonstrates that we adapt our language style and story content to suit contexts and social roles, which offers a different perspective to discursive psychologists (see Potter & Edwards, 1992; Potter & Wetherell, 1987) who argue that groups, societies, and cultures can be understood through their conversations.

PCP researchers often request participants to provide considerable detail about a specific aspect of their lives, encouraging them to unravel the thread of that story from the many others with which it is entangled. In constructivist research, methods are selected that privilege the telling of a particular story in the language of the teller and in a way that encourages free flow, unfettered by guiding (or some would say, confining?) questions from the minds of the researcher. We believe that these provide improved access to the teller’s meaning than more directive or extractive methods. It does, though, necessarily demand more time and care both during the telling and in the analysis and interpretation of the story. Some help is provided by PCP methods that explore the contrast poles of constructs, deemed in the theory to be dichotomous dimensions for differentiating objects, people, events and so on. Hence our alerting you to the contrasts applied in Dickens’ description of revolutionary times in the opening quotation, describing a time that you might think has some resonance with our own oscillating despair/hope situation during the 2020 pandemic.

When applying a construct to our experience, we tend to favour one pole (the elicited pole). People might, say, describe a recently read book as interesting. In seeking the contrast or ‘submerged’ pole, how a book that is not interesting might be described, we might be surprised by the variation we discover, with different people using the following contrasts: boring; too complex; tedious; unchallenging; old hat. Already we have an indication that a common word such as interesting has subtle, and sometimes not so subtle, differences in meaning for different people when applied to books. All this before we contemplate how the original person might use ‘interesting’ in a different way when applied to people rather than books.

However, it is not simply a matter of vocabulary. In our research methods book (Denicolo et al., 2016) we discuss at length the difficulties inherent in using decontextualised language alone to explore others’ meanings. We can assume too much from an apparently shared language, perhaps not recognising the differences, not just in professional jargon, of usage of specific words between localities, generations, and social groupings. Listen to teenagers talking now, then reflect on your own and your parents’ words that describe positive, favoured attributes to confront that issue (cf. fab, gear, cool, wicked, lit, dank).

In PCP, constructs can also be pre-verbal (learnt at an early age before language acquisition) and non-verbal (based on socially or culturally derived signals, such as a shrug or raised eyebrow). Additional complexity arises if we consider how intonation, emphasis and non-verbal communication can radically change the meaning of spoken words. In our illustration the last contrast pole, old hat, is a dead metaphor, incomprehensible to the young, derived from a period when a gentleman would not venture out without a hat, thus telling us something about the user of the phrase. Metaphors pervade our language, many philosophers including Nietzsche suggesting that all language is metaphor. Further, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) suggest that pervasive metaphors serve to orientate, as well as describe, how we think about and behave towards things, an experiential position with which PCP aligns. An example is the Western notion that time is money - we try to use our time *profitably*, regretting the *cost* of waiting for a delayed train which caused us to have to *budget* our time accordingly.

Discursive psychology approaches the use of metaphors in narratives in a different way to PCP (Edwards, 1991), with the former being interested in understanding how they are employed as rhetorical devices and the latter in understanding how they are used to elaborate meaning. Discursive psychology, as defined by Potter and Wetherell (1987), focuses on consensus and action, rather than on cognition, and so analysis from this perspective involves searching for the action orientation and argumentative position within texts. This different perspective on understanding how people use metaphors to convey meaning is one of, if not the most, important limitations in using social constructionist methods to analysis personal constructivist narratives.

Kelly (1955) drew on Vaihinger’s (1852 – 1933) philosophy of “As if” as a way of enabling people to use the symbolic and language elements of narratives to explore how they assign meanings to events and, by encouraging them to apply novel, currently fictitious metaphors to aspects of their lives, create new ‘truths’ for themselves. This stance fits with Bruner’s (1987) perspective on narratives as shapers of perception and culture and on language as a constructor of narratives, rather than them being mere reflections of some external, singular reality. It also means that, from a PCP perspective, we see the narrative as an everyday manifestation and embodiment of an aspect of the person’s perceptual world, rather than as a methodological device (Elbaz, 1990).

While the notion of storied lives is itself a compelling metaphor and collecting narratives a potential conduit to richer understanding of others’ meanings, it does not make a researcher’s analysis and interpretation of data easier – far from it. One of us noted some time ago:

One of the frustrating things about espousing a personal construct philosophy, or indeed any of a range of phenomenological approaches to research, is that it behoves one to take into account an astonishing variety of possible interpretations or constructions of reality. ......How much easier it would be to return to a childlike belief that there is an answer to every problem (Denicolo 1996, p. 56)

Nevertheless, it is that very complexity that provides our lived sense of constancy and stability. This sense stems from the continual flow of our construing that inextricably intertwines our individual interpretations with our social world and creates the perceptual experience of a narrated life. Our constructs are the building blocks of our experiential worlds and, as noted by Ryle (1975), they both ‘frame’ our development and ‘cage’ our potential. While PCP provides a plethora of methods for understanding and intervening in people’s sensemaking processes and lifeworlds, there was not previously a distinctive PCP approach to analysing the emergent narratives.

# Personal Constructivist Narrative Analysis

Connelly and Clandinin (1990) referred to narrative inquiry as “a process of collaboration involving mutual storytelling and restorying as the research proceeds” (p. 4). For constructivist researchers, consideration of the mode of analysis should be carefully considered at the study design stage as the decisions relating to data collection techniques, how they are applied, and the resulting analysis of data are closely dependent on the nature and context of participants. How participants might optimally access and express their construing is as crucial to the research process as is being clear about the purpose of the research, be it to answer research questions, such as, ‘what does person Y understand by their role in situation X?’, or to take an inductive approach to explain what is going on in a specific situation involving people.

Constructivists recognise that devising a purpose is already rife with researcher bias (their own prior experience and interests and that of those who fund them) and thus begins the analytic effort to reduce inherent bias while exploring, and then telling, their participants’ stories embedded within their data. Many forms of qualitative data analysis techniques advocate some form of bracketing off, or setting aside, of researcher perspectives in attempts to keep interpretations as ‘pure’ or as true to the data origin as possible. Constructivist researchers recognise intrinsic limitations on those efforts and attempt instead to explicitly acknowledge the interpretative and collaborative role of the researcher. By declaring relevant background information and questioning their own assumptions, they enable the research audience to both recognise interpretative influences and challenge assertions from differing perspectives. This is within the spirit of Kelly’s epistemology, the ‘invitational mood’ that encourages the presentation of ideas ‘*as if*’ they might have potential value when considered by others.

Although some PCP techniques, such as Repertory Grids, may at first glance seem very structured, lending themselves to computer analysis of the links between constructs, they, like the diverse range of written and pictorial based techniques for eliciting constructs, are in essence just catalysts for in-depth conversations yielding rich narrative data (see Bradley-Cole & Denicolo, 2020; Denicolo et al., 2016 for a wide range of elicitation methods). The way the story develops and the language in which it is expressed is very much determined by the participant, though the researcher, through skilled use of different elicitation techniques, encourages the making of implicit constructs more explicit. However, those constructs will naturally be in the language of the participants and a product of their contexts, so their meaning for the participant will not be presented overtly in the narrative accounts. Hence the need to permeate the whole research process from the beginning with structured analysis techniques.

## Elaborating the process

Having situated PCP within the landscape of narratives and discourse, we now move on to elaborate a four-stage process of conducting narrative based, personal constructivist research framed around Kompf’s notions of reflections in and on action by both researcher and participant (Denicolo & Pope, 2001, p.97). The process also encompasses three sub-stages of analysing narratives, however elicited, that enable multi-level exploration of constructs, metaphors, roles, implicit beliefs, and emotions. As we indicated earlier, a process of pre-analysis begins in the early part of the design stage, as described next, and is continued through the data collection stage that follows.

### Stage 1: preparation (anticipation), incorporated into the design stage of a project

Reflecting Kelly’s epistemology, Benjamin (1981) proposed that empathic interviewers should feel their way into the frame of reference of each interviewee, to see the world through their eyes ‘*as if’* it was their own world. This involves becoming familiar with their context, both cultural and age-related. This can also help with the selection of interviewees when some may have more relevant expert knowledge than others (expert or key respondents) or when triangulation of perspectives from actors with different roles in a process might illuminate it further.

When a narrative is derived from documents then exploration of the historical context is also appropriate. Take as an example the quotation with which we introduced this article. We wrote during the Covid-19 pandemic and could readily relate to the situation described, hope contrasting with despair as wisdom and foolishness alternated in presence around us, whether we lived in London or Paris, the two cities in the book title. Yet the tale took place when London was subject to burgeoning political reforms while Paris was in the grip of the Revolution. The protagonists in the story inhabited a world very hard for us to really appreciate now, despite the use of recognisable descriptors. Our participants, albeit our contemporaries, also dwell in circumstances that in many respects differ from ours. This behoves us to explore in advance their context, perhaps in the form of a cultural audit, so that we can interact with them more appropriately and locate their stories socially and temporally by being alert to potentially different priorities and language use.

At this stage, selecting techniques/methods to suit the needs and abilities of our key respondents is crucial. These should be techniques that stimulate participant reflection while also allowing them to articulate abstract thoughts and feelings in ways accessible to others, the researcher specifically. PCP provides a large variety of techniques, many of which can also be adapted in various ways to suit different situations, such as working with people with severe learning difficulties (Apraiz, 2001) or doctoral researchers (Dowle, 2020), to understand their concerns and challenges. These examples illustrate the need to ascertain in advance participants’ language register and vocabulary range to facilitate effective data collection.

### Stage 2: data collection

The foregoing describes how we prepare ourselves to enter the context of the research participant so that during the process of eliciting their constructs, encouraging them to share their perspectives with us, we can, as it were, begin to inhabit their frame of reference, or cage, alongside them. By doing so, we can get to know them and their lifeworlds holistically, as well as their perspectives on the research topic, and, for instance, gain an inkling of how their ‘despair’ and ‘hope’ might match, or not, our feeling of it.

Effective listening involves hearing the way things are said: the tone, expressions and gestures used, as well as paying attention to what is not said, or only hinted at, involving ears, eyes, skin, and guts (Ekman, 1964). This has immense implications for what is included and coded in a transcript prepared for detailed further analysis. Again, the level of detail required is dependent on the purpose of the project and should be considered at the design stage.

It is not only the participants who need to be reflective. We also need to be reflecting-in-action during this stage (Schön, 1983), first identifying our own role in the story as the researcher: what our role position is and how it might influence both the telling and the interpretation of the story. This highlighting of reflection on our own role acknowledges the double hermeneutic: the translation from the participant’s construct to verbalised thought, followed by the translation of that verbalisation into researcher understanding. The triple hermeneutic comes as the researcher attempts to convey that understanding to readers with the added requirement of the provision of supporting evidence from data analysis for interpretations and contentions. All these steps involve induction and iteration as ideas are produced, examined, explored further, elaborated, or discarded. In line with other qualitative approaches, such as grounded theory, we advocate the use of field notes throughout the data collection stage to facilitate reflection-in-action and to keep sight of participants’ contextual worlds through how they utilise symbols, myths, rituals, and non-verbal utterances in their constructs.

### Stage 3: personal constructivist data analysis post collection

This activity involves reflection-on-action and could be considered as involving three sub- stages.

**Stage 3a: Macro-analysis.** The researcher interrogates the research results, asking some fundamental questions of the story: what is this story about, why is it being told, what are its boundaries, what is its context -geographical, cultural and historical? Then the roles/role positions of the actors within the story are identified, including the researched and the researcher as interpreter of the narrative.

**Stage 3b: Intermediate analysis.** This involves using both the Stage 1 audit activity and the Stage 3a macro-analysis as a foundation for a richer picture of the participant-in-context. Both the participant’s narrative and the researcher’s field notes should be reviewed line by line to identify metaphors, rituals, myths, and other rhetorical devices that are in currency for that specific person from that generation in their physical, political, and cultural environment, as you would from discourse analysis but remembering that their purpose in PCP is to illuminate personal meanings. The review of field notes should facilitate understanding of what might be influencing the participant’s story and how they express their meanings. An explicit attempt must be made to avoid misinterpretation by assuming common modes of communication or similar meanings derived from similar experiences. Keeping field notes and analysing them as part of the corpus of data helps with own role management throughout the analytical process.

It is also pertinent to contemplate at this point what is omitted from the narrative. This includes what participants might assume to be obvious to us, or what they find difficult or embarrassing to articulate or what they deliberately exclude for any other reason. In our research book (Denicolo et al., 2016), we have noted the critical importance of establishing a respectful climate of rapport and trust when collecting data by, for example, advance investigation of cultural/professional etiquette. However, this cannot exclude recent or on-the-day circumstances or life events that might limit full and frank disclosure. We are privileged when we are invited to share in some of their construing though we must recognise that we are only glimpsing a tiny portion of it as we scour their words for their implications.

**Stage 3c: Micro-analysis.** This is the more common stage of interpretative analysis, thematically generating categories of meaning that reflect participants’ lived experiences. It is important to recognise at this point how much interpretation has already taken place. For example, transcription of verbal data into narrative form is a key act of interpretation, as are field notes and the preceding analytical stages. We do not suggest that these interpretations or embryonic theories are set aside but rather that they are made explicit, perhaps in a memo, so that any embedded assumptions can be challenged as the work progresses. This reflects Connelly and Clandinin’s (1990) assertion that narrative inquiry is a collaborative and evolving process of storytelling between participant and researcher that can help provide evidence of research rigour in the final write up.

For this stage, we provide a personal constructivist version of thematic analysis. Methodologically, it reflects the six steps outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), but with some alterations and with the incorporation of information derived from Stage 3b. Whilst we have argued that PCP aligns itself most closely with phenomenology, we are pragmatically suggesting a relativist ontological, but theoretically flexible, methodological approach to thematic analysis because it shares several key positions with PCP. Namely, it positions the researcher as an active interpreter, while it emphasises the participant as being situated within their context. Braun and Clarke (2006) define a theme as capturing “something important about the data in relation to the research question and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set” (p. 10).

From a PCP perspective, we are interested in identifying a person’s or group’s units of meanings, however, our position on patterns within the data is somewhat distinct. We seek to identify patterns in construing and how constructs may be shared with, or distinguished from those held by, others. In a position more closely aligned to Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith, 1995), there is no requirement on the PCP researcher to explain the full dataset, or to find the most simple way of explaining it. Kelly (1955) recognised and embraced the perceptual inconsistencies and conflicts that naturally arise within our evolving life-stories in his fragmentation corollary therefore one of the distinguishing features of PCP is that it accomodates the irrationality and subjectivity of human construing. Working in this paradigm means accepting that there is also more than one story contained within each narrative, so part of the researcher’s interpretative role is determining which is the most relevant story to tell from your participant’s perspective.

In summary, the steps in a personal constructivist thematic analysis are:

1. ***(Re-)Immersion in the data*.** Using the field recordings, narrative accounts, and field notes, along with the insights derived from the intermediate analysis stage, become fully engaged in the participant’s lifeworld through immersion in the data and seek out more obvious patterns of words and phrases as units of meaning.
2. ***Initial coding.*** Use a systematic process to identify constructs and their contrasts within each line of the narrative and generate descriptive codes in relation to the research question/purpose. Make note of any responses that are imbued with or altered by emotions (e.g., fear, anxiety, happiness) and any non-verbal linguistic cues (e.g., pauses, sighs, laughs) that could have a bearing on intended meanings.
3. ***Search for potential themes*.** Start moving beyond description by organising/grouping initial codes in various alternative ways with the aim of producing an initial thematic map that reflects the nature of the person’s construct system relating to the topic of enquiry. Codes should be organised hierarchically to reflect the superordinate (higher) or subordinate (lower) structure of constructs within their constellatory network and their core (related to the person’s sense of self) or peripheral (related to general beliefs) status. Where possible, also note the permeability of constructs (whether they seem more fixed or elastic in their application), and their breadth of application across the topic (comprehensively or incidentally applied).
4. ***Review of themes.*** Extend interpretation and abstraction by categorising constructs within higher order, interpreted themes, revising coding as necessary to refine them until a good fit, a coherent reflection of intended/conveyed meanings within the story, is obtained.
5. ***Definition of themes*.** Reach a high level of abstraction from the original data by revisiting the construct categories, roles, metaphors, and symbols and checking if the thematic map sufficiently reflects their essence within an internally consistent story. Undertake further interpretation and analysis if needed to delineate and interpret all the units of meaning into a situated and credible narrative. Revisit memos and check for changes in your original assumptions that help evidence your collaborative and rigorous approach to research.
6. ***Write-up*.** the final story of the research should reflect the essence of the participants’ construals within an internally consistent story. Support interpretations with data taken at different stages of analysis, across a spectrum from actual quotations to abstract explanations. A choice can be made to take the story back to the participant for authentication so that their reflections can be considered alongside the researcher’s by readers of the report.

Although we have described the process as if there were only one participant, it may well be that several participants have stories to tell that may weave together with the original narrative. For instance, we may be comparing people who undertake similar roles or complementary roles within the same context or in different ones. When comparing patterns of construing, while we might save effort if aspects on context are similar, we should be mindful that common events may be interpreted differently by individuals involved while their use of common words does not necessarily imply common understandings: refer to our earlier example of describing a book as ‘interesting’. When investigating the worlds of several people it is particularly important to explore contrast poles of constructs, perhaps asking them what they would see as the opposite to what they are describing.

Whether we have one or more participants, there is, then, a finite limit to our investigations so there is a final stage to constructivist analysis.

### Stage 4: Disengagement and Ethics

As with any research, ethical principles insist that we should leave the field with no harm done. However, with constructivist approaches we cannot expect to leave the participants ‘as we found them’. Inevitably, the process of exploring their constructs in depth frequently, if sometimes inadvertently, causes them to examine their own constructs that had been submerged or unacknowledged, thus leaving them changed by the encounter. Not only should we incorporate opportunities for them to become comfortable with those outcomes, but we should also proffer the opportunity for them to reconsider previous permissions for what is revealed publicly. This can be concerning for researchers who face losing important pieces of data from their reports, but it can be re-interpreted as a research challenge to be overcome by skilled negotiation and writing. This is a challenge we take on ourselves in condensing this elaborated procedure into a simplified format, as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Constructivist Narrative Analysis Procedures*

*[insert Table 1 here]*

# Synopsis & Discussion

In this paper we have endeavoured to convey the importance of congruency between research purpose, philosophical approach, and methodology, focusing especially on analysis of data. The emphasis of personal constructivist research is on exploring individual meaning to produce rich description of the topic of enquiry. The aim is for elaboration and transferability, rather than reduction and generalisability. Researchers working in this field face the challenge of judging the appropriate balance between breadth and depth in the face of scarce resources, especially those of time and skill set.

The elaborate procedures we have described here for analysing narrative data that pervade the research process will clearly sometimes be excessive, for example when only a general level impression of perspectives is sought. In this case, the researcher should choose methods of data collection and analysis appropriate to the task that make fewer demands on themselves and their participants. However, if a choice has been made to seek detailed understanding of how and why people make sense of a specific aspect of their worlds and how and why they translate that sense into the actions they take in it, then the choice of willing and able participants, the range of targeted data-eliciting methods and the involvement of the analysis effort in the elaborated, explicit form we describe, is worthwhile.

Nevertheless, it is possible to draw benefits from broader applications using pyramiding or inverse pyramiding. For instance, working to explore in-depth the views/constructs of selected, previous contributors to a large-scale research project can serve to both elaborate and elucidate the findings. Similarly, the investment of time and skill spent on working with one or two key informants to elicit priorities, language use, and modes of expressing meaning within a cognate group can pay dividends in relevance and comprehension when designing large scale research about topics of interest as they pertain to that group.

We recognise that many good research ideas are enthusiastically generated, fieldwork well-designed to collect interesting information and then earnestly embarked on. However, it is our contention that it is often the case that *potentially* rich data is frequently amassed but seldom done justice to at the analysis stage. Copious scripts are superficially scrutinised or reviewed perfunctorily or, most sadly, left in boxes in attics for lack of knowing what to do with them. These are the results of neglecting the critical steps of incorporating consideration of analysis as early as the question-devising stage and then within the fieldwork design.

We hope that our summary table, with its elaborated rationale, counters that trend and enables constructivist researchers to bring to life the rich patterns of meaning that determine salient aspects of the lives of their participants. In this way they might embark on the real voyage of discovery advocated by Proust who contended that if we visited far planets while keeping the same senses, we would see them only from an earth-bound perspective.

**The only true voyage of discovery, ......, would be not to visit strange lands but to possess other eyes, to behold the universe through the eyes of another, of a hundred others, to behold the hundred universes that each of them beholds, that each of them is.**

Marcel Proust, La Prisonnière, Vol. 5, [*À la recherche du temps perdu*](https://www.google.co.uk/search?sxsrf=ALeKk0026iGJgxklqWNYGPnMVQye0MBeBA:1608116286222&q=marcel+proust+%C3%A0+la+recherche+du+temps+perdu&stick=H4sIAAAAAAAAAOPgE-LQz9U3MLUoK1DiArGyjTJyC821JLKTrfQLUvMLclKBVFFxfp5Vbn5ZZmrxIlad3MSi5NQchYKi_NLiEoXDCxRyEhWKUpMzUouAWCGlVKEkNbegWAGoLaV0BysjAH1mjFNkAAAA&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwiyov3_q9LtAhWCgVwKHTJdC4YQmxMoBDAoegQIMRAG)*, 1923.*

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## Table 1. Constructivist Narrative Analysis Procedures

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **STAGE** | **ACTIVITY** |
| 1. **Preparation/anticipation pre data collection** | Incorporated into the design stage, exploration of the research context: historical, social, cultural, linguistic, etc, with potential to impinge on the participants’ meaning/construct systems and their mode of expression. This influences selection of key respondents and data collection techniques as well as being used later to inform interpretations. |
| 1. **Data collection** | Preparation to enter the frame of reference of the participant rather than imposing own.  Reflection-in-action. |
| 1. **Analysis of data post collection** | |
| 1. **Macro- analysis** | Interrogation of the whole story: what, why, how, and who. Construction of picture of participant-in-context, what influences meaning systems and their expression. |
| 1. **Intermediate analysis** | Recognition of what might be being omitted and the limitations of our access to others’ meaning systems. |
| 1. **Micro-analysis** | The use of traditional methods of narrative analysis, such as thematic analysis to explore transcripts for themes, whilst incorporating learning from previous stages to enrich interpretation. |
| 1. **Disengagement and ethics** | Engagement with ethical principles of research elaborated to incorporate acknowledgement that the participant/s will inevitably be changed by the encounter and should be given support and opportunity to withdraw data. |