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Exploring personal identities through constructions of footwear
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Introduction

I'm going to present findings from a study using grids gathered in workshop at International PCP Congress, Venice 2009 and at a further workshop in UK, which built on an earlier pilot study. We presented the findings from this pilot study at the International PCP Congress in Venice, 2009. It was based on the idea that the construction and expression of personal identity is becoming more dependent upon material goods and possessions and we are accustomed to the idea that the things we wear express the kind of person we are, or would like to be seen as, and the notion that many women are fascinated by shoes has entered popular consciousness. The idea of exploring women's identities through footwear emerged and we felt that shoes could be a route into identity that women would find meaningful, interesting and enjoyable. We were surrounded by women offering to be our participants! The pilot study involved four women between the ages of approx 30 and 45, two of whom were passionate about shoes and two for whom shoes were more of a practical necessity. We used pictures of various shoes as elements in a role construct repertory test, using triads and dyads to elicit constructs and interviewing the women further about the constructs that emerged. We found that, regardless of the women's level of interest in shoes, the method was very successful in quickly leading to important identity dimensions of meaning for the women. So what I'm reporting today is a follow-up study. We wanted to get an idea of whether the kinds of issues that had been raised in our pilot sample were shared by other women, and to try out the grid as a way of getting further information about the relationships between constructs that we might potentially analyse.

Method

We asked the women to work in pairs as co-investigators, taking it in turns to create grids for each other. Men who took part in the workshops did not complete grids- we feel there are likely to be such gender differences that it would not make sense to include data from men at this stage. Worked with 12 shoe images In second workshop, women also supplied some of their own shoes (show examples). Elicited constructs using triads or dyads of elements and recorded these in a pre-prepared grid, organising construct poles as preferred on left and non-preferred on right (show grid). We added three further non-shoe elements- the woman I am, the woman I fear I might be and the woman I'd like to be. We included these as they seem to have been useful concepts in a previous research study (ref here) and seemed likely to highlight issues of dissatisfaction with self and desire for change.

In total, 31 women completed grids using same shoe pictures working in pairs. Men were 'interviewers'.

The women were of various nationalities. Many came from the UK and Italy, with others from Australia, USA, Cyprus and Sri Lanka. They ranged in age from 26 to 64, with a good spread of ages between the youngest and oldest. Otherwise of course not at all a diverse sample- all well-educated, professional people.

Findings

The women produced 215 constructs, with most women producing between 4 and 10.

1. Construct 'themes'. Grouped constructs into themes using content analysis. But sometimes hard to know what the meaning was- a downside of using grids without opportunity to explore meanings as in an interview, and also possible language difficulties. It would have been very interesting to have the opportunity to talk to some of the women about some of the intriguing constructs that emerged.

In this analysis I only selected the constructs I felt were easily identifiable as belonging to one of these themes.

This resulted in 14 categories, accounting for 162 (75%) of the constructs. In order to derive some of these categories, it was necessary to enter some constructs into more than one category. Numbers in brackets refer to number of constructs in each category- just gives some idea of prevalence.

Comfortable 14
Practical 13
Elegance and class 14
Femininity 9
Boring and plain 26
Age 4
Sexuality 14
Conformity and individuality 13
Fashionable 9
Exhibitionism and being noticed 15
Aesthetics 15
Safety 7
Freedom and constraint 5
Fun and frivolity 10

I'm not going to look at them all, but concentrate on those that I think are particularly interesting.

This list reflects some of the issues raised by the women in our pilot study. But what is interesting is the diversity of constructs that are 'hidden' within the apparent consistency. The category 'comfortable' was the only one where the constructs seemed almost identical for each woman, with 10 out of 14 constructs being simply "comfortable versus uncomfortable", and comfortable being almost, but not quite always, the preferred pole- which I'll come back to in a moment. Shoes and comfort are, because the construct emerges so readily, an issue at the forefront of women's minds. Are men's shoes ever so uncomfortable that the issue of comfort looms large for them? For what are women prepared to sacrifice comfort?

With regard to the constructs around elegance and class, again it was the contrast, and always non-preferred, poles that were the most informative. The contrast poles of these 11 constructs often seemed to express a rejection of the vulgar, common, cheap and trashy. The exception above was 'elegant vs comfortable'. Elegance seems such a non 21st century concept, and yet it seems to be something that women continue to aspire to.

Femininity was another construct where the same term was used, always at the preferred pole, but where the contrast poles showed a lot of diversity, suggesting that it connects to a range of issues for women: Feminine vs sexless, aggressive, masculine, butch, neutral, all-rounder, pretending to play a role, practical, brazen/predatory. Femininity as a preferred pole was again something that could be seen as surprising in the context of our understanding of 21st century womanhood.

The apparently straightforward idea of 'practical' concealed a range of constructs with very different meanings. The actual word 'practical' was very often used as one pole of the construct, although this was sometimes the preferred pole and sometimes the non-preferred pole. The contrast poles included impractical, flimsy, frivolous, entertaining, playful and feminine. It's an object lesson in the Kellyan principle that constructs follow psycho-logic, not formal logic.

This was somewhat less true of the 26 constructs including the term boring or plain, or something closely related to this idea. Almost exclusively, and perhaps unsurprisingly, the boring or plain term was located at the non-preferred pole (interestingly, the one exception was plain vs vain, which appears to have a moral overtone). Taken together, the contrast poles suggest a desire for fun and frivolity, glamour and excitement, creativity and expressiveness, interest and vibrancy.

Sexuality, as anticipated, featured in many of the women's grids. Here, it was instructive to look at the preferred and non-preferred poles. Constructs where some version of 'being sexy' was the preferred pole included:

Sexy vs missionary
Sexy vs frumpy
Seductive vs off-putting
Proud to be a sexy woman vs conservative

Here being sexy seems to be preferred to being a passion-killer or unadventurous. But in other constructs the non-preferred pole had to do with suggesting problematic sexuality. They included:

Outgoing vs loose morals
Individual personality vs stereotype woman of the street
Free spirit vs sexualised (empty headed)
Wonderfully ridiculous vs tarty
Stylish vs tarty
Someone whose sexuality is more refined vs tarty, letting men know they're up for it!

These constructs seem to suggest that being sexy for women may mean treading a narrow path - it's about how to celebrate and enjoy one's sexuality without being regarded as a sex object or worse, a tart. This was encapsulated by one construct:

Classically sexy vs slutty

2. The woman I am and the woman I'd like to be. Over half of the women showed some disparity between 'the woman am' and 'the woman I'd like to be', ie on one or more constructs. However, it proved almost impossible to make much sense of these responses. In the case of a few individuals, the disparity did seem to fit with the content

analysis I've just talked about. For example, P20 sees herself as 'common' but would like to be 'elegant'. P4 saw herself as an 'all-rounder' but would like to be 'feminine', Emily saw herself as 'drab' but would like to be 'sexy', Sophie saw herself as 'boring' but would prefer to be 'interesting' and P11 saw herself as 'elegant' but would prefer to be 'comfortable'! But in many cases the constructs were not ones where it was possible to understand the meaning without talking further to the woman, and in particular the meaning of the desired pole, for example:

Woman I am	Woman I'd like to be
accommodating	hard work
normal	wacky
fashion victim	in style
unprotective	safe
trendy	overly girly
unchanging	ephemeral

Some of these might have been mistakes in using the left and right hand poles and got reversed- just don't know.

3. Bipolarity. Many of the constructs that emerged seemed to involve very odd contrasts- even taking into consideration the variety of construing that we can expect in even a fairly homogenous population, and I was dubious that they could be taken to operate for the person in a bi-polar fashion. Examples:

Serious vs bad taste
 Sporty vs identity-driven
 Outgoing vs loose morals
 Frivolous vs aggressive
 Bouncy vs mincey
 Lively vs self-confident

When we did the pilot interviews, some of the contrasts that the women produced needed a good deal of 'unpacking' and they revealed a whole cluster of constructs contained within them. Sometimes this might be due to using dyads rather than triads. So in the case of the any of the above 'constructs', one pole could in fact denote one construct and the other pole a quite different one. For example, after discussion we might have found that lively vs self confident became:

Lively vs lacks energy
 Self-confident vs timid

In the second workshop I tried to avoid this by looking at the emerging constructs and inviting the participants to think about the contrasts poles outside of the context of the actual shoes producing the construct.

4. Range of convenience. One of the consequences of using shoes as elements is that some of the constructs that emerge have a very limited range of convenience. This is likely to be true of the constructs around comfort, and there were many others such as:

Heels vs flat
Uniform neutral colour vs not harmonious in colour
Delicate vs sturdy
Soft vs hard (give blisters)
Summer (no socks) vs covered up, enclosed

However, there were surprisingly few of these and instead many of constructs that would seem to be actually be harder to apply to shoes than to a person, for example:

Feeling in control vs not having my own mind
Happy vs sad
Open mind vs closed mind
Who is liked vs scared
Serious vs stupid
Benign vs dangerous

-as well as many whose range of convenience could happily span both shoes and people. And this is of course what we had hoped for: that the use of shoes led quickly to constructs that were about the person's sense of self (we did of course orient women toward these issues in our instructions.)

Summary

Using shoes seems to be an engaging and productive way of enquiring about sense of self.

Sometimes the area is so rich that further probing of constructs is probably necessary to 'tease out' 'nests' of constructs.

Issues prominent for women include comfort and practicality, but at the same time a desire for elegance and ability to express sexuality and femininity. What women want and need from their shoes is not straightforward, and there is something of a tightrope to be walked between being sexy and being a tart.