

Author Popularity: an Exploratory Study based on Roald Dahl

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ABSTRACT

The study described here is an attempt to identify the elements which make an author popular. Emphasising the views of children themselves, rather than critics, parents and other adults, the research investigates the popularity with young readers of the writer Roald Dahl. The repertory grid technique is used as the means of eliciting children's views, and reasons for selecting this as the method are presented. Some informative constructs are identified by the participants in the study and it is reported that the participants found some qualities and characteristics in common between works by Dahl, thereby rendering them different from other books. Although constraints on participant numbers mean that the study can only be seen as a "first step" towards a clearer understanding of children's liking for works by Roald Dahl, it is argued that an attempt has been made to discover the opinions of the readers themselves by speaking to children, rather than simply considering the views of adults. Recommendations for future research are made. (160)

INTRODUCTION

It has been noted that "There has been a great deal of work on what children enjoy, their favourite authors and titles and topics, but little on why they have these preferences." (1). This sums up the position now as well as it did back in 1983 when this was written. It is particularly true that this issue has not been investigated with the involvement of children themselves.

Roald Dahl (1916-1990) is an interesting case of a very popular British author who has had overwhelming success with his work for children, and who is often considered to be a writer of modern classics. Evidence of Dahl's popularity with children can be seen by looking at his UK sales figures (2, 3, 4) – and by his success amongst British library users. Listed as one of the 14 authors having over one million loans in the UK during 1997-98 (5), 1998-99 (6) and 1999-00 (7), Dahl was also placed at number three of the 10 most borrowed children's authors (over 1 million loans) in the period July 1998 - June 1999 (8). Perhaps more importantly, Dahl's popularity is illustrated by a survey carried out by the section of a British national newspaper aimed at younger readers, called the *Young Telegraph* (9). The newspaper asked its readers to write in with details of their favourite books, therefore attempting to discover the opinions of children themselves about the books they like to read. As a mark of the popularity of Dahl, the survey found that 8 of the top 10 titles, including all of the top 5, were written by him. These figures represent a strong indication of the preference for Dahl as shown by children through their own publication, showing that they do read and enjoy the books. A second illustration of Dahl's success with children can be found in *Young People's Reading at the End of the Century* (10), a study which investigated the reading habits of British children of present times. In answer to a question about favourite story books, the study found that, for children aged 7 to 11, the top six were Dahl titles, and for children aged 11 to 14 and 14

to 16, six of the top ten titles were written by him. Other categories placed Dahl as a strong favourite with young readers.

There are several indications of Dahl's popularity in British surveys of children's reading habits, for example, Hall and Coles (11), and a 1997 survey carried out by the BBC *Bookworm* television program (in conjunction with Waterstones the booksellers) and referred to in Hall and Coles (49-50). Dahl was also placed first in a poll to find out the "nation's favourite modern children's author" (12). The poll was carried out by the BBC Radio 4 program, *Treasure Islands*, and both children and adults were eligible to vote. The most recent illustration of children's abiding affection for Roald Dahl came on World Book Day, Friday March 10th 2000 (13). Ten years after his death, Dahl topped a UK nationwide poll of 40,000 people to determine Britain's favourite author, collecting 4.5% of the vote. Carried out at 4,000 bookshops and libraries, in schools and on the Web, the results of the poll were weighted towards the book-buying tastes of young people. Indeed, it is interesting to note that J K Rowling was placed second in this poll, collecting 3.5% of votes. This demonstrates that Dahl was holding on to his position as a popular children's writer, although Rowling was not far behind at the time of poll.

All of the above demonstrates that Roald Dahl is extremely appropriate to act as the subject of a study investigating author popularity. This research was carried out before the great success of J K Rowling began, however, if the

work was to be undertaken at the present time, she would also be eminently suitable to act as its subject.

It should, perhaps, be borne in mind that popularity is not necessarily an accurate indicator of quality, and this has led to various critical considerations of Dahl. Many of the critics show themselves to be quite opposed to Dahl's work (e.g. 14, 15), and discuss their opinions of various themes of Dahl's work, for example, sexism (15), violence (16) and racism (17). A general consensus which can be found in considerations of Dahl is that he is extremely popular with children, but not always so esteemed by adults (18, 19, 20, 21, 11). Furthermore, if this is the case, and adults generally find Dahl less than loveable, then the fact that critics are themselves adults might explain their broad dislike of Dahl's work. Hall and Coles (11) are generally positive about Dahl and suggest that his success may derive from elements such as the appeal of his disturbing outlook, the use of rude words and noises, the inclusion of humour and wittiness, his unfussy prose style, the fast-moving plots, and identifiable character types. The inclusion of plenty of dialogue, and a narrative voice close to the child's situation, combined with the incorporation of a child-centred world which deliberately excludes adults, particularly parents, are also considered by Hall and Coles to be key to the popularity of Dahl.

However much the critics might attempt to analyse the work of Dahl, though, they are not the buying public, and it is children and parents or other relatives

who purchase the books. Indeed, an anomaly can be seen with reference to the conflicting views about Dahl of children and adults, in that it is the children who are likely to want the books, but that it is their parents who will mostly have the buying power (10). However, in the age of the television generation, when children are said to be losing their desire to read, this conflict is to some extent dissipated by the wish of parents to encourage their children to read, whatever the subject matter might be. Roald Dahl himself understood the importance of reading and saw his own books as “introductions to the idea of books in general” (22).

Whatever the views of adults, the fact remains that Dahl is popular with young readers, and it is the case that little work has been carried out into why children enjoy his work. Certain of the various discussions of Dahl's work do incorporate some discussion of the reasons for his popularity (e.g. 11), but few exhibit the involvement of the children themselves in getting to the heart of this issue. In his discussion of Dahl's suitability for children, Culley (17) mentions, almost in passing, a questionnaire he gave to children aged from six to eleven years, however, no details of investigating Dahl's popularity are given. Scott (23) wondered why teachers use Dahl's work in the classroom, concluding that it was because he was the class favourite, which seems to be rather a circular argument. She then went on to outline how she asked two 10 year old children to explain to her why they liked Dahl. The children were able to mention such characteristics as exaggeration, effective description,

unusual ideas, and extraordinary words as reasons for enjoying Dahl's books. However, this contribution from the children themselves was somewhat limited.

One study which set out to find out the secret of Dahl's popularity from children themselves is by Gouws and Bester (24), who undertook empirical research in South Africa in order to answer this question. A questionnaire was designed which concentrated firstly on Dahl's work in general, and then more specifically on six chosen texts - *Revolting Rhymes* (1982), *Dirty Beasts* (1983), *Matilda* (1988), *The Witches* (1983), *Esio Trot* (1989) and *The Vicar of Nibbleswicke* (1990). Gouws and Bester (24) drew the conclusion that "the very characteristics that offend adult critics make the books appealing to young readers." However, the questionnaire method of eliciting views necessarily leads to a certain amount of influencing of the responses given through the selection of subject matter and language used by the compiler. To this end, attempts were made to enrich the data gathered by requesting respondents to provide motivations for their answers, but an added problem could be seen in that children might be considered to be particularly open to suggestion.

A second study which involved children directly in the research was by Rudd (25), whose work concentrated specifically on one Dahl text - *The Twits* (1980). Rudd's main focus was on the study of children's literature, and he was attempting a "fresh" approach to the subject - "...a Communication Studies approach, using a Foucauldian notion of 'discourse'", which, amongst other

things, he believed would establish "...as a methodological principle, that any study of children's literature should place it in a concrete social context, thus giving more space to children's views" (p4)

Rudd used *The Twits* for his study because it was chosen by the children from one of his participating schools as their favourite book. His study of the novel involved a discussion of critical reactions to it, a deliberation of the various discourses in the work, and finally a consideration of how children themselves discussed and viewed the book. In this case, the children's involvement took the form of recorded interviews with 11 groups of children from three different schools, questioning them about their reasons for enjoying the story.

Despite being an attempt to involve children directly in the study of children's literature, this research was not concerned either with author popularity, or with the specific popularity of Roald Dahl. The study was concerned instead with using one of Dahl's novels - *The Twits* - as a means of testing the idea that a Communication Studies approach might explain the marginalisation of children's literature whilst giving more space to children's views.

The apparent lack of involvement of the readers themselves in the study of the popularity of Roald Dahl's books for children points to a gap in the research on this subject. It was therefore decided that a study investigating

the popularity of Roald Dahl should be designed which took into account the opinions of young readers with regard to his work. It was thought that investigating such a fine example of a popular author would allow for a satisfactory exploration of the components of author popularity. The repertory grid technique was identified as an effective method for such a study, since it is a content-free methodology, which would enable the participants to use their own terms when considering Dahl texts.

USE OF THE REPERTORY GRID TECHNIQUE

The repertory grid technique was developed by George Kelly (26) as part of Personal Construct Theory, which takes the position that humans are basically “scientists” and mentally “represent” the world, composing and testing hypotheses about the nature of reality (27). See Kelly (26) for a more detailed account of the theory.

The repertory grid technique is no longer linked exclusively to Kelly’s theory of personal constructs, because it has been used for a variety of applications, including, for example, investigating the personal meaning of death (28), local attitudes towards tourism development (29), and definitions of emotions (30). The terms coined by Kelly (26) for the repertory grid technique have become standard, so the technique is conventionally described as consisting of “elements” which are rated according to particular criteria called “constructs”. Once a participant has been exposed to the technique, the output will be a grid in the form of rows and columns, which record a

participant's ratings, usually on a five or seven point scale, of a number of elements in terms of a number of constructs.

Constructs are elicited by presenting the participant with a set of elements, for example, various popular songs they have heard. Asking the participant to compare and discriminate between the songs leads to the generation of a bipolar dimension - this is the construct. Employing the minimum context form (31) to elicit the constructs involves presenting participants with three of the elements - this is called a "triad" - and asking them to think of a way in which two of the elements are similar and consequently differ from the third. Continuing the example concerning popular songs, a participant might be presented with the three elements *Yesterday* (1965), *White Christmas* (1942) and *(Somewhere) Over the Rainbow* (1939). The participant might generate the construct "makes me feel happy - makes me feel sad". The construct can then be used to rate the remainder of the popular songs under consideration. An impression of the participant's opinions and interpretations of a subject emerges through the elicitation of more constructs, and the rating of all elements according to these constructs.

The advantage of the repertory grid technique lies in its emphasis on subjective evaluation presented in a form which is easily accessible to statistical manipulation. The technique was therefore selected as a suitable method for the present study, since it was thought important to discover the opinions of the young readers in their own language. As a content-free

methodology, the repertory grid technique enabled the children to be free to use their own terms when describing the constructs.

The only disadvantage of the repertory grid technique lies in the fact that the most effective method of analysis is by computer, and the analysis program which was available at the time of the study was unable to cope with large numbers of participants. It can also be hard to compare across participants unless they are all presented with the same elements. In the case of using children as participants, it would be difficult to ensure that they had all read the same texts, so a limited number of common texts had to be applied. It was, therefore, possible to carry out the repertory grid technique on only a small number of participants. As a result, the present study is in no way intended to be an exhaustive or quantitative survey of children on this subject but does represent a first, exploratory step towards acquiring ideas about Roald Dahl's work in children's own terms.

Interestingly, Rudd (25) also considered using the repertory grid technique to discover the constructs that children use when discussing books. Abandoning the process in the early stages, he found that the children had difficulties with both the “‘triadic elicitation’ process”, and with the systematic application of constructs to all the elements under consideration. As will be seen later in this paper, no such problems were encountered with the present research. A more conceptual criticism of the repertory grid technique offered by Rudd (25) is

that he believed the approach led him to “appropriate and distort” his participants’ responses, which he had wished to avoid with the Communication Studies approach. It should be noted that the authors of the present study did not experience similar reservations. In addition, Rudd considered the repertory grid technique as being “antipathetical to a discourse stance.” Specifically, he argued that, although the repertory grid technique presumes that participants are active and constructive, “...underlying ‘and undermining this’ is the assumption that people exhibit a conceptual unity in the way they construct the world. A discourse approach queries this, suggesting instead that the unity is a fiction, or, at most, a discursive achievement.” As discussed earlier, the assumption supporting the repertory grid technique is that humans are basically scientists and mentally represent the world, composing and testing hypotheses about the nature of reality (26, 27). However, Kelly does not suggest that people exhibit particular unity either in their mental representations of the world, or in their assumptions about the nature of reality. Indeed, Kelly developed the technique in a therapeutic setting precisely because his clients’ views of the world were not exhibiting unity. Readers are advised to see Kelly (26) for a more detailed account of Personal Construct Theory, which underlies the repertory grid technique.

METHOD

Participants

Six children (three male and three female) participated in the study. One of the male participants was aged twelve years, with the remainder of the participants all being aged ten years. Three were previously known to the experimenter, and the remainder were from a local primary school.

Elements

The elements in the present study took the form of books, or, in a few isolated cases, other forms of reading matter such as comics. Since the participants were being compared, it was necessary to ensure that some elements were common to all individuals, and to ask the participants to describe their own constructs. To this end, three Roald Dahl texts were selected as common elements. The *Young Telegraph* survey (9) was identified as an appropriate source for the likely favourite texts of the children, since these titles were chosen by young readers, and the work of Dahl was featured heavily. The top three works distinguished by the survey were texts written by Roald Dahl, and were used as the common elements. They are as follows:

1. *Matilda* (1988)
2. *The Witches* (1983)
3. *The BFG* (1982)

Attempts were made to ensure that all of the children who participated in the study had read these books. However, it proved difficult to find enough

children who had read all three, so of the participants involved, two had read the text of two of the works, and had seen a film adaptation of the third.

Procedure

Each participant was taken separately to a quiet room for the elicitation of grids. Prior to the experiment, the participants had been asked to think of six additional texts which they knew well. One of the participants had problems thinking of six further texts, so in his case only five were used. These titles were needed in order to act as the remaining elements with which to elicit a grid. Each of the elements was written on record cards for presentation to the participants. Before the technique was administered, the participants were given a brief introduction to the idea behind the study.

The minimum context form discussed above (31) was employed to elicit the constructs, so participants were presented with a triad from a list which had been prearranged in order to ensure that no pair of elements recurred. Once presented with the triad, the participants were asked to think of a way in which two elements were similar and consequently differed from the third, thereby generating the construct. For the children considering nine elements, ten triads were presented, and for the child considering eight elements, six triads were presented. It was hoped that participants would generate one construct for each triad, however, it was understood that difficulties might be experienced with some triads, due to the participants being children. It was

therefore made clear to the children that, if they had problems, the experimenter would go on to the next triad.

Once a satisfactory construct had been achieved, its two poles were written on a record card and placed on a flat surface on either side of a five point rating scale. Participants were then asked to rate all the texts, physically placing the record card on which the titles were written at the relevant point on the rating scale according to their evaluation of each text in relation to the two extremes of the construct. Participants were asked if they wished to change the position of any of the texts before their ratings were noted. The experimenter then introduced the next triad for consideration, and the process continued until there were no triads remaining.

RESULTS

The data were analysed using the RepGrid version 3 program, a repertory grid elicitation and analysis package for the Apple Macintosh computer (32). The analysis resulted in the elicitation of one focused grid for each participant. As discussed above, it was intended that the responses of the participants to the common elements would be compared. An illustration of this can be seen, for example, in Dillon and McKnight (27), where the individual grids of all the participants have been analysed together as one large grid, allowing for comparisons between all of the elements and all of the

constructs produced by the study. This was possible because all of the elements presented to the participants in this study were identical. For the current study, a focused grid consisting only of data relating to the Dahl texts was produced, in an attempt to isolate the relevant findings and complete a similar comparison. However, as a result of the limit on common elements, this produced a grid which demonstrated a scarcity of variance between the ratings, since there were too many constructs (50) compared to elements (3). As a result, no meaningful results were generated, so each participant's focused grid has been analysed separately, and these are presented in Appendix A.

The grids consist of the list of elements along the top, and the list of constructs below, the main body being made up of the ratings produced by the participants. The computer program has reordered both lists in order to show the minimum distance between related element and construct rating columns, and dendrograms have been created by joining elements and constructs at their appropriate matching levels. As can be seen from Figure 2, for example, the construct dendrogram has been placed above, with the element dendrogram below, and both are to the right of the reordered ratings. The matching levels are shown on adjacent scales, where high matches indicate that elements share similar ratings on the majority of constructs, or vice versa. Consequently, again using Figure 2 as an example, it can be seen that elements 4 (*The Witches*) and 3 (*The BFG*) are highly matched, while element 1

(*Matilda*) is the least similar to the remaining elements. This type of matching may also be carried out on the construct dendrogram, making it possible to build up a detailed picture of how each participant interprets their chosen texts.

Constructs

The focused grids for each participant show that the analysis revealed many different relationships between constructs. Of particular note was that all six had elicited either the construct “funny - not funny” or “funny - serious”, these clearly having very similar meanings. In addition, five of the six participants elicited the construct “scary - not scary”. This suggests that these two themes were commonly held to be significant by the participant when considering reading matter, and it is interesting that these ideas, particularly that of humour, have been discussed by various critics as reasons for children's liking for Dahl (e.g. 24, 33).

It must be remembered, however, that each reader had their own particular set of elements and placed each of the texts, including the common Dahl works, at different points on their self-appointed scales. This is shown in Table 1. It should be noted that during the analysis of the data, the computer program may reverse constructs which have been entered, in order to make the best match between elements. For example, Figure 3 offers the scale “scary - not scary”, although the elements were rated by the participant according to

the scale “not scary – scary”. This has also altered the ratings given, with number 1 becoming number 5, number 2 becoming number 4, and so on. In order to make comparison across individuals more effective, Table 1 presents the scales and ratings as they were originally submitted by the participants.

Construct	Text	Scale Position					
Serious/not funny – funny	<i>The BFG</i>	3	3	4	3	2	3
	<i>Matilda</i>	4	2	5	2	3	3
	<i>The Witches</i>	2	1	4	2	2	2
Not scary – scary	<i>The BFG</i>	-	3	1	2	2	2
	<i>Matilda</i>	-	2	1	1	1	2
	<i>The Witches</i>	-	4	3	3	5	4
	Participant	1	2	3	4	5	6

Table 1: Scale positions of common Dahl texts

It can be seen from Table 1 that the children’s individual opinions were very much in evidence in the study. Dahl was not always considered scary, nor was he always considered funny. With regard to the construct “serious/not funny – funny”, most of the children showed ambiguous feelings about *The BFG*, with four out of six placing it in the centre of the rating scale. There were very varied feelings amongst the participants about the nature of *Matilda* in this regard, and *The Witches* appeared to be considered more serious than funny, with five out of six participants placing it towards the serious side of the rating scale. In the case of the “not scary – scary” construct, the greater proportion of the children considered that both *The BFG* and *Matilda* were not scary, whereas it appeared that most of the readers found *The Witches* frightening.

In addition to the themes of funny and scary, there were other constructs elicited by the participants which concentrated on similar issues. These included the involvement of animals, the inclusion of cartoons, and the involvement of children, which were picked out by two participants; enjoyment, which was noted by three participants; and lastly, observations about the characters as well as opinions about the story or plot, which were both indicated by four participants.

Elements

It is valuable to concentrate particularly on how closely the Dahl texts are matched on the element dendrograms for each participant. If the Dahl elements match particularly closely, the participants are likely to be considering the works as similar to each other in particular ways, and different from the remaining texts. In addition to the three stipulated Dahl texts, all six participants selected at least one other text by Dahl as one of their chosen elements. The additional Dahl texts were as follows: *Esio Trot* (1989), *The Twits* (1980), *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1964), *James and the Giant Peach* (x2) (1961), *Fantastic Mr Fox* (1970), and *The Vicar of Nibbleswicke* (1990). Five readers selected one additional Dahl text, and the remaining participant (number 5), selected two further Dahl works among his personal elements. Since this was the child who had eight rather than nine elements to consider, it meant that five out of his eight elements were works by Dahl. This concentration on the works of Dahl might be an indicator of his popularity,

but might also be because the children were aware that the study was focusing on this particular author, and so felt obliged to choose further texts by him. The analysis of each participant in this context is given below:

Participant	Match of Dahl Texts
1	<i>The Witches</i> and <i>The BFG</i> very close (90%) <i>Matilda</i> least like all of the other elements, including Dahl texts <i>Esio Trot</i> joins <i>The Witches</i> and <i>The BFG</i> at 80%
2	<i>Matilda</i> and <i>The BFG</i> close (79%) <i>The Witches</i> fairly close (72%) <i>The Twits</i> very separate from common Dahl texts
3	Three common texts very separate <i>Charlie and the Chocolate Factory</i> joins <i>Matilda</i> at 83%
4	Three common texts join at 73% <i>James and the Giant Peach</i> joins <i>Matilda</i> at 80%, and joins <i>The BFG</i> and <i>The Witches</i> at 72%
5	Three common texts join at 72% Five Dahl texts cluster above 70%, and look completely separate from remaining 3 texts. <i>The BFG</i> and <i>Fantastic Mr Fox</i> particularly close at 95%
6	<i>Matilda</i> and <i>The BFG</i> close (82%) <i>The Witches</i> completely separate <i>The Vicar of Nibbleswicke</i> separate from other Dahl texts

Table 2: Match of all Dahl texts for all participants

The results in Table 2 suggest that, as would be expected, the children had their own very individual opinions about books by Roald Dahl. Participant 1 matched *Esio Trot* highly (80%) with *The Witches* and *The BFG*, which were already matched very highly at the level of 90%. The results for participant 2, however, did not join *The Twits* closely with the common texts, which were themselves linked closely (above 70%). Conversely, participant 3 placed the common texts very separately, but showed a high match between the additional text, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, and *Matilda* (85%). Participant

4 connected the common texts fairly highly at 70%, and joined the additional text with two of these at the 70% level, with the third (*Matilda*) matching particularly closely at 80%. The results obtained for participant 5 found that the five Dahl works clustered together above 70%, and were completely separate from the other three texts, which also grouped together above 70%. This participant also made a particularly high match between *The BFG* and *Fantastic Mr Fox*, at the level of 95%. Finally, the additional text selected by participant 6 did not connect closely with any of the three common texts, only two of which were closely matched themselves, at the 80% level.

These results indicate that four out of the six participants matched at least three Dahl texts above the level of 70%, suggesting that they considered that these works exhibited certain qualities in common. It seems important to highlight the results of participant 5, in which the five Dahl works clustered together above 70%, and were completely separate from the other three texts, which also clustered together above 70% (see Figure 5). This suggests that participant 5 found the Dahl texts to be very similar in nature, and different from the other three elements under consideration.

Since the sample and therefore the amount of elements employed for this study are both small, it is not likely that a survey of common authors and features among the elements selected by the children and not written by Dahl will yield much information. However, as noted by Table 3, the analysis showed that there were some, albeit limited, common authors and features. It

can be seen from the Table that two participants chose books featuring cartoons , two selected books by R. L. Stine, and two picked books by Dick King-Smith. Therefore, common authors and features occurred across no more than two participants in each case. It is worth noting here also that readers generally tend to like books of similar style by different writers (see, for instance, 34 and 35).

Cartoons		
Participant	Title	Author
1	<i>Calvin and Hobbes</i>	Bill Watterson
1	<i>The Far Side Collection</i>	Gary Larson
6	<i>The Beano</i>	(Comic)
Same author		
Participant	Title	Author
2	<i>The Ghost Next Door</i>	R.L. Stine
6	<i>Piano Lessons Can Be Murder</i>	R.L. Stine
6	<i>Welcome to Camp Nightmare</i>	R.L. Stine
1	<i>The Sheep-Pig</i>	Dick King-Smith
6	<i>Daggie Dogfoot</i>	Dick King-Smith

Table 3: Common authors and features of elements not written by Dahl

It is particularly noteworthy that two of the children chose texts by R.L. Stine from the *Goosebumps* series, a “horror fiction series aimed at the under-12s” which has been a “publishing phenomenon in the US” (36). At the time of this study, the series had become equally popular in Britain, and this is reflected by its being chosen by two out of the six participants (from the age group at which the books are aimed) from this study. Furthermore, it is interesting to note that the arguments which were put forward with regard to the *Goosebumps* texts seem to match the concerns which had been voiced about works by Dahl. That is, some parents and teachers argued that the *Goosebumps* stories contain dubious taste and plotting, while others were glad that

children who usually prefer Disney videos or computer games were reading anything at all (36).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

As mentioned above, when comparing grids the repertory grid technique can only be carried out on a small number of participants, due to difficulties with analysis. This constraint on participant numbers, coupled with the limits of having only three common titles, means that the study can only be seen as a “first step” towards a clearer understanding of children's liking for works by Roald Dahl. However, the study can be seen to have attempted to discover the opinions of the readers themselves by speaking to children, rather than simply considering the views of adults.

It can be concluded from the study that the participants, who were simply required to have read certain of Dahl's books, also enjoyed them. This could be surmised from comments made by the participants to the experimenter during the study, and from the fact that all of the participants chose at least one further Dahl book in addition to the compulsory ones. This enjoyment of Dahl, and the fact that two of the children chose texts from the *Goosebumps* series, reinforces the idea that children themselves do not have the same concerns when choosing their books as the concerns adults have when selecting reading material for them.

The results regarding the matching between common Dahl elements, and between these and the additional Dahl texts did suggest that some qualities and characteristics were found in common between works by Dahl by a majority of the participants. This appeared to be particularly noticeable in the case of participant 5, whose eight elements included five Dahl texts, the latter clustering together above 70%, completely separate from the remaining elements.

All of the participants elicited the constructs “funny - not funny” or “funny - serious”, and five of the six participants elicited the construct “scary - not scary”. Since the children were considering other books in addition to those written by Dahl, these constructs were generated from their opinions about reading material in general, rather than simply about Dahl. However, this certain level of agreement between participants does seem to present the idea that they were generally thinking in a similar way, and considered the two themes of humour and scariness to be particularly significant.

The children did not think that books by Roald Dahl were either always funny or always scary. This is interesting, since the critics are all agreed on the significance of humour in Dahl’s work (see, for instance, 20, 33, 23,18). There is widespread agreement that the humour in Dahl books is of a particularly crude or black nature, which is cited by Gouws and Bester (94) as being one of the main reasons for children liking it. Notably, and as discussed previously, this was the study which set out to find out the secret of Dahl's popularity

from children themselves via a questionnaire. With regard to scariness, the critics generally do not discuss this directly, but bring out such elements as violence and sadism within the work. Indeed, Gouws and Bester (24) found that the majority of the children in their study did not pick up on the violence in Dahl's books, and neither of these themes was elicited by the present study. However, it can be argued that a general feeling of scariness was identified.

When considering the common Dahl elements with regard to the theme of humour, it is difficult to make any generalizations, since each child placed the texts at different points on the scale. This seems to correspond with the idea that humour is individual, even at the comparatively young age of the participants in this study. In the case of scariness, however, there appeared to be more of a consensus amongst the children, with the greater proportion considering *The Witches* to be scary, and both *The BFG* and *Matilda* to be not scary.

Therefore, it can be argued that the study has highlighted that Dahl texts do have some characteristics in common, rendering them different from other books. The definition of exactly what these characteristics are might help to explain the popularity of Dahl, and this study has been partially successful in contributing to this definition. It is clear that further work is required and the gap in the research still exists. Future work on this matter might consider a case study approach with open questions, although objectivity would be likely to suffer. A better approach would be a further repertory grid study

which stipulates a greater number of common elements. This could then be used to develop a questionnaire, using the constructs generated here as the basis for the questions. This would take this research a step further whilst allowing for more quantitative data to be obtained. Although young respondents are considered to be particularly open to suggestion, using constructs already elicited by children could avoid a situation in which the selection of subject matter and language used by the questionnaire compiler has an excessive influence on the participants.

Finally, it should be noted that the conclusions which the authors have felt able to draw from this study might seem predictable. This is partly a result of the constraints on participant numbers and common Dahl titles, and partly a result of the arguments which have been put forward by the critics highlighting some of the same views on Dahl as those which have emerged from the study. However, it could be argued that, contrary to the belief that children and adults do not think similarly, this study has shown that the critics have, in fact, been able to identify some of the reasons for the great appeal of Roald Dahl to children. The fact remains, though, that the majority of the critics dislike Roald Dahl's work, whilst children continue to love it.

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APPENDIX A

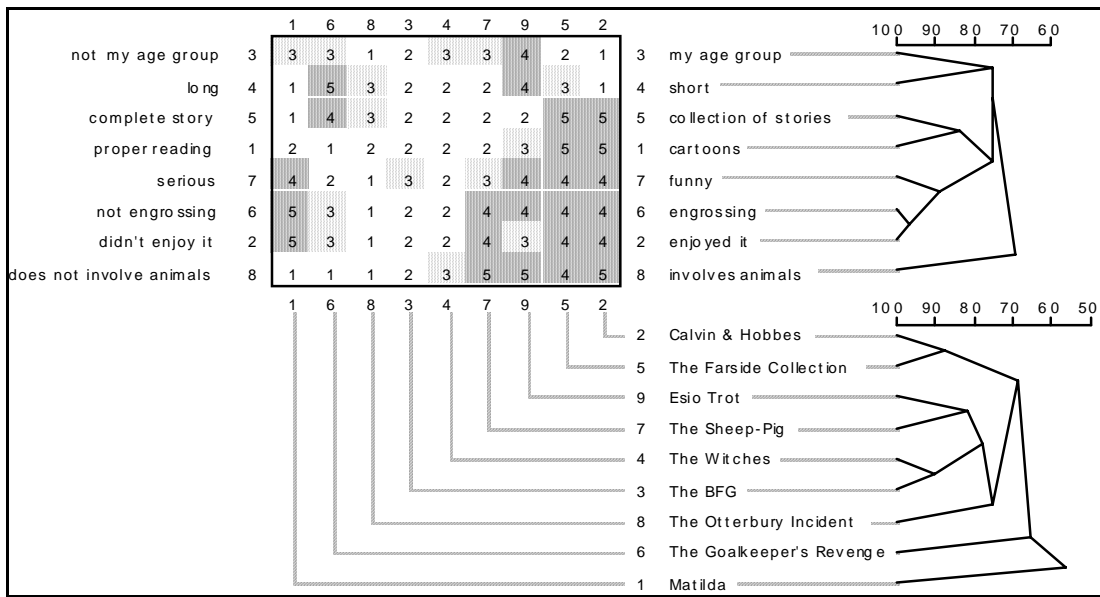


Figure 1: Focused grid for participant 1

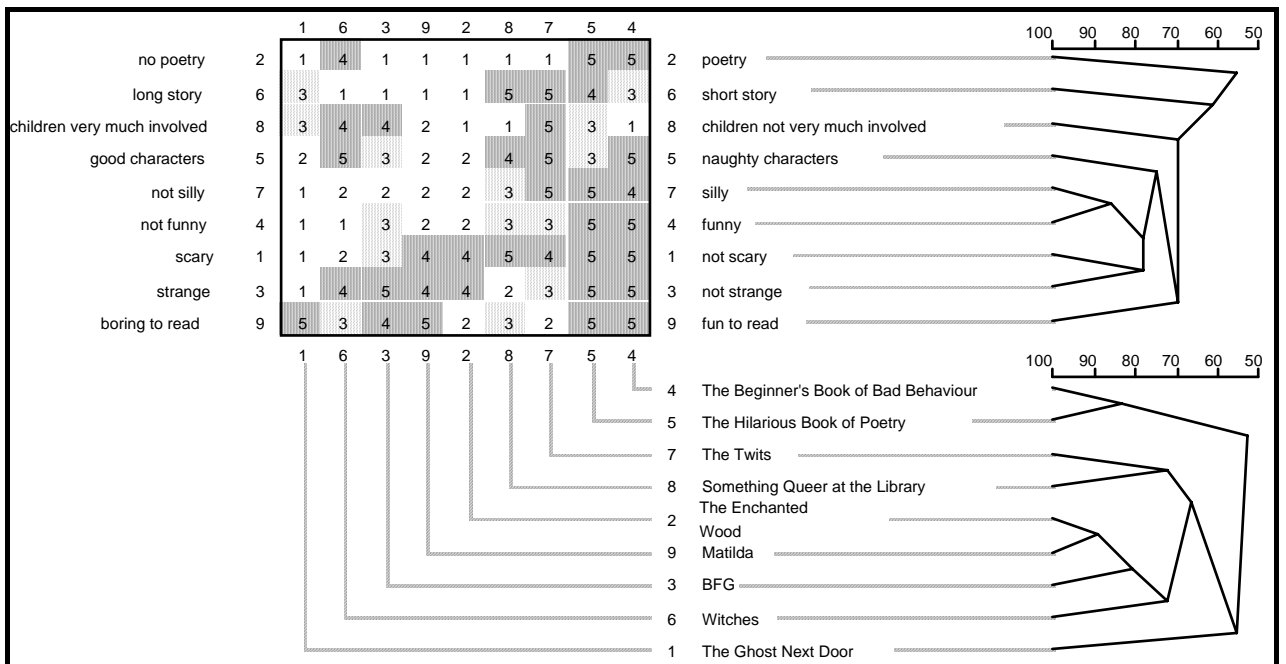


Figure 2: Focused grid for participant 2

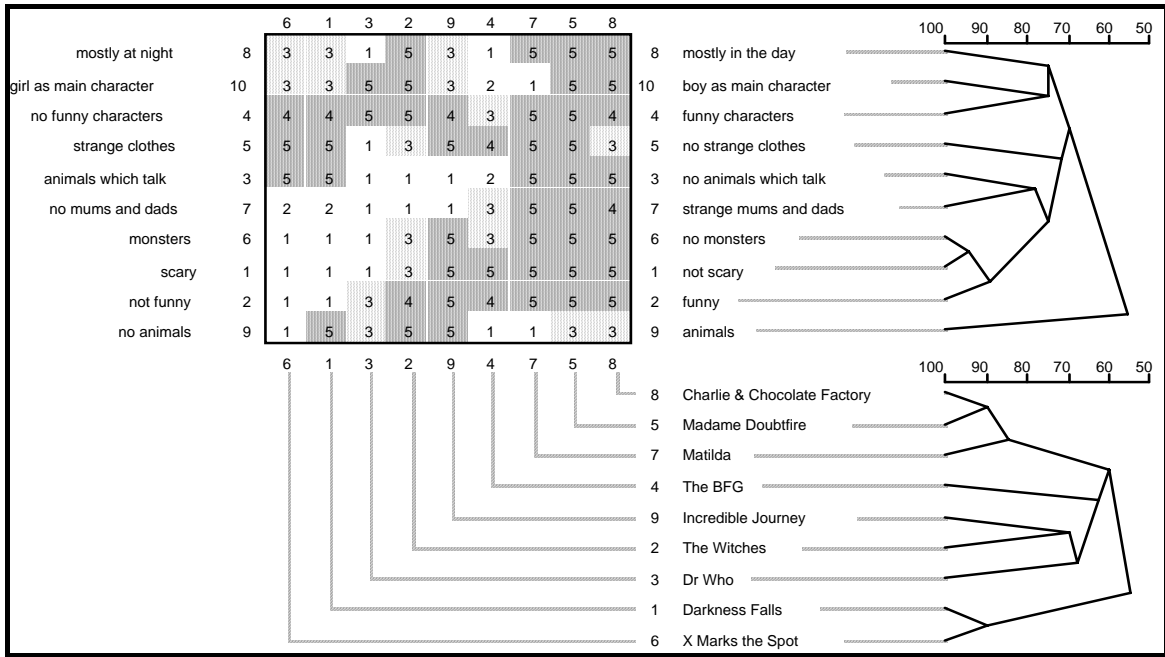


Figure 3: Focused grid for participant 3

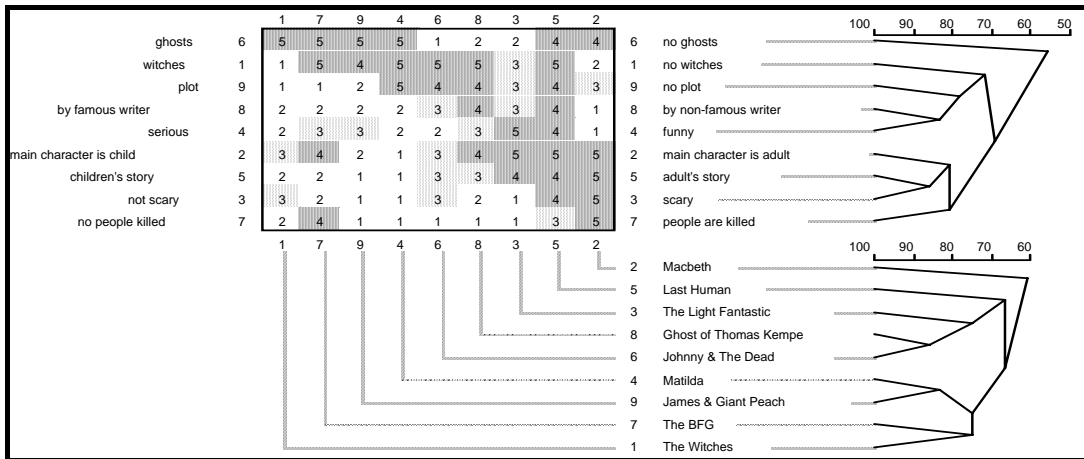


Figure 4: Focused grid for participant 4

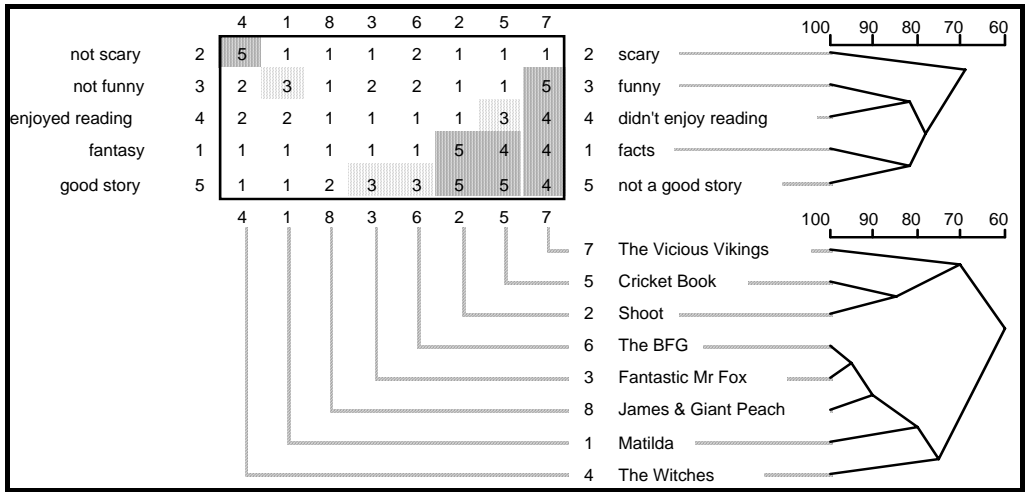


Figure 5: Focused grid for participant 5

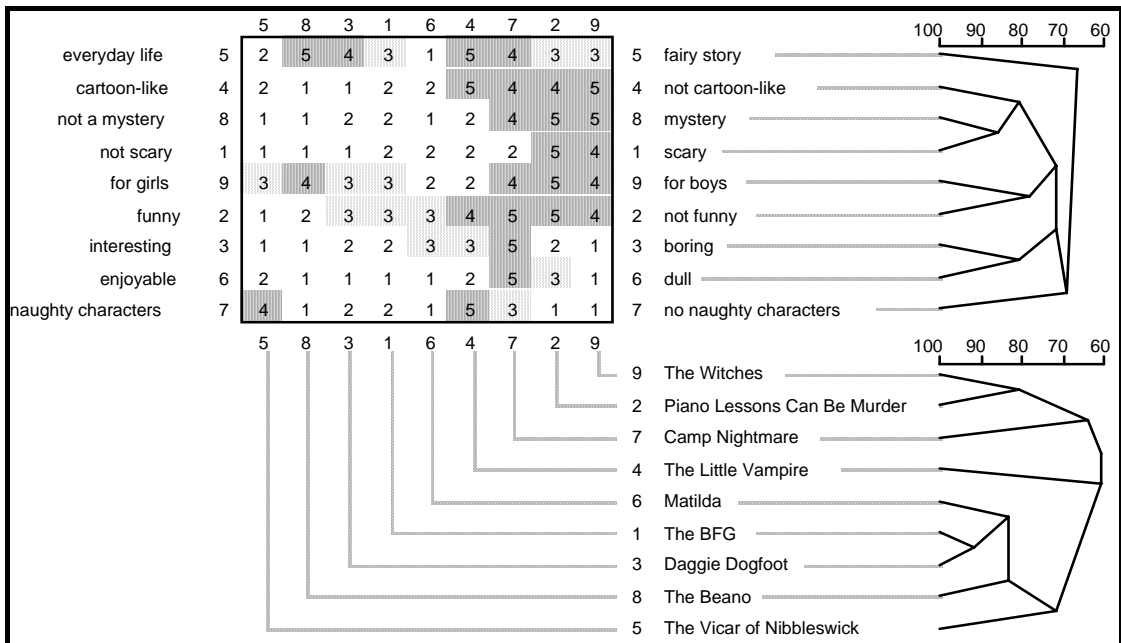


Figure 6: Focused grid for participant 6