

**What drives men who commit stalking offences and how practitioners can  
best respond to their needs**

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**A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of Nottingham Trent  
University for the Professional Doctorate in Forensic Psychology**

August 2019

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## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to express gratitude to my academic supervisors, Dr Daria Kuss and Professor Belinda Winder, for their continued support throughout my journey on this doctorate programme.

My sincere thanks also extend to my boss Dr Neil Gredecki, who has provided time, space and motivation. He believes in the value of this work for our clients, public protection and our Civil Service, reminding me of the importance of this work when I have needed a boost.

I have drawn strength from my colleagues and friends, too many to mention individually. Without them this exciting and tiresome journey would not have been as pleasurable. My enthusiasm and desire to address the issues set out in this thesis, have bounced back from you with equal energy.

I would like to thank Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service for funding this programme and providing me with the opportunity to fulfil a life goal on a subject matter I am very passionate about. This work has been made much more meaningful to me with the introduction to, and collaborations with, Professor Clive Ruggles and Dr Sue Hills. They have developed the Alice Ruggles Trust in the name of their daughter, tragically murdered by her stalker. I hope my efforts go some way to helping raise awareness of the complexities surrounding those who commit stalking offences, and in making new suggestions for their treatment and management.

First things last, I cannot express my love and thanks enough to my young sons Harvey and Lewis, for their patience and support. I hope you will be as proud of me as I am of you both.

## **Declaration**

I declare that:

- (i) This thesis is not one for which a degree has been or will be, conferred by any other university;
- (ii) This thesis is not one for which a degree has already been conferred by this university;
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## **Thesis abstract**

Stalking causes immeasurable psychological damage to victims, in some cases leading to physical violence. It is a prevalent behaviour with growing public awareness. Practitioners experience those who commit stalking offences as interpersonally complex, and there is a dearth of empirical literature reporting conclusively on their psychopathology, effective treatment and management, and on the idiosyncratic experiences of those who stalk. The systematic review of international literature on psychopathology features of adult males who stalk defines the scope and quality of available publications. The review highlights the relative scarcity of robust comparator research studies, and tentatively concludes on the commonality of Personality Disorder - Not Otherwise Specified, and insecure attachment styles, amongst this population. The thesis research study attended to the knowledge-practice gaps regarding what drives stalking behaviours, utilising mixed methods, including a responsive methodological approach. This novel Visually Adapted Repertory Grid Technique (VARGT), married with Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), satisfied the researcher's epistemological position of constructive alternativism and related research aims. This methodology captured the relational experiences of seven adult male participants convicted of stalking offences. It did so through a robust collaborative and double hermeneutics process, supported by statistical analysis of data derived from the VARGT. Three superordinate themes were identified with associated subordinate themes, primarily highlighting the presence of narcissistic vulnerability. Positive engagement using the VARGT was a pronounced and unintended outcome. Transcript extracts and researcher-practitioner reflections are presented, detailing its therapeutic value and potential application in research and clinical practice. This thesis evolved from existing and developing practitioner-researcher knowledge and experience. It provides valuable, and advancing, contributions back to the field of forensic psychology practice and research. Overall, this thesis offers practitioners and policymakers new insights for application to the assessment, treatment and management of those who commit stalking offences.

## CHAPTER 1: THESIS OVERVIEW

### Introduction

A joint report published in 2017 by HMICFRS (Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services) and HMCPSI (Her Majesty's Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate) highlighted the devastation that stalking offences cause within all sections of our society. People who stalk are understood to have specific, complex needs (HMICFRS & HMCPSI, 2017) and whilst there is developing knowledge of associated risk factors for stalking (McEwan, Daffern, MacKenzie & Ogloff, 2017), there is still a dearth of research evidence for what works to reduce reoffending within this group (e.g. HMICFRS & HMCPSI, 2017; McEwan et al., 2017). Whilst practitioners have experienced those who stalk as complex interpersonally, there is a paucity of research literature reporting conclusively on their psychopathology, and on the individual experiences of those who commit stalking offences. Understanding these aspects were seen as pivotal to tailoring treatment, and risk management approaches, and this constitutes the practitioner-researcher-practitioner cycle illustrated through this thesis (see Appendix A for a reflective summary on being a researching practitioner). Understanding how those who stalk construe their own offending pathway and patterns of behaviours was deemed critical in the advancement of researcher and practitioner knowledge in this field.

Stalking is criminal and a social problem, with complex levels of victim impact. Stalking was recognised as a specific crime in 2012, following amendments to the Protection from Harassment Act 1997. The Suzy Lamplugh Trust defines stalking as *'a pattern of fixated and obsessive behaviour which is repeated, persistent, intrusive and causes fear of violence or engenders alarm and distress in the victim'* (2018: 6). The new Stalking Protection Act (2019) gives police powers to intervene early upon suspicion of stalking offending. The associated Stalking Protection Orders provide a legal means by which police can inform a perpetrator that the behaviour is causing concern and must cease, without shying away from stalking terminology (The House Parliament's Magazine, 2019). Stalking Protection Orders will have the ability to protect victims sooner, helping to prevent the behaviours becoming fixated, entrenched, and harder to stop.

Despite recent legislative changes and increasing public awareness, there is still a lack of specific and accepted hypotheses to explain stalking (see Meloy & Fisher, 2005; Purcell & McEwan, 2018). Unfortunately, legal sanctions remain of little consequence for the majority of stalking cases (see Benitez, McNeil & Binder, 2010; POSTnote, 2018), and stalking recidivism rates are thought to be around one-third to a half (see MacKenzie, McEwan, Pathé, James, Ogloff & Mullen, 2009; McEwan et al., 2017).

Stalking has been described as a pattern-based crime, as opposed to incident-based (Pathé, Mackenzie & Mullen, 2004), increasing the complexity for those investigating complaints. Stalking is often reported or discussed by focusing on specific incidents or tactics, many of which are not illegal. Varying tactics, in isolation, often appear harmless; however, the fear and harm from stalking is cumulative over time rather than from an incident (Logan & Walker, 2015). Stalking also poses a risk to general public safety, as other persons can be collateral victims. Whilst some stalking behaviours can lead to physical violence, varying degrees of psychological harm are always a consequence; victim fear is pervasive and cumulative (Logan & Walker, 2017). Indeed, MacKenzie et al. (2009:35) assert that *'The major source of harm for many victims of stalking is not from violence but from the persistent and unpredictable intrusions that evoke a sense of powerlessness and fear'* (also see Kamphuis & Emmelkamp, 2000; Pathé & Mullen, 1997). Broadly speaking, the psychological threat is implicit in the pattern of behaviour.

Improved social awareness and legislative powers have led to an increase in cases being prosecuted in the UK (POSTnote, 2018), however the parallel demands on risk assessors and treatment providers, particularly in the absence of psychologically-based treatment options for those who stalk, is of concern internationally (Purcell & McEwan, 2018). Similarly, while the literature on risk factors associated with different patterns of recurrent stalking is slowly developing, there is a lack of research on which to base risk management plans (McEwan et al., 2017). As previously mentioned, legal sanctions alone are not sufficient to stop the majority of those who stalk. This thesis aims to raise awareness of these issues and provide innovative options for engaging, treating and risk managing those who commit stalking offences.

In terms of the use of terminology within this thesis, a couple of points need addressing. Given the complexity of identifying, prosecuting and convicting for stalking in the UK, and differences globally in defining terms for the same set of behaviours, this thesis refers to *stalking, or related offences*. Such '*related*' offences committed as part of a pattern of stalking behaviours may include harassment and breaches of legal sanctions, such as restraining orders. Stalking offenders (often referred to within this thesis as '*those convicted of stalking, or related offences*'), includes those who commit stalking, although may not have received convictions for stalking. For example, some studies referred to within this thesis will have used terms such as obsessional followers, harassers, and those who continually breach restraining orders per se. Samples referred to as those who stalk, and/or have committed stalking offences within this thesis, are deemed to meet the criteria regarding a fixated and obsessive, unwanted pattern of behaviours. Finally, although this thesis does not explore varying classification systems, many studies drawn upon refer to Mullen, Pathé, Purcell and Stuart's (1999) stalker typologies. Therefore, references are made to the varying typologies within this classification system, which categorises offenders based on their initial motivations. These typologies are summarised for reference in Appendix B.

There is general consensus amongst practitioners regarding the complexity of developing interpersonal working relationships with those who stalk (e.g., MacKenzie & James, 2011; Rosenfeld, Fava & Galietta, 2009). Furthermore, an associated pessimism surrounding psychotherapeutic attempts to rehabilitate stalking offenders persists (see Sheridan & Davies, 2010). In understanding this, Nijdam-Jones, Rosenfeld, Gerbrandij, Quick and Galietta (2018) suggest exploration beyond assumed mental disorders, in order to expose wider psychological and motivational contributors to these persisting behaviours. Paying attention to any responsivity factors in this way, practitioners will be better equipped to tailor treatment pathways and risk management plans (MacKenzie & James, 2011). In support of suggestions to understand those who commit stalking offences on a more fundamental and idiosyncratic level, it is noteworthy that there is a dearth of research literature reporting on their experiences, that is, how they construe their reality for stalking episodes, an obvious knowledge gap, which perhaps only the experiential experts themselves could fill.

Backed with a wealth of practitioner experience in the field of forensic psychology, specialising in the assessment, treatment and management of those who stalk, this thesis enabled the aforementioned knowledge and practice gaps to be explored in depth. The thesis provides practice-based recommendations to help develop the work of forensic psychologists with those who stalk. As such, each chapter is currently in preparation for publication as part of a wider strategy for dissemination of findings. This thesis incorporates a systematic review and narrative synthesis of international literature on psychopathology features of adult males who have committed stalking offences, defining the scope and quality of available publications. With a scarcity of robust comparator group studies, tentative conclusions were made and recommendations for bespoke case formulation were supported. This thesis details and incorporates the development of a novel research tool to maximise engagement of those who stalk, which enabled rich and informative data collection from those convicted of stalking, or related offences, in Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) custody. Qualitative methodology yielded novel, strong, and recurring analytical themes, supported by repertory grid analysis, with clear practice-, and treatment-based applicability. Unintended findings from the use of a novel Visually Adapted Repertory Grid Technique (VARGT) illustrated this type of engagement as having a positive therapeutic impact. Practitioner-researcher reflections are included in this thesis regarding these findings and its applicability in wider research and clinical practice.

### **Aims & Objectives**

This thesis aimed to access knowledge from the experiential expert, which is from those who stalk. Particularly regarding how best to engage and respond to their needs, as well as being able to inform best practice on treatment and risk management approaches. The current reality was acknowledged that, *'the clinician will often have a relatively brief window of opportunity in which to effect change, making the development of rapport and motivation to change a primary goal'* (MacKenzie et al., 2009: 62). Therefore, this thesis also aimed to pilot the use of a novel research tool in order to maximise engagement with willing participants. Knowing how to best engage at the earliest opportunity, by understanding the psychology of those who stalk before and during the stalking episodes was the prime objective. Understanding psychopathology, drivers and maintenance factors

contributing towards the behaviours was also key. It was intended that such aims would feed into providing practice-based options to assist criminal justice agencies and practitioners alike, to work more effectively with those who commit stalking offences. With a wider objective of adding to international knowledge and practice on this topic, this thesis also aimed to explore fundamental themes for effective treatment approaches.

Essentially the thesis aimed to:

- Investigate and add to the knowledge and practice gaps regarding why people stalk;
- Explore how professionals and practitioners can help them stop;
- Understand what the issues are around engagement, psychopathology, and why legal sanctions are not enough;
- Add to the research and practitioner knowledge gaps pertaining to those who stalk by contributing a novel engagement tool and conducting a mixed methods, fundamentally qualitative-based, research study with men who commit stalking offences;
- Continue to raise awareness of stalking and society's multi-agency duty to address the issues in order to protect the public.

### **Outline of chapters**

This thesis comprises six chapters. Chapter 2 presents a systematic review of the features of psychopathology for adult males who commit stalking offences. Fundamental to understanding problem behaviours, this review underlines responsivity factors pertaining to this particular group. In doing so, it synthesises international research literature, which utilised comparator groups to define bespoke aspects. It challenges some common misconceptions about those who commit stalking offences and purports the value of collaborative case formulation over psychiatric diagnoses alone.

Chapter 3 outlines the novel Visually Adapted Repertory Grid Technique (VARGT) for replication purposes.

Chapter 4 contains a mixed methods research study. It introduces the study and rationale, including the use of a combined methodology of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) and the VARGT. The research study attended to



the knowledge and practice gaps using a responsive methodological approach (the VARGT) to engage those convicted of stalking (or related) offences in the research. IPA was chosen to capture the depth of experience whilst the VARGT provided a structure for engagement allowing gentle exposure of personal construct systems in relation to stalking and relationships. Chapter 4 presents the analysed findings and practical applications of the acquired understanding of the interpreted realities of participants, ultimately laying the foundations for therapeutic engagement and intervention options for this client group.

Chapter 5 aims to share researcher-practitioner reflections on the application of the VARGT with those convicted of stalking, or related offences, in a research setting, discussing its potential for application as a clinical tool. The therapeutic impact on participants resulting from engagement with this unique methodological approach to research was evident.

Chapter 6 provides an overall thesis discussion. It brings together the conclusions of the systematic review, research study, use of, and potential applications of, the VARGT, to address the thesis aims and objectives. It illustrates the intentions and outcomes of the practitioner-researcher-practitioner journey with regards to understanding what drives those who stalk and how practitioners can best respond to their needs.

## **CHAPTER 2: What are the features of psychopathology for adult males who commit stalking offences? A systematic review**

### **Introduction**

A pivotal aspect of any ability to respond to the needs of, improve rehabilitative efficacy with, and indeed understand what drives those who commit stalking offences, is examining any underlying psychopathology (see Andrews, Bonta & Wormith, 2011; Nijdam-Jones, Rosenfeld, Gerbrandij, Quick & Galietta, 2018). ‘*Psychopathology* is defined as the manifestations of mental disorders’ (Maxmen, Ward & Kilgus, 2009: 5), and commonly refers to a person’s holistic mental health, psychological functioning and manifestations that may indicate mental illness or psychological impairment (Maxmen et al., 2009). Andrews et al. (2011) refer to such as specific responsivity factors, which include psychosocial functioning, motivation to change, personality characteristics, mental health, intellectual and cognitive functioning ability. The psychopathology features of males who commit stalking offences was the intended focus in this systematic review, acknowledging varied psychopathology presentations between genders and the differing clinical treatment options reflecting this. Purcell and McEwan (2018) assert a gender difference in psychopathology of those who stalk, reporting that females are more likely to be of the intimacy seeker typology (see Appendix B for summary of typologies), and thus likely diagnosed with serious mental illness (Strand & McEwan, 2012). This review and overall thesis did not comment on such gender differences, but acknowledges this may be an area for future focus when conducting research, or working with those who commit stalking offences. This review aimed to simplify the focus by creating gender homogeneity by aligning with the intended research focus on males who have committed stalking offences.

Stalking is not a new behaviour and historically has been conceptually linked to major mental illness and general psychopathology (e.g., Lewis, Fremouw, Ben & Farr, 2001; Spitzberg & Cadiz, 2002; Meloy, 2007; Nijdam-Jones et al., 2018). There are no specific hypotheses to fully explain the phenomenon of stalking (Meloy & Fisher, 2005), nor any consensus on associated psychopathology (see Nijdam-Jones et al., 2018; Purcell & McEwan, 2018). However, it is important to first understand any complex psychopathology, considering mental illness, and responding to cognitive ability and stalker motivation, prior to the commencement of intervention (e.g., MacKenzie, James, McEwan, Mullen & Ogloff, 2010; Meloy,

2013). With this in mind, this systematic review appraised empirical evidence relevant to the psychopathological features of adult males who commit stalking offences as a pre-requisite to understanding their experiences through research. Systematic reviews are structured and robust processes for collating and appraising all relevant evidence-based literature in order to answer a specific question as opposed to relying on single studies (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006).

Most research activities with those who stalk have focused on characteristics of, and risk factors for, males who have committed stalking offences, from forensic and/or psychiatric settings (Lewis et al., 2001). Nijdam-Jones et al. (2018) suggest that these factors may be responsible for the historical overestimation of psychopathology amongst samples of those who have committed stalking offences. Unclear and changing legislative frameworks for identifying those who stalk has possibly created sample bias given that only the very serious offenders have been observed within forensic and clinical settings (Nijdam-Jones et al., 2018). Recent research studies investigating stalker psychopathology (i.e. Dressing, Foerster & Gass, 2011; Nijdam-Jones et al., 2018) remain inconclusive due to the absence of suitable comparator groups that would be able to identify similarities and differences from the target group, for example with the general population or other general offenders. Indeed, many studies have instead explored the features of heterogeneity between typologies of those who stalk in respect of psychopathology. For example, McEwan and Strand (2013) reported that *DSM IV-TR* (APA, 2000) Axis I and psychotic disorders were significantly more prevalent among stranger and acquaintance stalkers than ex-intimate partner stalkers.

In terms of a psychopathological predisposition for stalking, Attachment Theory (Bartholomew, 1990) has for a long time been the most promoted (MacKenzie, Mullen, Ogloff, McEwan & James, 2008; Tassy & Winstead, 2014), with stalking being conceptualised as behavioural demonstrations of attachment pathology (Marazziti, Falaschi, Lombardi, Mungai & Dell'Osso, 2015; Meloy, 2007). Studies have supported the assertion that the insecure, often preoccupied, attachment style is the most common amongst people who stalk (e.g., Dutton, Saunders, Starzomski & Bartholomew, 1994; MacKenzie et al., 2008). Marazziti et al. (2015) surmised that this attachment style manifests as a constant anxious state, with the fear of loss and abandonment dominating and leading to desperate and relentless attempts to avoid

it. Considering this severe attachment pathology, therapists may inadvertently offer themselves up to become a victim of stalking (Farber, 2015) as they extend empathy and build the professional relationship. Indeed this therapist quality in developing the client-therapist relationship is purported to determine successful therapeutic intervention as opposed to using a specific technique (e.g., Farber, 2015; Kroll, 1993).

The links between stalking and psychopathy, personality disorders, and Autistic Spectrum Disorders (ASD) have also been researched, acknowledging the potentially different drivers or motivating features. ASD, a lifelong neurodevelopmental condition (Diagnostic & Statistical Manual of mental disorders, 5<sup>th</sup> ed., [DSM-5]: American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013), has not typically been associated with increased risk of offending (National Autistic Society, 2017), although offending perpetrated by an individual with ASD can be attributed to it (see Allely & Creaby-Attwood, 2016; Browning & Caulfield, 2011; Stokes, Newton & Kaur, 2007). For example, it is suggested that those with ASD engaging in stalking behaviour are doing so due to their naïve attempts to establish an intimate relationship in the context of inadequate social functioning (Stokes & Newton, 2004). With psychopathy, those who stalk also deemed psychopathic, are motivated by gaining control and interpersonal dominance over another, as opposed to an underlying emotional attachment (Storey, Hart, Meloy & Reavis, 2009).

Stalking offenders that have personality disorders comprise proportionately the largest subgroup (e.g., Meloy, Rivers, Siegel, Gothard, Naimark & Nicolini, 2000; Rosenfeld, 2004). Given the prevalence of sample bias as outlined previously, it is unsurprising that many classed as stalkers present with *DSM* Axis I disorders<sup>1</sup> (Douglas & Dutton, 2001) with the most common Axis II diagnosis being Personality Disorder - Not Otherwise Specified (NOS). They suggest those who stalk, targeting ex-partners, are likely to possess Cluster B personality disorders, also displaying traits of dependent, schizoid and avoidant personality. It is noteworthy here to add that this diagnosis is known to present vast manifesting heterogeneity amongst individuals (see Johnstone & Boyle, 2018). Furthermore, in respect of conceptual

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<sup>1</sup> Axis I disorders are generally recognised as clinical syndromes. Axis II disorders are recognised as personality disorders.

links, Brennan and Shaver (1998) helpfully highlighted the overlap between attachment styles and personality disorders, using attachment theory to explain the origins of personality disorders, suggesting they are not separate entities.

In the absence of a robust evidence base for effective treatment intervention for those who stalk (Purcell & McEwan, 2018), an adapted Dialectical Behaviour Therapy intervention has been piloted (Rosenfeld, Galietta, Ivanoff, Garcia-Mansilla, Martinez, Fava & Green, 2007) given the suggested prevalence of personality disorders. Whilst this showed some success, there have been no further treatment effectiveness studies since (Purcell & McEwan, 2018). Understanding underlying mental disorders is important in rehabilitative intervention given those who stalk motivated by major mental illness, are deemed more treatable than stalking that is the result of a personality disorder (Meloy, 2013). Treatment for the latter is often considered to require long-term and in-depth intervention, which is unsurprising given the entrenched patterns of dysfunctional interpersonal behaviours, and those with diagnosis being twice as likely to have stalked multiple times (McEwan & Strand, 2013).

With regard to other clinical syndromes, when exploring the links between psychotic disorder and stalking, Erotomania is the term dominating the literature (Mullen & Pathé, 1994), and often contextual to the absence of an intimate relationship. The authors note that the prototypical individual would be an isolated, socially inept person that may present with high levels of sensitivity, and possibly showing narcissistic superiority, whilst possessing a desire for a relationship and struggling with an associated fear of rejection (see Mullen, Pathé Purcell & Stuart, 1999).

Given the suggested psychopathology features, it is unsurprising that practitioner experience highlights complex interpersonal responsivity barriers when attempting to engage with those convicted of stalking, or related offences (MacKenzie, McEwan, Pathé, James, Ogloff & Mullen, 2009). Whilst the value of a positive working relationship with offenders is acknowledged (e.g., DeSorcy, Olver & Wormith, 2016; Rosenfeld, Fava & Galietta, 2009), developing such a relationship is challenging. Indeed, *'The most striking aspect of treating stalking offenders is the impact that this client population has on the therapeutic relationship'* (Rosenfeld et al., 2009: 97). The pessimistic view surrounding the clinical attempts to rehabilitate

stalking offenders via psychotherapy (e.g., Sheridan & Davies, 2010) persist despite stalking specific literature claiming that abstinence following prosecution is assisted by a directive therapeutic relationship (see Mullen et al., 1999).

Continued inconclusive outcomes from investigations into the distinguishing psychopathology features of stalking offenders (Tassy et al., 2014; Nijdam-Jones et al., 2018) stem from study limitations such as reliance on archival records, diagnostic weaknesses, and sample bias. Most recently, Nijdam-Jones et al. (2018) examined 137 stalkers using *DSM-IV-TR* (APA, 2000) criteria. Their study aspired to mitigate against previous design flaws and investigate the specific psychopathology of those who stalk, referred to a community-based programme between 2005 and 2013 in New York City, USA. This study compared outcomes between those who have committed stalking offences, with and without psychiatric diagnoses, based on factors such as criminal histories and violence, although it did not utilise a controlled comparator group. They found that just over a quarter of their sample were absent of a diagnosis, suggesting psychopathology amongst this group may not be as prevalent as has been cited or assumed previously. Nijdam-Jones et al. (2018) also suggested that the prevalence rate of psychotic disorder amongst their stalker sample was similar to that identified within other offender groups, again offering contradictory evidence to previous assumptions. These were significant findings from a within group study.

Systematic reviews focussing on empirical evidence pertaining to stalking offenders are lacking. This is perhaps reflective of the relative dearth of research with this offender group compared to other types of offenders. There has been no systematic review of responsivity factors or psychopathology features pertaining to stalking offenders. Such a review would be helpful in filling the knowledge and practice gaps, and assist professionals to be able to work more collaboratively and therapeutically with stalking offenders. In turn, this could improve rehabilitative and risk management attempts, and subsequently impact on public protection and safety. This systematic review intended to ascertain the psychopathology features of adult male stalking offenders. It aimed to address questions around which, if any, psychopathology features are common amongst, and unique to, adult male stalking offenders. Therefore, selected studies for this systematic review had to have utilised a specified comparator group. Potential gaps within the current research literature

are highlighted. Subsequent suggestions are then made for further research relating to psychopathology, attending to the impact this may have on professional engagement with those who commit stalking offences.

## **Method**

After initial pilot searches to optimise the sensitivity of search terms (April 2018) the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-analyses (PRISMA: Moher, Liberati, Tetzlaff, & Altman, 2009) guidelines were followed to produce a comprehensive systematic review protocol (see Appendix C). This protocol was registered on PROSPERO<sup>2</sup> in June 2018 to avoid unplanned duplication and promote transparency from the point of inception. Both the Joanna Briggs Institute and Cochrane Library databases were searched prior to commencement of the systematic review data extraction (May 2018, and again in June 2018) to avoid duplication.

### **Search Strategy.**

The following electronic databases were searched using the specific terms identified within the protocol (see Appendix C). The preceding pilot searches included a fifth database but this yielded only duplicates or irrelevant subject areas such as deer stalking. In the final search conducted in June 2018, the refined search terms identified in the protocol were applied within the following four relevant databases:

1. Scopus - *Largest database for peer-reviewed literature*
2. PubMed - *Access to primary literature; US government; large database*
3. ProQuest (PsycINFO) - *Large psychology database; ProQuest well-known*
4. Criminal Justice Abstracts (EBSCO) - *Criminal justice focus*

Additional searches included a review of Google Scholar (sorting the first 100 results by '*relevance*' for the search term '*male stalker psychopathology*'), and searches within key research databases within relevant clinical and forensic organisations. These were the National Health Service (NHS) Health Research

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<sup>2</sup> PROSPERO is an international prospective register of systematic reviews. The reference number for this review is CRD42018097183

Authority and Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) National Research Committee (NRC) research summaries electronic databases. Grey literature searches were conducted within the electronic databases PsycINFO under 'Dissertations and Theses', Electronic Theses Online System (EThOS), and the Nottingham Trent University Institutional Repository (IRep). Additional hand searches were conducted within the reference sections of all final screened articles. None of the above additional searches produced any new studies for inclusion into the review.

### **Study Eligibility.**

Study eligibility criteria were determined to select specific and relevant studies to conduct a narrative synthesis of quantitative research studies in order to answer the overarching systematic review question. The PICO model (Booth & Fry-Smith, 2004) was utilised to define and deconstruct the research question in order to develop the inclusion criteria for searches. This model attends to the component parts of *Population*, *Intervention*, *Comparator* and *Outcome*. A bespoke protocol was developed, specifying inclusion and exclusion criteria, and applied to search results to screen and determine relevant articles for the final review (see Appendix C).

The studies included within this systematic review had to have a sample *Population* of males who have perpetrated stalking behaviours, including participants aged 18 or over (deemed adult), and those from forensic or clinical settings (thus recognised for exhibiting problematic stalking behaviours). The group of interest (*Intervention*) was determined as those having committed stalking, or related offences. This was inclusive of other types of offences such as harassment given the different legislative terms used in studies dependent on their year and country of publication. Studies were required to have utilised a *Comparator* group such as non-stalkers (i.e., other types of offenders or a general population sample). The *Outcome* of studies would need to have focused on psychopathology, as opposed to stalking behaviours. Given the dearth of published research within this field, the decision was made to include studies from any year of publication, and international studies as long as they were available in the English language.



At this stage of the systematic review it was evident that there were no studies meeting the exact protocol following final abstract and full text screening. All the final studies utilised participant groups combining males and females. No studies of stalker psychopathology employed a comparator group using male-only stalking participants. The decision was taken to continue with the systematic review for a number of reasons. That is, this very outcome highlights the general lack of empirical evidence for this offender group, this particular aspect of this offender group, and the oversight of the potential differences in psychopathology generally between male and female offenders. It was deemed important to critically appraise the available empirical evidence on the psychopathology of those who commit stalking offences, providing a caveated narrative summary of currently available research.

#### **Data extraction and quality assessment.**

The PRISMA flow chart (Figure 1) illustrates the sensitivity of screening, overall data collection, and results of screening outcomes at the various stages. Table 1 contains key information pertaining to the seven included studies. Eligible studies for the narrative synthesis were then critically reviewed using an adapted quality appraisal checklist, applicable to comparative study designs originally developed by Cowley (1995). Having reviewed a number of quality appraisal checklists, the content of Cowley's (1995) was deemed most appropriate given the nature of the methodology used within the final included articles, and the topic under review. Adaptations were made to ensure contextual validity of the criterion and applicability to the target sample under consideration. Modifications were necessary given the need to appraise studies on the psychopathology of those who stalk, considering the reliability and validity of determining measures, and the assumed heterogeneity of those who stalk, as a group. Revisions to the original checklist were also made based on a review of essential comparative research study design principles and the methodology of the included articles, to further ensure the adapted checklist had a good level of face validity, and ability to discriminate over quality. A number of criteria were kept, for example, methods of sample matching, use of robust statistical analysis, and processes to prevent bias amongst assessors of psychopathology for their sample. The original quality assessment rating system was utilised as it proved fit for purpose. Appendix D presents both the original checklist devised by Cowley (1995) alongside the bespoke adapted version used in this systematic review.

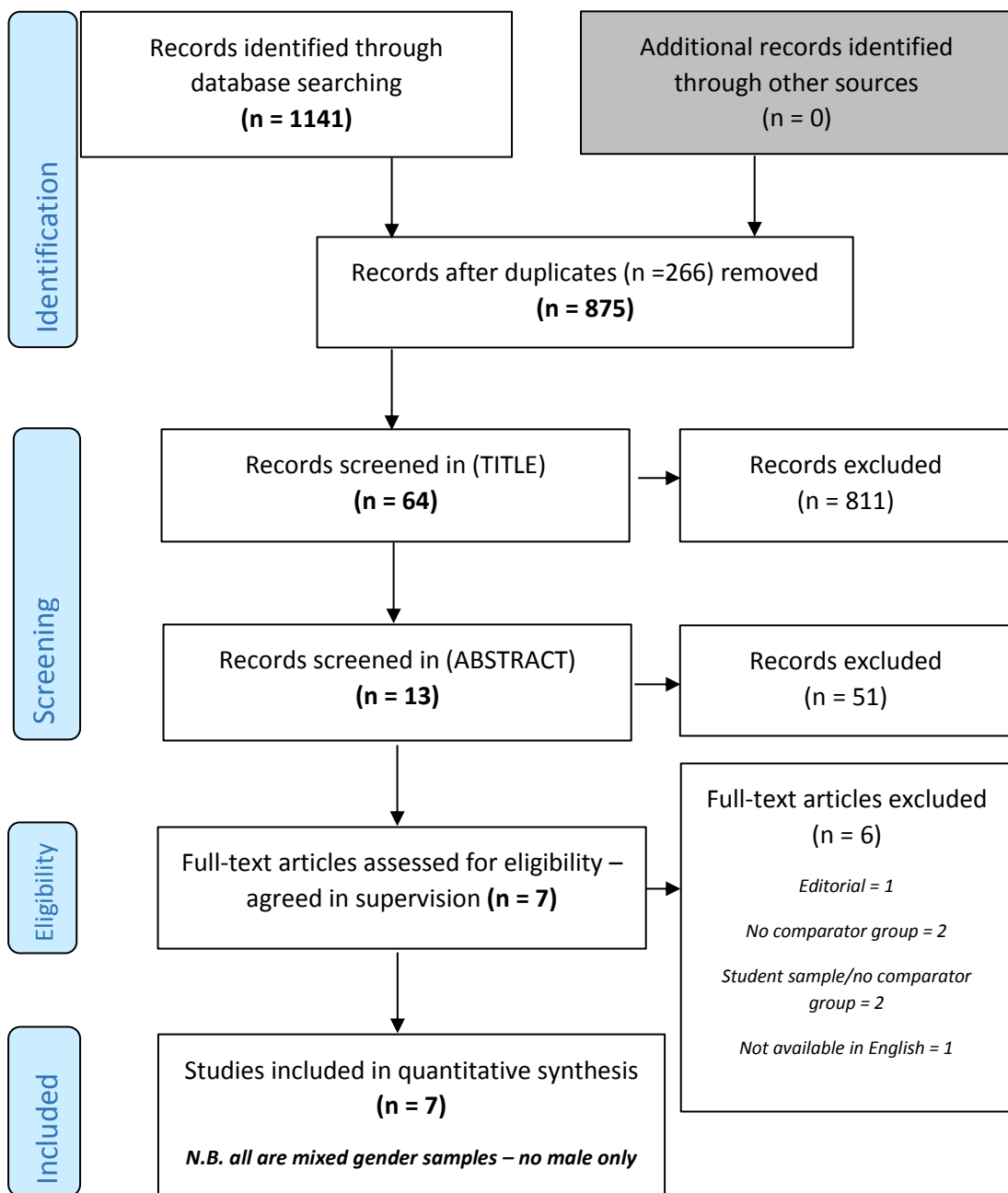


Figure 1. PRISMA (2009) flow diagram of data extraction stages and results

Authors	Year/ country	Group of interest sample (stalkers)	Comparator sample	Outcome (psychopathology)	Study aim(s)	Study design	Key findings
Harmon, Rosner and Owens	1995  USA	48 Forensic cases (charged with harassment and menacing) referred Jan 1987-Jan 1994  32 Male  16 Female  Mean age of 40 (range of 22 to 66)	Clinical population as a whole (all cases referred to Forensic Psychiatry Clinic 1993)  921 Male  151 Female  =1072  (Another table states total comparator group = 915)  14 to 74 (mean age of 31)	Psychiatric disorders; Delusional disorders; Erotomania.	This was not made explicit in the paper.  The study aim was to distinguish between the clinical population as a whole and the obsessional followers, on demographic and clinical features.	Comparison study based on clinical and demographic features for all 48 stalkers.	Confirmation Erotomania exists. Other types of mental illness and delusional disorders can result in similar behaviour patterns (including non-erotic harassing). The quality and intensity of the obsession and impairment of judgement is similar to Erotomania, regardless of the content of the delusions. Data suggests these individuals can be more violent/dangerous than suggested.
MacKenzie, Mullen, Ogloff, McEwan and James	2008  Australia	122 stalkers (referred to specialist forensic clinic – Problem Behaviours Program).  93.4% Male.  Age mean 36.3 (SD = 10.7)	General community norms data on attachment styles.	Parental bonding; Attachment styles.	To extend the research on stalker attachment styles by sub-type.		Stalkers were found to be more likely to have insecure attachment styles than members of the general community. Supports the theory that stalking evolves from pathological attachment. Highlights need to consider attachment in the assessment and management of stalkers.

MacKenzie, James, McEwan, Mullen and Ogloff	2010  Australia	147 stalkers referred to a community based correctional specialist clinic (mental illness not a pre-requisite for referral).  91.2% Male.  Age ranged from 19 to 66 years old. Mean age was 35 (SD = 10.1)	General population norms.  Offender sample comprising 88 white prisoners obtained from sample used by Jensen and Faulstich (1988).	IQ; WASI scores.  Psychosis (schizophrenia, delusional disorder and bipolar disorder).	To answer questions around intelligence levels amongst stalkers in comparison to other offenders and the general population.	Further analysis of 45 stalkers classified into two categories (affectionate and persecutory). Comparison study; Chi Square analysis.	The study found that stalkers have a significantly lower VIQ than PIQ.  Previous assumptions about intelligence levels in stalkers may be misleading. The verbal/performance deficit is important with regards to design/delivery of treatment interventions. The study concluded that the motivational types vary significantly in the education level achieved, intellectual ability and style of cognitive processing.
McEwan, Mullen and MacKenzie	2010  Australia	138 stalkers (criminally charged or referred to a specialist stalking clinic). All but 2 referred from CJ agencies.  123 Male  15 Female  Age mean 36.4 (SD = 11.1)	Three comparator groups used:  General population; psychiatric population; and UK community-based offender sample	Suicide rates	The aim of this study was to compare the incidence of suicide in a sample of stalkers with that in the Australian population as a whole, with psychiatric patients, and with community-based offenders.		Stalkers committed suicide at significantly higher rates than any of the comparison groups.
Meloy and Gothard	1995  USA	20 obsessional followers in custody	30 offenders with mental disorders in custody	Clinical variables; psychiatric diagnoses	To test the null hypothesis that Obsessional Followers would not differ significantly	Retrospective case evaluation reviews.	Obsessional Followers were older, more intelligent, better educated than the other offenders. No significant differences were found on DSM-III-R axis I diagnoses. Axis II diagnoses showed significant

		18 Male 2 Female Age ranged from 20 to 50 years old (SD = 7). Average of 35.4 years.			from a randomly selected group of offenders with mental disorders on certain demographic and clinical variables.		differences. Obsessional Followers more likely to have a PD other than Antisocial PD. Obsessional Followers are likely to be distinguishable from offenders with mental disorders based on presence of a non-antisocial (related to attachment pathology) PD.
Meloy, Rivers, Siegel, Gothard, Naimark and Nicolini	2000  USA	65 obsessional followers in custody  54 Male 11 Female Age range 21-55, mean 34.94 (SD=7.27)	65 offenders with mental disorders	Clinical variables; psychiatric diagnoses	The aim was to replicate earlier findings by comparing demographic, clinical and criminal variables within sub groups of Obsessional Followers and a comparison group of offenders with mental disorders.	Analytical cohort comparison study. Odds ratios comparing attachment styles with community norms.	Obsessional Followers had significantly greater estimated IQ than the offenders with mental disorders; but were not older nor better educated. No significant differences were found in the high prevalence of both axis I and II (DSM-IV) diagnoses. Obsessional Followers who targeted ex-intimates were significantly more likely to have a substance misuse or dependence diagnosis. Obsessional Followers who stalked strangers/acquaintances were more likely to be delusional.
Sandberg, McNeil and Binder	1998  USA	17 'stalkers'; inpatients  14 Male 3 Female Mean age was 37.58 (SD = 11.28).	326 others; inpatients	Clinical/psychiatric characteristics	The study aimed to identify demographic and clinical features of psychiatric inpatients who stalk or harass hospital staff following discharge.		Stalkers are more likely to have a diagnosis of PD and/or paranoid disorder, erotomanic subtype, and to have a history of physically assaultive or fear-inducing behaviour. Stalkers are more likely to be male, never married, and have histories of multiple hospitalisations, suicidal or self-injurious behaviours, and substance abuse/dependence.

Table 1. Key information for Included studies

## Results

### Quality assessments

A quality appraisal checklist by Cowley (1995) was adopted to assess a collection of quantitative comparison research studies within this systematic review. The use of a structured checklist formalises the process used to test for the internal validity of studies under review that will assist in answering the review question. The intent was to appraise the extent to which a study is free from the main methodological biases in assigning relative weighting to study outcomes in producing conclusive statements.

This review employed an inclusive search which minimised exclusion on the grounds of study design, and employed a tailored quality assessment tool to appraise the studies and assign appropriate weighting to the conclusions drawn. Each of the seven studies included was deemed adequate in design, contextual to the time period in which they were undertaken, and adequate for exploring the respective research question. In order to quality appraise and synthesise findings, each study was quality assessed, peer-reviewed, and assigned a quality rating (see Appendix E for included studies quality assessment ratings table).

All the included studies had used a comparative research design. Whilst having its limitations, this study design can be beneficial within social research as a method to explore similarities and variance between groups. This type of research design can falter on case selection, and in particular where small sample sizes are employed. For constructed populations like those used in the included studies within this review, i.e., people who stalk, sample bias can occur in that findings may merely reflect the construction itself (see Mills, Van de Bunt & De Bruijn, 2006). For this reason, sensible comparator group selection was essential. None of the included studies employed a randomised sample design and none attended to how they may have controlled for non-stalkers only within comparison samples. The strength of selected comparator groups also differed in terms of asserting similarity or variance in study findings. The studies utilised purposive sampling methods to recruit their target sample, a particularly sensible approach in the context of poor criminal

identification of those who stalk. The final studies included utilised the best data at their disposal. With samples taken from forensic psychiatry contexts, this bias is introduced into this review's conclusions about the psychopathology of those who stalk.

The included studies investigated various and some overlapping, psychopathology constructs. The psychopathology under study, across different time periods, using different tools to do so, and within different cultures, meant construct equivalence needed consideration (see Mills et al., 2006). Therefore, this review was pragmatic, open to, and cognisant with, varying terminology for similar constructs under investigation within the studies. Notwithstanding, various complexities existed in quality assessing, critically reviewing, and attempting to synthesise findings, as will be discussed later. With comparison studies there is limited ability to assign causal associations regardless, and with the included studies there was a limited extent to which it was possible to extend generalisations about those who commit stalking offences, outside of the settings of the studies' populations (external validity). The populations of the included studies also reflected differing levels of seriousness of offending given there is no internationally agreed framework for what constitutes, or constituted, stalking, and this will conceptually differ based on the different time periods from which the studies have drawn.

### **Narrative synthesis rationale**

Given the heterogeneity of both target and comparator sample groups, and research designs within the included studies, a meta-analysis would not be possible. A narrative synthesis of the findings is therefore presented. Following a demographic summary of all target samples of included studies for context, the results of this review are organised by psychopathology type (*Outcome*), to provide a structure for answering the systematic review question, whilst integrating the quality assessment conclusions.

### **Demographic information and characteristics of study samples**

The seven final articles included for the narrative synthesis employed purposive sampling to collate stalker samples from referrals to forensic and/or psychiatric services in the USA or Australia. Studies were conducted between 1995 and 2010

(spanning 15 years). Some studies utilised retrospective (archival) data for their analysis, whereas others were prospective in sample selection. Each study provided a level of demographic information about the target sample groups, however comparator group selections varied from static groups (i.e., already established population norms for psychopathology features or assessment tools) to randomised selection. This meant that there was a lack of consistent sample matching across studies with some assuming a good match given the same referral source, whereas others used population norms. Studies tended not to focus on possible implications of differing demographics between their samples and opted for what they believed were best-fit comparator groups.

Given varying target and comparator sample sizes, studies tended to use percentages to highlight similarities and differences between groups. Most included studies also employed statistical analytical methods to quantify and interpret any differences found, and some accounted for varying sample sizes by applying odds ratios and effect sizes analyses. Whilst most studies recognised the heterogeneity of stalkers as a client group within their study, not all reported their conclusions regarding this nor applied a categorisation system.

Sample sizes for participants who had stalked ranged across the seven studies from as few as 17 to 147. The three studies conducted in Australia (MacKenzie, James, McEwan, Mullen & Ogloff, 2010; MacKenzie, Mullen, Ogloff, McEwan & James, 2008; McEwan, Mullen & MacKenzie, 2010) identified their stalker sample using legislative context; they had been convicted of, or charged with, stalking offences, or such behaviours had been identified as problematic by the referrer. Those committing harassment offences were included if the episode lasted over two weeks (considered a 'watershed measure' by Purcell, Pathé & Mullen, 2002). The studies undertaken by Meloy and Gothard (1995), and Meloy, Rivers, Siegel, Gothard, Naimark and Nicolini (2000), identified their target sample using criteria such as committing a pattern of stalking or harassment against a person. Their target sample were conceptualised as obsessional followers. Harmon, Rosner and Owens (1995) used similar terminology and identified their target sample by reviewing 379 forensic psychiatry referrals and screening in those involving repeated behaviour patterns exhibiting stalking which totalled 48. Sandberg, McNeil and Binder (1998) selected their sample as a committee, identifying those who had displayed stalking



behaviours from retrospective observational records spanning a six year period. In terms of construct equivalence, there appears a good level of consistency across the studies given the complications in attempting to universally define stalkers in legislative and conceptual terms.

The three studies conducted in Australia yielded the largest sample numbers (122, 138 and 147 stalkers, respectively), and categorised them by motivational typology (Mullen et al., 1999), attending to the observed heterogeneity amongst stalkers regarding initiating motivations. These three studies were the most recent, conducted in 2008 and 2010, compared to those undertaken in the USA, which were published between 1995 and 2000. The Australian studies yielded similar demographics amongst their target samples. This is unsurprising given the similar time periods of the studies, and having the same participant recruitment source; a forensic clinic for which there is no prerequisite of mental illness. The Australian studies' stalker samples consistently had a higher ratio of males ranging from 89% to 93%, and yielded similar mean ages of between 35 and 36.4 years old (MacKenzie et al., 2010; MacKenzie et al., 2008; McEwan et al., 2010). The stalker typology proportions within the target samples across the three studies were also comparable (see Table 2).

The four studies undertaken in the USA (Harmon et al., 1995; Meloy & Gothard, 1995; Meloy et al., 2000; Sandberg et al., 1998) yielded slightly different demographic data and tended to focus primarily on psychiatric illnesses. Their stalker samples came from referrals to forensic psychiatry services and retrospective data taken from archival case records. The mean ages ranged from 34.9 to 40, sample sizes from 17 to 65, and as with the Australian samples, there was a higher percentage of males within the samples (ranging from 67-90%). The sample used by Harmon et al. (1995), producing the lower end of the range, focussed on delusional disorder with their purposive sampling approach yielding a higher number of female participants, which stands apart from other studies of stalkers and psychopathology.

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Study	Typology				
	Rejected	Resentful	Intimacy Seeker	Incompetent Suitor	Predatory
MacKenzie et al., 2010	33%	22%	15%	21%	9%
McEwan et al., 2010	27%	24%	16%	24%	9%
MacKenzie et al., 2008	26%	22%	17%	26%	9%

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*Note.* See Appendix B for brief summary of typologies.

Table 2. Typology percentage proportions amongst the Australian study samples

Three of the four USA studies reported on ethnicity proportions, but neglect to include general population or other offender comparisons for that same time period. Meloy and Gothard (1995) remarked on the gender and ethnicity proportions of their samples; stalker sample and comparator group comprising others in custody with a mental disorder. Sandberg et al. (1998) also reported on age, educational achievement, and ethnic background, comparing in-patients, with and without, stalking offences having been committed. The three studies reported that the majority of the stalker samples were white Caucasian (35%: Meloy & Gothard, 1995; 46%: Meloy et al., 2000; 59%: Sandberg et al., 1998).

Other than age and gender, very few other demographic characteristics of the samples from within the included studies can be meaningfully reported on due to the absence of details, particularly with the studies utilising population norms.

## **Attachment styles**

Despite the popularity of attachment theory when considering stalking behaviours, only one of the included studies focussed on attachment styles (MacKenzie et al., 2008). It proposed to extend the research on attachment styles amongst those who stalk, in comparison to an Australian general public community sample. MacKenzie et al. (2008) recruited 122 stalkers from a forensic clinic in Australia who were assessed using the Adult Attachment Style measure (a forced-choice version of the tool by Bartholomew and Horowitz, 1991) and the Parental Bonding Instrument (PBI), which is a 25-item self-report questionnaire (Parker, Tupling & Brown, 1979) measuring influential parent-child bonding characteristics. Although the included study by MacKenzie et al. (2008) was robust and methodologically sound, the quality assessment suggested that the findings should be regarded with some reservation. Whilst odds ratios were employed due to vastly differing sample sizes, limitations existed due to utilising the psychometric measures' general community sample norms as comparator groups. For example, the reduced ability for sample matching. However, this comparison sample provided a helpful comparison for the purposes of the study.

Of significance, MacKenzie et al. (2008) found their stalker sample to be significantly more likely to have a negative self-view compared to the general public group, with the exception of intimacy seekers, perhaps whose hopeful fantasies or delusions act as a protective skin. The intimacy seeker typology sub-group yielded findings to suggest they were neither more likely than the general public sample to have an insecure attachment style, nor did they hold negative views of self and others above the community sample. The authors propose this could represent the manifestation of delusional beliefs held in respect of a confidence in the eventuality of a relationship with the desired victim. The sense is that this may explain the self-reported secure attachment style and the longevity of their pursuits of victims, rather than possessing an objectively secure attachment style and self-worth.

MacKenzie et al. (2008) concluded that stalkers were more likely than the general population to have had emotionally neglectful parental experiences and to have an insecure attachment style as adults. Those who had stalked were more likely to score on the preoccupied style of attachment than were the general public group (with the exception of predatory stalkers, see Appendix B for typology summaries).

Unsurprisingly, they also found no significant differences between the stalking and comparator groups on the dismissing style of attachment. These two findings show that differing childhood attachment disruptions, and adjustments to such may manifest in ways where an individual may not desire emotional closeness with others, thus less likely to stalk. It was conceptualised by MacKenzie et al. (2008) that preoccupied stalkers become consumed by obsessional, negative thoughts, emotions, cognitive distortion and justifications. They suggested that stalking may have roots in an attempt to restore self-worth, which aligns with goal linking theory suggested by Spitzberg and Cupach (2003).

In exploring this, MacKenzie et al. (2008) reported that stalkers remembered their parents as being less caring and more emotionally neglectful than the general public sample (based on the PBI). This was especially so for the rejected and predatory stalker typologies. The authors hypothesised that the two stalker sub-groups have responded to the lack of care differently, i.e., one clinging to a relationship out of fear of abandonment (rejected typology), and the other avoiding emotional connections to protect oneself against rejection (predatory typology), manifesting in the initial motivation for stalking. Of further note, the sample of those who had stalked recalled less paternal controlling characteristics than the general public sample (Mackenzie et al., 2008), with the exception of those fitting the resentful typology. The authors suggested that the behaviours of the resentful type stalk to redress a perceived injustice may either be a replication of their controlling father's behaviour, or indeed a pattern of responding to ensure their experience of powerlessness and impotence are not experienced again.

#### **Attachment styles summary.**

All stalking typology behaviours appear to be underpinned by a psychological vulnerability related to different adverse attachment experiences; which manifest differently in relationships within adulthood, affecting potential for stalking (see MacKenzie et al., 2008). Those who have stalked are more likely to have an insecure attachment style, as robustly evidenced by MacKenzie et al. (2008). This is an important feature of psychopathology in relation to stalking behaviours, and therefore should be incorporated into engagement, assessment, treatment, and risk management plans. Given this summary was based on the findings of a single study, replicated findings and further empirical evidence is needed.

## **Personality Disorders**

This section addresses and appraises the findings of the included studies in respect of personality disorder. To contextualise with current diagnostic systems, the fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of mental disorders (*DSM-5*: APA, 2013) is now in use, which has reorganised the categorisation of personality disorders. It contains a reduced number of disorders, and has removed and reconceptualised what was known as Personality Disorder - Not Otherwise Specified (PD-NOS). The implications of this for the findings within this review are discussed within the summary and final discussion sections.

Harmon et al. (1995) reviewed 48 stalker cases referred to a Forensic Psychiatry Clinic between 1987 and 1994, using the *DSM-III-R* (APA, 1987). Out of the personality disorders identified the PD-NOS sub-type was most common. The quality assessment of this study highlighted strengths of having both samples sourced from the same setting, at the same time period, and using an internationally recognised diagnostic tool. The limitations, however, led to the view that the findings in isolation could be doubted, largely due to the subjective allocation of cases to the stalker sample group (from archival records) and a lack of inter-rater reliability processes for diagnoses. It is also unclear if evaluators for assigning to groups were blind to the psychopathology outcomes, and aims of the study, in doing so.

Meloy and Gothard (1995) conducted a study designed to explore the assumption, in the absence of empirical evidence, of higher rates of mental disorder amongst those who had committed stalking offences (referred to as 'obsessional followers' in their study). They undertook their study utilising archival case records from court referrals to a forensic clinical evaluation unit in San Diego, USA. Their objective was to compare demographic and clinical variables between obsessional followers and an offender group with mental disorders. The target sample consisted of a small and non-random, convenience sample of 20 obsessional followers detained in custody (18 males and 2 females). They were compared with a randomly selected group of 30 offenders detained in custody with mental disorders awaiting psychiatric and psychological evaluation. The quality assessment for this study suggested the findings should be considered with some reservation despite being a relatively

sound research. This is because of the small sample size, lack of proportionate sample size analyses being undertaken, and the lack of inter-rater reliability processes based on historical psychopathology diagnoses. In respect of the potential bias, attempts were made to reduce this as evaluators were blind to group allocation and the aims of the study.

With these limitations in mind, the findings of the study by Meloy and Gothard (1995) found no significant differences between groups on Axis I disorders (using *DSM-III-R*; APA, 1987). However, they found significant differences on Axis II conditions. The stalker group were more likely to have a personality disorder compared to the comparison group, with 85% meeting the criteria for Axis II diagnoses. Notably for the stalker sample, only 10% had antisocial personality disorder, whilst 75% had diagnoses for a broad range of other personality disorders or developmental disorder. The most prevalent was PD-NOS, diagnosed in eight cases. This conclusion reflects that of Harmon et al. (1995), which applied the same assessment tool to archival records, and fits with underlying attachment pathology suggestions with the low prevalence of antisocial personality disorder. Indeed, over a quarter of the comparator group had antisocial personality disorder diagnoses. It is noteworthy that the researchers used a small sample from a forensic psychiatry unit, and whilst attempting to corroborate some self-reported information within archived case records, there were instances of missing data in both the target and comparator groups which was significant given the already small sample size.

The replication study conducted by Meloy et al. (2000) was quality assessed as similar to the above, although it employed a greater sample size and equivalent comparator group size. As with the previous design (see Meloy & Gothard, 1995), the study employed a static group archival method of data collection consisting of 65 obsessional followers, and 65 offenders with mental disorders comprising the comparison group, both selected at random from within the same setting. The authors highlight that diagnosis was determined again using the *DSM-III-R* (APA, 1987) and based on evaluators reviewing the archival data, creating a key limitation of this study. Researchers this time found no significant differences between the sample groups on Axis I and II diagnoses. Within the stalker sample, Meloy et al. (2000) found 62% of their stalker sample had Axis II diagnoses, with only 9% meeting the criteria for antisocial personality disorder. The most prevalent was PD-

NOS ( $n = 22$ : 34%), with the most common descriptor trait being narcissistic ( $n = 19$ ).

A study undertaken to identify demographic and clinical features of psychiatric inpatients by Sandberg et al. (1998) utilised a stalker sample comprising 17 inpatient cases (14 males and 3 females), who had engaged in stalking behaviours. Stalking behaviours were determined by retrospective review of observational records, using a subcommittee system to reach agreement. Most of the sample were involuntarily admitted, not facing criminal charges, and had all stalked or harassed hospital staff following discharge, which was the focus of the study. Their case records were reviewed for demographic and clinical information, and subsequently compared to 326 *typical* inpatients whose clinical and demographic information had been collected in a previous study.

Sandberg et al. (1998) reported their stalker sample to be significantly more likely to have a personality disorder diagnosis and/or paranoid disorder (Erotomania subtype). They acknowledged that in the context of the results, those identified in the target group were likely to be the most noticeable and serious cases, creating a sampling bias. As such, they asserted that the study's applicability was deemed best to lie in formulating systematic management strategies in response to such behaviours against hospital staff after discharge by inpatients. The quality assessment deemed that the findings should be considered with some doubt in context of making robust conclusions on the distinct psychopathology of those who stalk. In addition to the above, the authors used a small sample size without applying adjustment sensitive statistical analysis to account for the vast difference in sample sizes, employing only percentage comparisons to present findings. Furthermore, there was no inter-rater reliability process for determining psychopathology, and there exists the possibility that those within the comparator group could have employed undetected and undisclosed stalking behaviours, given their group selection methods. These relied on self-report, which could have been heavily biased given the prevalence of denial and minimisation amongst those who stalk (see MacKenzie et al., 2009).

### **Personality Disorders summary.**

The studies' combined are inconclusive of whether those who stalk differ from other groups of offenders in terms of prevalence of personality disorder. The highest quality study appears to conclude no significant differences, although it does highlight that within their stalker sample, PD-NOS was most common (Meloy et al., 2000). Links made between stalker samples and PD-NOS prevalence was common amongst the studies in this review. This personality subtype has been replaced in the *DSM-5* edition (APA, 2013) with Personality Disorder – Trait Specified, which provides a pathological trait profile as opposed to a vague diagnosis, often used to rule out the presence of standard personality disorders (Oldham, 2015). The implications of these revisions on the included studies' findings will be discussed later in terms of overall conclusions drawn from this systematic review.

A further collective point of interest regarding personality disorder was the links made to attachment pathology amongst the studies. Meloy and Gothard (1995) concluded that those who had stalked were more likely to have non-antisocial personality disorders than offenders with mental disorders, which they conceptually linked to attachment pathology, and was deemed the distinguishing feature. Sandberg et al. (1998) also highlighted the alignment to attachment pathology in their study, with personality disorders by their definition denoting a longstanding pattern of interpersonal problems. The conceptual link between attachment pathology and personality disorder (explored in depth by Brennan and Shaver, 1998) will be discussed further in summarising this review.

### **Delusional Disorders**

In terms of delusional disorders, there has been a longstanding presumed link, unsurprising given the potential for sample biases when accessing stalker samples. MacKenzie et al. (2010) found that within their sample, 86% of the intimacy seekers were psychotic; incorporating schizophrenia, delusional disorder and/or bi-polar disorder, with delusional beliefs. They assessed this using *DSM-IV-R* (APA, 2000) guidelines and asserted that this was a significant finding and a much higher figure than found in other subtype of stalkers in their target sample. This prevalence level was dependent on the intimacy seeker typology sub-type, who are categorised as such largely by their delusional presentations. This was the only study that was



quality assessed as having findings considered likely to be valid with confidence. It was appreciated in synthesising results however, that this study is more recent and utilised clear stalking group criteria and internationally robust measures applying inter-rater reliability processes.

Meloy et al. (2000) reviewed 65 obsessional followers against a comparator group and found that delusional disorder was uncommon ( $n=4$ : 6%) within their stalker sample. They reported that psychotic disorder was, however, present at the time of stalking in 22% of the participants. Nine participants (14%) showed symptoms of Erotomania and the authors reported that delusional beliefs were more significantly found amongst the acquaintance/stranger victim-type stalkers (likely the same as the intimacy seeker sub-type). The quality assessment undertaken provoked some reservations in asserting the reported findings as robust. For example, as highlighted in the study limitations, it relied on retrospective case information to diagnose participants and did not employ any inter-rater reliability processes.

The included study by Harmon et al. (1995) reviewed 48 cases charged with harassment and menacing, that were referred to a Forensic Psychiatry Clinic between 1987 and 1994. The study group were divided into two sub-groups; affectionate/amorous and persecutory/angry type delusions ( $n = 45$ ); based on the nature of attachment between defendant and object, and by the nature, if any, of prior interaction. Amongst the stalker group, 29% of cases had satisfied the *DSM-III-R* (APA, 1987) criteria for Delusional (Paranoid) Disorder; although only six cases of these were defined Erotomaniac and these were all female. Of the remaining cases, schizophrenia and personality disorder were identified. Harmon et al. (1995) therefore concluded that Erotomania did exist amongst those who stalk, held in the forensic psychiatry setting, but was not the sole delusional disorder driving harassing behaviours. Furthermore, they highlighted that there were similarities between cases displaying persecutory/ angry forms of delusional disorders and those with more amorous intent. This suggests that the motivations of love pursuit or vengeance are not discriminatory. As previously commented upon, the quality appraisal of this study poses some doubts over conclusions drawn given the range of limitations.

### **Delusional Disorders summary.**

Delusional disorder amongst those who stalk is not prevalent, and although some studies in this systematic review appear to contradict this, the participant settings skew the conclusions made about those who commit stalking offences as a group. Whilst Erotomania amongst stalker groups was reported in two studies, it was reported at a low level of prevalence, and predominantly related to females. The most consistent finding from robust studies was the prevalence of psychotic disorders amongst a particular stalker sub group, described as intimacy seekers or acquaintance or stranger stalkers (Meloy et al., 2000; MacKenzie et al., 2010). Again, target sample bias created this finding.

### **Clinical Syndromes**

The included studies reported on varying clinical syndromes. McEwan et al. (2010) found in their study that 86% of their stalker sample had received at least one mental disorder diagnosis; and 40.4% from those diagnosed with Axis I conditions were also diagnosed with a personality disorder. The authors note that the sample setting (a forensic mental health clinic) will have influenced and perhaps overestimated prevalence rates for mental disorder. Furthermore, the quality assessment of this study highlighted that whilst presenting robust methodology, some reservation over the findings exist largely due to the small target sample size. To mitigate this odds ratios were applied to the data to account for varying sample sizes and a variety of adequately matched comparator groups were selected, addressing the study aims with additional rigour.

In a previous study by Meloy and Gothard (1995) 60% ( $n = 12$ ) of the stalker sample had a history with in- or out-patient psychiatric treatment and 85% ( $n = 17$ ) had an Axis I disorder diagnosis. However, they also found that Axis I prevalence was similar across target and comparator groups. Meloy and Gothard (1995) reflected in their conclusions that their obsessional followers, whether Erotomaniac or not, had a history of conflicted or impaired relationships (with many victims being strangers), had never had an intimate relationship, had failed on their previous attempts to attain an intimate relationship, and were socially isolated. The findings did not support the notion that stalking was committed by mentally healthy, law-abiding

individuals. However, one must consider sample size and bias from the setting, alongside study focus, in context of this assertion.

In their replication study, Meloy et al. (2000) found that 86% of their 65 obsessional followers had an Axis I diagnosis, most commonly substance dependency. Mood disorder was less common, whilst delusional disorder was considered relatively uncommon. As with the original study, this replication study comes with limitations in terms of quality assessment and sample bias. The Meloy et al. (2000) study replicated results highlighting that the obsessional follower group may not be law-abiding, trouble free individuals prior to stalking behaviours, stating that this behaviour may be another extension of problematic and antisocial activities. The authors also highlighted that the study supported the assertion that the stalker group showed a history of failed heterosexual relationships. They commented that this spanned at least a decade before stalking behaviour begins, which is an interesting observation considering the average age of those who stalk.

#### **Clinical Syndromes summary.**

Some studies included in this review are heavily biased in their findings with regards to Axis I prevalence. This is due to participant sample sources, and the lack of reference to stalker subtypes, which would take account of the bias, as opposed to assigning the findings to people who stalk, as a group. Therefore, whilst the results suggest high prevalence of mental disorder diagnosis amongst stalker groups, this bias needs consideration, as does the finding by Meloy and Gothard (1995) that such prevalence was not different from their comparator group.

#### **Education levels and intelligence levels/Intelligence Quotient (IQ)**

Intelligence levels are commented upon here as a responsiveness factor incorporated by the included studies in this review. Included studies referred to the intelligence levels of those who stalk using various methods, although are summarised together in this section due to confidence in construct equivalence. In their study, Meloy and Gothard (1995) suggested that none of their stalker sample were considered below average on intelligence level estimates. This was based on using the Shipley Test (see study for details and references) or on the examiner's judgement. They concluded that the stalker sample were better educated and more intelligent than

the comparison group. Whilst they acknowledged limitations to their findings (i.e. reliance on the Shipley Test, clinical examiner judgement, and missing data), they deemed this finding to be commensurate with stalkers' perceived ability for manipulation and resourcefulness. The quality appraisal of this study highlighted the weaknesses in determining intellectual levels, the missing data for many cases, and reliance on observational inferences to support their findings. In their replication study, Meloy et al. (2000) found that whilst their stalker group had significantly higher estimated IQ levels, they were not better educated. They employed the same assessment methods of IQ, thus the limitations described above persisted, although they attempted to assign equivalent WAIS-R<sup>3</sup> bandings to provide a more descriptive assessment. However, only 69% of their stalker sample had IQ data, leaving a significant portion of missing data.

Attempting to provide comment upon intelligence levels amongst those who commit stalking offences, two studies relied solely on demographic data regarding education levels. Within their sample, Harmon et al. (1995) found that all of the stalker cohort had some high school education, compared to only 3% of the comparison clinic cohort. Almost 80% of the stalker sample had completed high school (compared to less than 30% in the comparator group), with 40% being college graduates (compared to 6% of the clinic group). A number of hypotheses could be raised from this significant difference, although unfortunately, there is no clear description given on criteria for assignment to the two sample groups.

Sandberg et al. (1998) found that their stalker group and comparator group did not differ significantly in terms of education and that patients from both groups had at least a high school education. This was a very specific population that both groups were drawn from and discriminating allocation to groups was weak. The study findings are considered with some doubt based on the quality assessment undertaken.

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<sup>3</sup> The Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale (WAIS) is on its fourth edition: Wechsler, D. (2008). *Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale—Fourth Edition (WAIS–IV)*. San Antonio, TX: The Psychological Corporation.

The included study by MacKenzie et al. (2010) directly addressed the issue of intelligence levels amongst those who stalk. They concluded that previous assumptions about intelligence levels amongst those who stalk may be misleading, highlighting limitations to previous studies (i.e., Meloy & Gothard, 1995; Meloy et al., 2000), for example using anecdotal observations of the ingenuity and manipulation used by many who commit stalking offences, as indicative of high intelligence levels. The authors highlighted that conclusions based on retrospective analyses of case notes prepared for other purposes, using years in education as a proxy for standardised IQ measures may be misleading. Mackenzie et al. (2010) found no consistent correlation between years in education and IQ scores amongst their stalker sample. To illustrate they highlighted that the resentful subtype on average, spent more years in education yet had the lowest mean Verbal IQ<sup>4</sup> (VIQ), whilst the predatory subtype had the highest mean VIQ, yet they were less likely to complete high school.

The study undertaken by MacKenzie et al. (2010) was deemed likely to be valid in terms of their findings based on the quality assessment undertaken for this review. Given the quality appraisal outcome for this comprehensive study, only key points of note are presented here (see Appendix E for further details). MacKenzie et al. (2010) evaluated 147 stalkers referred to a specialist forensic clinic in Australia, which has no prerequisite for previous or current mental illness. Whilst the authors acknowledge that their stalker sample did not constitute perhaps the most serious cases given the source was a community-based clinic, they assert that their sample of stalkers was more representative than retrospective case samples used in previous studies. The comparator group was chosen based on ethnic composition match, and availability of both PIQ and VIQ scores of the sample. The relatively small sample size of the comparator group ( $n = 88$ ) was acknowledged, however, best fit was decided upon due to robust IQ measurement and matching.

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<sup>4</sup> Full Scale Intelligence Quotient (FSIQ) refers to an assessment rating of a person's complete cognitive capacity, comprising of Verbal IQ (VIQ) and Performance IQ (PIQ). VIQ indicates capabilities and limitations in a person's understanding and use of the spoken word. PIQ is a score resulting from assessments of mental capacity using nonverbal skills.

In the study by MacKenzie et al. (2010) the Wechsler Abbreviated Scale of Intelligence (WASI<sup>5</sup>) was administered. Researchers pragmatically chose the WASI tool, acknowledging its limitations as an abbreviated test, presenting correlation coefficients of the WASI with the WAIS-III, and making interpretative adjustments to compare the WASI scores between groups. MacKenzie et al. (2010) compared their WASI scores of the stalker group with two samples: a general population norms adult sample ( $M = 100$ ,  $SD = 15$ , taken from the WASI manual) and an offender sample ( $M = \text{FIQ } 87.66$  ( $SD = 11.15$ );  $\text{VIQ } 86.48$  ( $SD = 11.85$ );  $\text{PIQ } 91.74$  ( $SD = 11.29$ )).

MacKenzie et al. (2010) found that the mean stalker IQ was 91.59 ( $SD = 16.2$ ), and that their VIQ scores were significantly lower than PIQ scores, which may reflect another finding that only 36% of stalkers had completed secondary education. The FIQ and PIQ scores for the whole stalker group fell in the average range, whilst VIQ fell in the low average range, giving a discrepancy ( $\text{PIQ} > \text{VIQ}$ ) of 9.8. Authors highlighted the difficulty with estimating FIQ scores when the discrepancy between VIQ and PIQ exists at a significant level. A comparison of the stalker IQ scores and general population norms showed their FIQ was significantly lower. The same conclusion was revealed for VIQ scores, however the PIQ score for the whole stalker group did not differ from the norm sample. When compared with the general offender comparator sample, the stalker sample did not differ significantly on FIQ. Stalker subtype examination revealed that the intimacy seekers and predatory stalker typologies had a higher FIQ than the offender sample. Similarly, there were no significant differences found with the VIQ scores of both samples, yet the intimacy seeker subtype produced a higher mean score than the offender sample. The PIQ examination showed similar results, with the intimacy seekers and rejected subtypes producing higher PIQ scores than the offender sample.

These findings perhaps suggest that the small sub group of intimacy seekers (known to target strangers and largely suffer major mental disorder), do indeed have higher levels of intelligence. This may explain the confident conclusions of earlier

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<sup>5</sup> The Wechsler Abbreviated Scale of Intelligence (WASI) is a much shorter measure of FSIQ, VIQ and PIQ (see Weschler, 1999). It is now in its second edition (see McCrimmon & Smith, 2013).

included studies by Meloy and Gothard (1995), and Meloy et al., (2000) asserting higher intelligence levels amongst those who commit stalking offences, than other offender groups, having relied on psychiatric patient samples. With practical relevance, MacKenzie et al. (2010) posit that given the prevalence of psychosis (86%) amongst intimacy seekers, that appealing to their intellect as a way to encourage desistance may be futile. Conceptually, they assume that given the intimacy seekers' delusional pursuit of the victim, this must override competent cognitive ability.

Given communication is the central feature of stalking, the verbal deficit in those who stalk may be unsurprising (see MacKenzie et al., 2008). Given bespoke psychological interventions are recommended for those who commit stalking offences, which rely on verbal interaction, MacKenzie et al. (2010) recommend thorough IQ assessments are undertaken in light of their findings to shape content responsively to verbal capacity. Furthermore, they encourage consideration of the use of behaviour- focussed therapies (i.e., functional analysis) and assert that the development of interpersonal communication skills could be a therapeutic focus.

### **Intelligence levels summary.**

Despite the assumption that those who stalk are more intelligent than other offender groups, the robust study by MacKenzie et al. (2010) presents contradictory and informative findings. The intelligence levels of people who stalk, are asserted to be lower than the general population sample, and similar to the offender comparator group. The stalker sample Performance IQ was found to be superior to their Verbal IQ; a finding useful for bespoke practical application.

### **Suicide rates**

Only one study included in this systematic review focussed on prevalence rates of suicide amongst those convicted of, or exhibiting stalking, compared to non-stalking groups. This study by McEwan et al. (2010) concluded that prevalence rates were significantly higher amongst those exhibiting stalking behaviours; a 2.2% incidence rate was found and a relative risk calculation showed the stalker group to be 80 times more likely to have committed suicide in the study period compared to the three comparator groups. This non-randomised, comparison study included 138

participants convicted of, or exhibiting stalking, or related offences, referred to a specialist stalking clinic, and used data collated over a three-year period (2004-2006). They undertook 12-month follow up data collection, employing relative risk ratios to compare this data with their three comparison groups. These were the suicide rates data from the Australian general population between 1995 and 2005, the suicide rates data from a separate research sample from 1998 consisting of those referred to Australian psychiatric services between 1961 and 1994, and a community-based offenders dataset from England and Wales. McEwan et al. (2010) satisfied themselves of the comparability of the suicide rates between the UK and Australian general population records at that time.

In their study, McEwan et al. (2010) found that three participants had committed suicide during the follow up period. The three were male, and all stalking episodes had been driven by a desire for a relationship; two were intimacy seekers with delusional beliefs, and one fitted the rejected typology. All three had been in contact with the criminal justice system, and two had been subject to protective orders (both breached), none had been violent towards the victim or third parties, but one had made threats to the victim and her family. All three had been in-patients with psychiatric services at some point in their history, with primary concerns being depressive symptoms. At the time of their assessment, one of the three had been diagnosed with depression, one with psychotic illness and the other with PD-NOS (and a later diagnosis for psychotic illness). Despite the small number, the authors propose that added stressors from the contextual stalking episode may increase risk among those with existing vulnerabilities in their mental health. This study was quality assessed and deemed to meet most of the methodological key criteria but with some limitations, namely the outcome sample size to draw conclusions from ( $n = 3$ ). Its strengths, however, lie in its sample matching attempts, using best-fit populations from three separate comparison groups.

Whilst McEwan et al. (2010) acknowledge that the population context (forensic mental health clinic) will have influenced prevalence rates for mental illness, they urge clinicians to consider risk of suicide when working with this offender group, alongside the risks they pose to victims. They assert the need for clinicians to assess those committing stalking, or related offences for symptoms of depression, and where relevant, incorporate crisis and risk management plans to mitigate risks



as far as possible. Managing the psychological distress experienced by those who stalk, according to the authors, will likely benefit victims too given the links to risk.

### **Suicide rates summary.**

The empirical evidence reviewed and presented suggested a low baseline of prevalence, however a comparatively higher risk of suicide amongst stalker groups, compared to others. This conclusion was based on only one study, which was however, deemed robust in its methodology. The prevalence of depression was also noted, and requires attention when aiming to work with those who commit stalking offences, in rehabilitative and desistance capacities.

### **Discussion**

This systematic review aimed to collate and appraise empirical evidence pertaining to psychopathology features for adult male those who stalk. Despite all included studies sampling mixed gender populations, meaningful conclusions were yielded. From this useful practical implications for research and clinical practice were drawn.

Collectively the studies found a much higher proportion of males in their stalker samples, and consistent mean age ranges of between 35 and 40. None of the studies addressed what influence these demographics may have on their findings, or what it may say generally about those who commit stalking offences. No other conclusive similarities were drawn on demographic information given the use of contrasting populations in different contexts, and from various countries, at separate times. Whilst the studies defined their stalker group with relative clarity, and there was an assumed level of construct equivalence across studies, the majority did not comment upon psychopathology specific to gender. Nonetheless, some important collective findings from this review were found and will be discussed in context of the review question given the vast majority of participants in the included studies were adult males.

The highest quality study concluded there were no significant differences on the prevalence of personality disorder between their stalker sample, and other offenders (Meloy et al., 2000). Within their stalker sample personality disorder was present in

62% cases and PD-NOS was most common within this. The same was also found in the other studies commenting on personality disorder prevalence amongst stalker groups (Harmon et al., 1995; Meloy & Gothard, 1995). PD-NOS has been summarised by Wilberg, Hummelen, Pedersen & Karterud (2008: 467) as '*a milder form of PD but is nevertheless associated with significant clinical problems*'. This may conceptually explain why those who stalk are often otherwise law-abiding, and well-functioning psychosocially. Unfortunately, PD-NOS is a vague diagnosis and arguably of minimal clinical application given the vast heterogeneity within the diagnosis (Oldham, 2015). The latest *DSM* (5<sup>th</sup> ed., APA, 2013) attempts to address this in their hybrid model, intending to provide more precise characteristic clinical pictures with diagnoses, thus assigning the diagnosis Personality Disorder – Trait Specified (Sevecke, Poustka & Popow, 2016).

In terms of understanding predisposing features of psychopathology, there was good evidence to conclude that those who stalked were more likely to have an insecure attachment style in comparison to the general population (MacKenzie et al., 2008). A preoccupied attachment style is rooted in experiencing inconsistent caregiver support (MacKenzie et al. (2008), and it is purported that these experiences of inconsistency lowers an individuals' threshold for perceived attachment threats from their environment (Brennan & Shaver, 1998). This could help explain the conceptual links between attachment style, personality disorder traits and stalking behaviours (further explored within the research study presented in chapter 4).

A concomitant finding, synonymous with insecure attachment styles, was that those who stalked were more likely than the general population to hold a negative self-view (MacKenzie et al., 2008). The origins of personality disorder are deemed relatively poorly understood although it has been asserted that they are acquired disorders related to negative childhood experiences (Sevecke et al., 2016), and presumably the development of a negative self-view. Understanding personality disorder through attachment theory in relation to stalking shows significant conceptual overlaps. This is with the exception perhaps of psychopathic personality types that are unrelated to attachment (see Brennan & Shaver, 1998), and rare amongst those who commit stalking offences. While attachment pathology and personality disorder have been conceptually linked, further research is needed (see

Brennan & Shaver, 1998) given these are important clinical considerations for addressing rehabilitative practice gaps for those who stalk.

In respect of Axis I diagnoses (based on outdated *DSM* classifications), Meloy and Gothard (1995) found no significant differences between their stalker and comparator group. However, their stalker sample were derived from a forensic psychiatric setting and the comparator group consisted of offenders with mental disorders. Delusional and psychotic disorders however, were deemed uncommon amongst people who had stalked in the replication study (Meloy et al., 2000). In concluding on clinical syndromes, the most recent published study on stalker psychopathology supports the review findings that mental disorder is not as prevalent as historically presumed (Nijdam-Jones et al., 2018). Notwithstanding, some studies in this systematic review appear to support the link between stalking and mental disorder, albeit with sample settings creating bias. With this caveat, where delusional beliefs were present in fuelling stalking behaviours, the victims were more likely to be strangers or acquaintances (Meloy et al., 2000), or intimacy seekers (MacKenzie et al., 2010), which are a similar, if not the same, subtype of stalkers. These are valuable clinical findings for application to practice with a minority sub-group of stalkers who suffer serious mental illness. These findings suggest that mental disorder is an important consideration in the initial assessment and case formulation work with those who have stalked. This is in order to rule in, or out, illness, particularly in light of the assertion that stalking driven by serious mental illness may be more treatable than that underpinned by personality disorder (Meloy, 2013).

The intelligence levels of those who stalked were reliably found to be lower than the general population sample, and similar to the offender comparator group (see MacKenzie et al., 2010). This study also found that the stalker sample's Performance IQ was superior to their Verbal IQ. In order to best respond to the criminogenic and rehabilitative needs of those who have committed stalking offences, this finding needs consideration in professional interactions to maximise engagement opportunities. This is the case for all conclusions made from this review if professionals are to build a therapeutic alliance and better respond to the needs of those who stalk.

One important finding, and the least common topic amongst the literature, was the evidence of a higher risk of suicide amongst stalker groups (McEwan et al., 2010). Prevalence rates were found to be significantly higher compared to the general population, psychiatric, and general offender samples (McEwan et al., 2010). The authors propose that the added emotional stress that is contextual to the stalking episode may heighten risk in an already psychologically vulnerable population. They recommend this finding is considered in individual assessments in clinical practise. Opportunities to engage with those who have committed stalking offences, should be considerate of this risk to self, and the connotations for a person's distress and the subsequent impact this can have on their stalking behaviour.

### **Limitations and external validity**

There is a general dearth of psychopathology studies with those who stalk, employing comparator groups and none exploring male-specific features. The quality of studies varied, with evaluations being based on an adapted checklist which is untested outside of this review. The main limitation of this review in answering the question of unique male stalker psychopathology features is the reliance on mixed gender sample studies to draw conclusions; despite samples largely consisting of males. Given the outcome of the review this now seems a moot point. The settings of studies were all forensic and/or psychiatric, and whilst this is unsurprising, it brings a level of bias in the results for mental disorder and other psychopathology. There is some clear study heterogeneity. Differing time periods of the studies could influence findings and be reflective of levels of awareness of stalking at different times and in different countries, relating to their legislation and criminal identification. There may have been gender biases and general biases over diagnosis pertaining to time periods, psychometric and diagnostic measures used, and countries of study. Some studies employed retrospective designs with its limitations, whilst others were prospective in nature, utilising inter-rater reliability processes. Finally, the studies chose different comparator groups to draw conclusions about the psychopathology of those who stalk, which brings limitations to the assertions that can be made about the findings.

### **Implications for practice and policy**

Consideration of the heterogeneity of those who commit stalking offences is crucial regarding psychopathology of stranger stalkers in particular. Further attempts to

combine and conclude on a whole group psychopathology need to be mindful of this. With the presented evidence herein, the differing needs and psychopathology of those deemed intimacy seekers (stranger stalkers) need to be incorporated into any further research designs, policy and interventions strategies to ensure best responsiveness. Furthermore, in acknowledgment of this a recommendation is to be specific about any assignment of psychopathology to those who have stalked.

This review challenges historical assumptions of the strength of associations between stalking and major mental illness, and indeed of higher intellectual levels than other offenders. It concludes that whilst there may be some distinct differences between adult males who stalk, and other populations (i.e. general, psychiatric, and other offender populations), there are also some similarities and thus each person would benefit from individual and comprehensive psychopathology and responsiveness assessments in order to fully understand their treatment and responsiveness needs. This assertion is further supported by the specific findings regarding the prevalence of PD-NOS. This diagnosis, and more importantly the problematic manifestation of a variety of traits the diagnosis infers, could differ amongst those who stalk vastly. This adds to the skepticism over the validity and helpfulness to clients of diagnosis and the wider *DSM-5* (see Johnstone & Boyle, 2018).

Understanding how best to engage with those who commit stalking offences in order to meaningfully assess and formulate a treatment plan, as well as develop risk management strategies, is key, and this review draws together some common features. It also highlights an argument to undertake an individual approach to understanding those who commit stalking offences. That is, specifically using collaborative engagement to assess an individual's psychopathology, responsiveness needs and psychosocial functioning, to jointly improve insight and the efficacy and success, of rehabilitative and risk management attempts. Whilst there is a lacking evidence base for formulation approaches as interventions (see Cole, Wood & Spendelov, 2015), the ability to understand an individuals' problem behaviours contextually to them, has benefits beyond simply assigning psychiatric diagnoses, which effectively captures symptomatology (Johnstone & Boyle, 2018). This review supports the assertion that exploring symptom level features of psychopathology and the relationship to stalking, as opposed to further analysis of mental disorder prevalence and common diagnoses, is crucial (see Nijdam-Jones et al., 2018). PD-

NOS being common amongst those diagnosed with PD would also support this conclusion. Nijdam-Jones et al. (2018) asserted a need to move away from a focus on psychiatric disorders and consider wider psychopathology features such as attachment, to understand the behaviour. This review further supports this suggestion.

These are all important issues given rehabilitative interventions for those who commit stalking offences are in their infancy (Purcell & McEwan, 2018). In the absence of randomised and/or controlled studies focusing on the rehabilitative treatment of those who stalk, a recommendation to utilise individual psychological intervention strategies is wise (e.g., MacKenzie & James, 2011; MacKenzie et al., 2010; McEwan & Mullen, 2008; McEwan, Pathé & Ogloff, 2011). In response to these practical implications, chapters 3, 4 and 5 within this thesis outline a number of advancement. These are: (a) the development of a responsive engagement tool (comprising a Visually Adapted Repertory Grid Technique) for use in research and clinical practice to develop collaborative case formulations; (b) researcher-practitioner reflections on the therapeutic impact of the tool are discussed; (c) the rich and informative findings of a mixed methods study exploring the experiences of those who stalk, and what drives their behaviours, are presented.

### **Future research**

The current systematic review highlights a clear gap in robust and consistent empirical evidence regarding the differences between the psychopathology features of male adults who stalk, compared with other offenders, and general population, especially when accounting for stranger (intimacy seeker) stalkers. The evidence base for differences between those committing stalking offences and those who do not is also lacking, regardless of gender. Empirical data pertaining to this would help further shape practitioner work with male and female offenders and support intervention strategies with an evidence base. Other research has concentrated on the links between stalking and psychopathy, personality disorder, and Autistic Spectrum Disorders (ASD), but these studies are limited.

Comparative studies measuring mental disorder (on both Axis I and II) using the revised *DSM-V-TR* (APA, 2000) with stalker samples, matched other offender

groups, and a general population sample, may further our knowledge on any bespoke psychopathology profiles for those who commit stalking offences. Further, controlling for different stalker typologies given the heterogeneity of the group would improve robustness and applicability of findings. The purported ability of the *DSM-5* (APA, 2013) diagnostic model to be clearer in the characteristic profiles of diagnoses would vastly improve our understanding of any stalking-related psychopathology.

What appears to be fundamentally lacking however, are in-depth studies exploring the clinical predispositions and symptoms of those committing stalking offences, such as underlying poor self-worth, fragile narcissism, abandonment anxiety, rejection sensitivity and poor emotional coping strategies. Diagnostic labels do not appear to have assisted in the field of study in terms of understanding and working better with those who have committed stalking offences. However, having an idiosyncratic psychotherapeutic understanding may provide richer and more applicable findings for practitioners. The research undertaken as part of this thesis goes some way to addressing these knowledge and practice gaps (see chapter 4).

Given the heterogeneity of people who stalk and the evidence of associated distinct psychopathology features of stranger (intimacy seeker) stalkers, individual case study research would add to existing empirical evidence. Richer idiosyncratic data pertaining to psychopathology features could assist in further informing policy and clinical practice with regards to the assessment, treatment and management of a subset of those who commit stalking offences. Qualitative and mixed methods approaches would fit best in order to collaborate and gain the necessary missing experiential information.

## **Conclusion**

This systematic review has drawn together relevant studies to provide empirical conclusions about the psychopathology of adult males who commit stalking offences. This was an essential step in establishing current knowledge, understanding the development of this presumed knowledge, and identifying possible explanations for practical difficulties in relation to engaging responsively with people who commit stalking offences.

The inclusion criteria specified the use of comparator groups in order to contextualise any conclusions drawn that are specific to this population. Seven studies were included in the narrative synthesis, though none of these utilised male only stalker samples. Nonetheless, the review analysed the best available evidence with associated commentary on internal and external validity evaluations. In conclusion, adult male stalker psychopathology commonly featured insecure attachment styles, Personality Disorder - Not Otherwise Specified (PD-NOS) and an average level of IQ (with Performance IQ greater than Verbal IQ).

These aspects, along with mental health assessments (for also ruling in/out serious mental illness), should underpin assessments of psychopathology with those who commit stalking offences. This would most likely produce a greater understanding of those who stalk, providing meaningful and responsive recommendations for practitioners to apply in engagement opportunities. The new *DSM-5* (APA, 2013) with improved construct validity is asserted to be clearer in the specific characteristic profiles of those diagnosed with personality disorder or developmental disorder (Oldham, 2015). Given the findings of this review, this would be particularly useful with reference to PD-NOS being replaced with a Personality Disorder - Trait Specified diagnosis. Combining issues regarding attachment pathology, given the conceptual links, seems prudent in avoiding assigning a list of psychopathology labels to this group of offenders and instead seeking to understand their functioning and worldviews. The absence of qualitative studies with people who commit stalking offences is surprising. It constitutes a significant missing piece of knowledge in understanding what drives stalking, what the underlying psychopathology features are, and how this knowledge can be practically applied to best respond to their needs, and in turn further protect the public.



## **CHAPTER 3: Using a Visually Adapted Repertory Grid Technique (VARGT) with those convicted of stalking to maximise engagement**

### **Introduction and methodological rationale**

This chapter provides a detailed description of the visual adaptations made to the standard repertory grid technique (RGT: Winter, 2003). It was a chosen method, adapted and utilised within the mixed methods research study documented within this thesis (chapter 4). This chapter begins to introduce the methodological rationale for this aspect of the thesis research and establishes the novel use of the VARGT as a robust research tool. It also constitutes a complete instructional and replicable guide to the administration of the Visually Adapted Repertory Grid Technique (VARGT).

The use of the RGT as a clinical and/or research tool is well-established (i.e., Blagden, Winder, Gregson & Thorne, 2014; Faccio, Castiglioni & Bell, 2012; Leach, Freshwater, Aldridge & Sunderland, 2001; Mason, 2008; Turpin, Dallos, Owen & Thomas, 2009; Winter, 2003). Derived from Personal Construct Theory (PCT; Kelly, 1955), the technique provides an approach to research and practice which has a constructivist phenomenological outlook. That is, it disputes the concept of an objective reality in any one situation in respect of the human experience. The research undertaken as part of this thesis aimed to understand the experiences of those convicted of stalking. Furthermore, it aimed to explore the functions and drivers for behaviours often deemed self-defeating and incomprehensible by the objective viewer. An empirical understanding of the subjective constructed realities of those who commit stalking offences is lacking, yet important for improving rehabilitative support and risk management.

Kelly's (1955) Personal Construct Theory proposes that it is the meaning we uniquely assign to events, not the event itself, which influences our responses, and this meaning (determining subjective reality) is largely predisposed by previous experiences (Banister, Burman, Parker, Taylor & Tindall, 1994). The constant processing of human experiences structures, and re-structures, our personal theories. Kelly refers to '*man-the-scientist*' in this respect, given individuals build a template that underpins future meaning-making (1955: 4), manifesting on all levels

(cognitive, emotional and behavioural). The template has the ability to mask, or highlight, aspects of our experiences of situations (Banister et al., 1994), making us prone to believe that which supports our worldview. Our idiosyncratic experiential journeys and the repertoire of meanings we assign accumulate, reinforce and sometimes challenge our developing personal theories. The Repertory Grid Technique (RGT: Winter, 2003) is a popular methodology which enables the researcher to learn about these contextual interpretations made by participants of their life experiences and subjective world at that given time point (Neimeyer, Bowman & Saferstein, 2005). It provides a vehicle for eliciting the templates upon which interpretations of situations are based (Tan & Hunter, 2002), enabling analysis of subjective meaning and idiosyncratic belief systems (Turpin et al., 2009). The technique essentially defines and builds an accessible framework of how the participant views that contextual part of their experiential world on their terms, which rest on their personal repertoire (Jankowicz, 2004). The traditional technique however provides this accessibility primarily to the practitioner.

Whilst originally used in clinical practice (Winter, 1992), it differs greatly from objective and often projective forensic psychology assessments (Horley, 2008). This technique has been applied in research within forensic practice and it has been previously coupled with Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) within social sciences research (e.g., Blagden et al., 2014; Yorke & Dallos, 2015). It has also been utilised for measuring change (e.g., Mason, 2008) and to provide richer case formulation with individuals with learning disability (see Kitson-Boyce, Blagden, Winder & Dillon, 2018; Mason, 2003). There is no standard repertory grid method, although the technique has been modified many times since its inception (Grice, 2002), and maintains three key components: *elements*, *constructs*, and a *linking mechanism* (Easterby-Smith, 1980). The technique comprises an intricate sorting exercise (Neimeyer et al., 2005), requiring skill and experience, although the procedures are easy to adapt to ensure the user's objectives may be met more precisely (Easterby-Smith, 1980; Winter, 2003).

One predicted obstacle based on practitioner experience and literature reviews, considered during the research design stage, was a potential difficulty engaging participants within interviews to be able to address the research questions sufficiently. Clinical- and researcher-practitioners note the challenges in establishing

a therapeutic relationship with people who commit stalking offences (e.g., Rosenfeld, Fava & Galietta, 2009). The systematic review presented in chapter 2 also outlined psychopathology factors associated with this offender group, which can impact on engagement with professionals. In line with the thesis research study objectives and epistemological position, the RGT was selected as a complementary engagement and data collection tool, to the overall Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) methodology. To address engagement concerns, novel visual adaptations were made to the standard RGT administration to develop a transparent, kinaesthetic and engaging tool for use within the mixed methods research study (see chapter 4). The VARGT was designed to reduce cognitive loading and physically direct interaction during the RGT process. It was utilised to minimise any psychological challenge, often resulting from researcher-led questioning around sensitive topics, and encourage active participant engagement and collaboration in the research activity. These adaptations were made in order to maximise the depth of engagement of participants in the research. Specifically, to explore participant experiences of their own stalking behaviours in context of their social world in a non-direct, non-judgemental and non-threatening manner, and to provide an accessible and contemporaneous output for both researcher and participants to review. The use of the VARGT actualised these intended objectives, producing rich valuable data for analysis (as set out in chapter 4), in addition to producing unexpected therapeutic impact experiences (refer to chapter 5).

This chapter details how to administer the Visually Adapted Repertory Grid Technique (VARGT). It describes the VARGT specific procedures, incorporating transcript examples, and provides participant and researcher observations to support a case for utilising the VARGT as a meaningfully engaging research and clinical engagement tool (see chapter 5 for the researcher-practitioner reflections on the application of the VARGT).

## **Administering the VARGT**

### **VARGT: Procedural overview**

Overarching RGT procedures described by Tan and Hunter (2002), Grice (2002) and Jankowicz (2004) were followed, providing the basis from which the VARGT

was designed. In line with fundamental research objectives, the VARGT was contextualised to engagement issues with professionals, personal constructions of their stalking behaviour, and around concepts of the self. The elements<sup>6</sup> were supplied in line with this suggested context (Easterby-Smith, 1980; Tan & Hunter, 2002), and element triads were systematically pre-selected. Constructs<sup>7</sup> for participant grids were largely elicited, ensuring focus on personal meaning, whilst three were supplied, constituting a variant method supported by Tan and Hunter (2002). Those supplied were developed from a robust process of literature reviewing, practitioner piloting, and service user group<sup>8</sup> consultation, to ensure discriminatory power and generic clarity of concepts. The supplied constructs were introduced following elicited ones (supported by Easterby-Smith, 1980) to prevent biasing participant elicitation. Furthermore, to prevent risking domination of the grids by these supplied constructs, preliminary peer testing of discriminatory power was undertaken, and subsequent principal components analyses were consulted to review the diversity of use across dimensions (see Easterby-Smith, 1980). By supplying constructs for all participant grids, comparative statistical analysis can be undertaken across the sample (Tan & Hunter, 2002).

The VARGT enabled a fully participant-led method of rating elements along construct continuums (the linking mechanism) and a collaborative eyeball analysis (narrative review of the visually accessible grid content). Essentially, the elements provide context to the topic of focus, whilst the elicitation of constructs provides insight into how the participant construes their world, and the rating process tells of how the participant is thinking (Jankowicz, 2004). The total time taken to complete the VARGT with this thesis research sample varied dependent on level of engagement. The mean time being two hours which included introduction, rapport building and an initial open question regarding their current circumstances. This fits with the suggestion by Easterby-Smith (1980) that if kept manageable with around ten elements and constructs each, the time taken to complete a grid would be two hours.

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<sup>6</sup> Elements: People, activities or roles related to the topic of study (Tan & Hunter, 2002)

<sup>7</sup> Constructs: Qualities that people attribute to the elements (Easterby-Smith, 1980)

<sup>8</sup> Volunteer service users in a forensic setting regularly consulted regarding research ideas and concepts

**VARGT: Materials**

The VARGT used A1 size blank grids, ensuring each construct row was separate and had its own rating continuum of 1-to-7 across the top (see Figure 2). Visually this presents less crowding and an ability to rate elements against each construct more independently. The grid layout ensures adequate space for element cards to be placed and for construct names to be written either side of the continuum. Two grids with space for five constructs per sheet were utilised per participant to maximise visual capacity, but without becoming unwieldy. The VARGT also required ten pre-prepared elements cards in colour (for visual discrimination), marker pens for adding constructs either side of the continuums, and other pens for adding in rated elements to the grids together. Preparing the interview room was essential given the need to accommodate these materials, ensuring ergonomically appropriate seating and table space for writing onto the large grids.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	

Figure 2. Blank VARGT grid

### **VARGT: Conceptualising elements**

The VARGT commenced with the introduction to the concept of elements with a visual presentation of the pre-selected elements written on cards (see Table 3). The choice of elements is crucial for the ability to properly contextualise the exercise in order to expose the related personal construct system of the participant (Easterby-Smith, 1980). They suggest no fewer than six elements and no more than 12 to structure the grid.

Supplied elements	
<i>Self-Past</i>	<i>Offender Manager</i>
<i>Self-Now</i>	<i>Person I Like</i>
<i>Self-Future (Ideal Self)</i>	<i>Person I Don't Like</i>
<i>(Alleged) Victim</i>	<i>Ex-Intimate Partner (not victim) or Close Friend (if never experienced an intimate relationship)</i>
<i>Parent/Caregiver</i>	<i>Stalker</i>

Table 3. Supplied elements for an example VARGT

Elements can be elicited around the subject area, or supplied (Tan & Hunter, 2002). These specific elements were chosen and supplied given the research objectives to explore participants' relational world (social, intimate and professional) and interpretations in the context of stalking and stalking offending (see Tan & Hunter, 2002). These authors also suggest supplying elements where comparison across homogenous sample responses is intended.

To ensure personal context for the participant (see Tan & Hunter, 2002), semi-structured interviewing was undertaken to define each element meaningfully,

identifying specific people and key characteristics. Defining the elements also included eliciting relevant contextual time points, for example for *self-past* the time point was whilst committing stalking offences. Selecting a contextual time point for other elements, for example *(alleged) victim*, was equally important where participants expressed the view that key characteristics for someone had changed over time. Discussions around finalising the time points can provoke interesting disclosures about perceived differences in characteristics such as, the *(alleged) victim* 'then' (time of offending) and 'now' (present day).

Figure 3 contains a participant transcript extract (P5) taken from the research study detailed in chapter 4, providing an example of how to contextualise the three self-concepts.

*INT: we are going to look at yourself now, as in you right now, how you feel, how you think, how you are as a person right now*

*P5: yeah*

*INT: we are going to look at you in the past and it's useful to look at the height of your offending so should we say that 4-month period when you were emailing?*

*P5: okay*

*INT: is that what you got the conviction for?*

*P5: yeah, it's classed as stalking*

*INT: so we'll focus on yourself past as that being you in those 4 months and how you were thinking, feeling, what kind of person you were then*

*P5: okay*

*INT: and then we're also going to look at you in the future, when you see yourself ideally, when you're at a point of being happy with yourself*

*P5: okay*

Figure 3. Transcription extract contextualising the three self-concepts

Additional prompts and tips useful defining elements are presented in Figure 4.

- Elicitation questions for more abstract elements, i.e. *Person I Like*, could be “*Who are they?*”, “*Picture someone... What are they like?*”
- If they struggle, it may be they don’t know them well enough to have made judgments and as such will find rating them against constructs difficult later too. The researcher could elicit another element altogether (for example if the participant doesn’t know the *Offender Manager*<sup>9</sup> very well, but has had contact with the *Offender Supervisor*<sup>10</sup>, this could be substituted).
- The researcher could elicit an entirely different element /significant other altogether as long as they fit with the subject matter.
- The *Stalker* element requires the participant to verbalise what this label conjures up about that person from their perspective
- Contemporaneous note taking of the element defining process will assist the researcher have engagement that is more personal later during ratings, and can assist in re-focussing the participant regarding element context.

Figure 4. Defining Elements: Prompts and Tips

### **VARGT: Constructs**

These can be conceptualised as the values upon which participants align and differentiate between elements (Easterby-Smith, 1980). They tend to be bipolar and contrasting in nature (Tan & Hunter, 2002; Jankowicz, 2004), creating a continuum upon which individuals interpret others. The classical triadic method for construct elicitation was utilised (Tan & Hunter, 2009), with pre-prepared triads of elements (see Table 4). Pre-selected systematic triads of elements were utilised to ensure efficient coverage of all elements and to explore some specific relational aspects between elements of interest. Seven to ten triads is purported to be sufficient to elicit constructs (Reger, 1990), which was evident within the thesis research study when saturation in elicitation became evident at around seven. The supplied

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<sup>9</sup> Offender Manager: community based supervisory support by probation officer

<sup>10</sup> Offender Supervisor: custody based supervisory support by prison officer or probation officer



constructs were introduced following elicited ones to minimise bias in direction and themes in participant responses (Easterby-Smith, 1980; Tan & Hunter, 2002).

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Systematic Triads
<i>Self-Past / (Alleged) Victim / Person Don't Like</i>
<i>Stalker / Parent / Person Like</i>
<i>Self-Past / Self Now / Self-Future</i>
<i>Self-Now / Offender Manager / Ex-partner or Close Friend</i>
<i>Self-Future / Person Like / Parent</i>
<i>Offender Manager / Stalker / (Alleged) Victim</i>
<i>Parent / Self-past / Stalker</i>
<i>Person don't like / Ex-partner or Close Friend / Self-Future</i>
<i>[Continue with random selections if not elicited enough constructs]</i>

---

Table 4. Example list of pre-prepared systematic triads

Participants were visually presented subsequent triads, using the pre-prepared cards, and asked which two are most alike, and different from the third. The unchosen card was moved out of view to allow focus. The researcher then guided the participant through a laddering down approach (Jankowicz, 2004) to ascertain the meaning of the constructs elicited from the triads, referred to as emergent poles. Subsequently to also define terms, explore value and meaning, clarifying concepts, and then determine a contrasting construct, implicit pole, to create a continuum. Capturing the participants' superordinate constructs within their personal construct system can be achieved with laddering processes (Fransella, Bell & Banister, 2004), as it allows participants to elaborate on the elicited constructs (Tan & Hunter, 2002). This can be pivotal in understanding constructs as the participant does, setting aside one's own connotations (Jankowicz, 2004). Guidance provided by Easterby-Smith (1980) concerning the nature of constructs themselves was followed such as avoiding superficial descriptions like *'they're nice'*.

Two brief transcript extracts are presented in Figure 5 to illustrate the laddering questions used in the originating research study. The first shows how the interviewer may elicit the implicit or contrasting pole (P1) and the second shows the laddering down process (P2).

<p><b>Extract 1:</b></p> <p><i>INT: So for example if say you met somebody and they weren't that kind of person that stands by people's sides or they don't support people, what would they be?</i></p> <p><b>Extract 2:</b></p> <p><i>INT: What similar qualities do those two people hold?</i></p> <p><i>P2: I am able to trust them both</i></p> <p><i>INT: and is trust something really important to you?</i></p> <p><i>P2: Yeah definitely yeah</i></p> <p><i>INT: why is it important to you?</i></p>
--

Figure 5. Transcription extracts demonstrating construct elicitation

Figure 6 provides further prompts and tips for construct elicitation during interview.

- |  |
|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Possible questions to help define emergent poles are <i>“How are they similar?” “What makes them alike?” “Who would you prefer to be and why?”</i></li><li>• It can be helpful to use third party terminology, e.g., <i>“how are those two people alike”</i>, pointing to <i>Self-past</i> and <i>‘Stalker’</i>, to reduce potential for defensive responding.</li><li>• Possible questions to ascertain the personal value assigned to the constructs (which can often be hierarchical) are <i>“What does that mean to you?” “Why is that important?” “What advantages are there to being like that?”</i></li><li>• Possible questions to clarify constructs – <i>“What is naïve?” “How would you define it?” “Define that kind of person for me... What might that say about them, or make you think about them?”</i> The purpose here is to</li></ul> |
|--|

understand how the participant is conceptualising and construing in order to reduce researcher connotations biasing data.

- It may be pertinent to employ third party language in cases where the participant discloses sensitive and negatively laden self-assertions. For example, *“What did arrogant look like in relation to self-past?”*. This may help to elicit personal and sensitive constructs in a less psychologically threatening and direct way.
- Easterby-Smith (1980) advises ‘*why*’ questions produce greater generality, whereas ‘*what*’ and ‘*how*’ questions produce more specific constructs during this stage of elicitation.
- Possible questions to define implicit poles are *“What is the opposite of naïve for you?”* *“If someone is not naïve then what are they?”* *“What does that look like?”* Make sure to use the participants’ implicit pole construct rather than a superficial, opposite word to the emergent pole.
- Recording the process of elicitation will enable later observational analysis i.e., chosen constructs from specific element triads, and the qualitative processes of defining constructs and assigning importance.

Figure 6. Eliciting constructs: Prompts and tips

The emergent and implicit poles are reviewed with the participant to confirm and select the final elicited constructs with most significance for them. This review and selection process encouraged space for self-reflection and provided further rich data collection. The selected constructs and implicit poles were written onto the grid (see Figure 7), with positively judged constructs entered on the same side. The benefits of such include being able to more clearly identify pattern biases in rating elements, providing more visually accessible patterns for subsequent eyeball analysis discussions, and in reducing cognitive load when the participant is making sense-checks by comparing element ratings whilst rating another.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
<b>Good self-worth</b>								<b>Low self worth</b>
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
<b>Connected to others</b>								<b>Lonely; Isolated</b>
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
<b>Realist</b>								<b>Fantastist</b>
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
<b>Trusting</b>								<b>Guarded</b>
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
<b>Faith in self</b>								<b>Self-doubting</b>

Figure 7. Example VARGT grid with construct poles

The three supplied constructs (see Table 5) were added to the grid subsequent to elicited ones and collaboratively explored as concepts to ensure shared understanding. Combining elicited and supplied constructs provides participant-led constructs to feature, whilst allowing the clinician or researcher to ensure the final grid contains some key features from previous findings viewed as important to the phenomenon being examined (Mason, 2008). Supplying carefully selected constructs in grids allows comparisons across the sample to be undertaken (Easterby-Smith, 1980).

Emergent Pole	Implicit Pole
<p><b>Feels good about themselves</b></p> <p><i>(good self-worth; self-confident; secure in themselves)</i></p> <p><i>(feels valued/valuable)</i></p>	<p><b>Low self-worth</b></p> <p><i>(insecure; concerned about what others think of them)</i></p> <p><i>(does not feel valued/valuable)</i></p>
<p><b>Connected to others</b></p> <p><i>(socially supported; enjoys intimacy)</i></p>	<p><b>Lonely, Unconnected</b></p> <p><i>(lonely; isolated)</i></p>
<p><b>Realist</b></p> <p><i>(accepts situations as they are and deals with it)</i></p>	<p><b>Fantasist</b></p> <p><i>(escapes from reality; a dreamer)</i></p>

*Note.* Supplied constructs in bold; explanatory information underneath.

Table 5. Supplied constructs for the VARGT

### **VARGT: Rating Elements on the Construct Continuums**

Employing a rating scale to link constructs to elements is the most common method (Easterby-Smith, 1980; Tan & Hunter, 2002). Jankowicz (2004: 72) conceptualises the rating process as ascribing ‘*meaning attached to the elements by their positions on the various constructs in the grid*’. Ratings were assigned for each element along each construct continuum at a time by placing the elements cards along the continuum (1 to 7), where they perceive them to best fit. To collect meaningful data, a 7-point rating scale was chosen because it can elicit greater discrimination along the continuums amongst elements (Tan & Hunter, 2002), and this range has been shown to produce data which is more meaningful for statistical analysis (Grice, 2002). The numerical continuum gave a visual scale; alternatively colours could be used to distinguish a scale, for placing elements in relation to the construct continuum under examination. Each element was placed along the continuum, some layered onto the same rating given this was not an exercise to rank elements (see Figure 8). The researcher and participant then undertook to write onto the grid where they had placed the elements in order to free the elements cards for reuse on the next construct continuum (see Figure 9). The researcher can guide this with “we

are using the cards just to think about it and then we're going to commit it to paper by writing the elements on", which can provoke participant-led reflections on their initial responses and later, more considered ratings.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
<b>Good self-worth</b>	Person I don't like	Self-future Person I like	Offender Manager	Ex-intimate	Self-now Parent/carer	Alleged victim	Self-past Stalker	<b>Low self worth</b>
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
<b>Connected to others</b>								<b>Lonely; Isolated</b>
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
<b>Realist</b>								<b>Fantastist</b>
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
<b>Trusting</b>								<b>Guarded</b>
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
<b>Faith in self</b>								<b>Self-doubting</b>

Figure 8. Example VARGT grid with rated elements cards in place

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Good self-worth	Person I don't like	Self-future Person I like	Offender Manager	Ex-intimate	Self-now Parent/carer	Alleged victim	Self-past Stalker	Low self worth
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Connected to others	Alleged victim	Person I like Ex- intimate	Self- future	Self-now	Offender Manager Person I don't like	Self- past	Parent/ carer Stalker	Lonely; isolated
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Realist								Fantasia
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Trusting								Guarded
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Faith in self								Self- doubting

Figure 9. Example VARGT with confirmed rated elements and replaced element cards

The kinaesthetic process of placing all elements and then writing them onto the grid as confirmation provoked spontaneous narratives from participants. They explained their decision-making and judgments towards themselves and others. Where this did not naturally occur, prompt questions were utilised to elicit the same either at the placement or confirmation stage. Figure 10 provides suggested prompts for eliciting qualitative information for decisions around the linking mechanism (rating process).

- “What made you decide to place X there?”
- “Why did you place X there [pointing], and X there [pointing]?”
- Previous researcher notes on who the elements were and how they were initially defined through key characteristics can help here to contextualise placements collaboratively, i.e., [Person Like] ‘ah, that’s Tom who …..’

Figure 10. Eliciting qualitative information on element and construct links (ratings)

The rating process was repeated until all elements had been rated on each construct continuum.

**VARGT: Collaborative eyeball analysis**

The VARGT produced a qualitative grid which makes collaborative eyeball analysis easier (see Figure 11 for an example of a standard populated RGT grid). The VARGT completed grid visually presents all constructs and elements by name, and the rating continuum. It provides positively based values on the left and more negative contrasting constructs on the right, which also more easily allows visual pattern recognition. Effectively the constructs are used to make distinctions between significant people on the topic and have been likened to schemas, and the idiographic grid exposes the fundamental template of one’s construing (Leach et al., 2001). Additionally, the VARGT enables participants to conduct their own eyeball analyses; making observations of the constructs self-elicited, the element placements, and any patterns of element placements, visual clusters, or distinctions. This element of autonomous self-discovery and reflection can be meaningful and psychologically powerful for participants (as illustrated in chapter 5).

Stef Grid (page 1)

	Me Now											
	Police Officer					Spouse						
	Me as I'd like to be					Alleged Victim						
	Prisoner admitting offence					Me before arrest						
	Person you don't like					Prisoner maintaining innocence						
	Person you like					Sexual Offender						
Optimist	7	7	3	3	7	6	2	6	6	4	7	Pessimist (looks for hidden meanings)
Happy Person	5	6	4	2	6	3	2	6	5	3	7	Burdened Person
Outgoing person	6	5	4	2	6	3	2	6	3	3	7	Can't let people near
Positive outlook on life	6	4	4	2	6	4	2	6	3	3	5	Negative outlook on life
Happy Life	5	5	4	2	7	4	3	6	4	3	6	Unhappy life
Manipulative	3	1	5	4	7	4	3	2	4	4	1	Naive
Honest and Truthful	4	7	4	2	7	4	3	6	4	3	7	Liar (Dishonest person)
Paranoid of people motives	2	4	4	4	2	5	4	3	3	5	6	Able to trust people
Friendly and approachable	6	7	2	4	6	3	3	7	5	3	6	Hostile
Stand up for what you believe in	1	5	2	1	2	5	1	7	2	2	5	Get walked over

Notes:  
 # Constructs: 10      # Elements: 11.  
 Grid Type: Rating      Scale Range: 1.00 to 7.00.

Figure 11. Example standard populated RGT grid<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Included with the permission of Dr Nick Blagden (Blagden, 2011)



### **VARGT: Participant experience**

The kinaesthetic, visual and collaborative nature of the VARGT prompted participants in the original study to remark on their experience independently during the eyeball analysis stage (elaborated on in detail within chapter 5). The transcript extract below (Figure 12) provides an example of the visual impact of the completed VARGT grid for one research participant (P1).

*P1: I wanted to see the actual change for myself and I really couldn't see it in words alone but by doing this chart my days my eyes are open, my eyes are so open that I can already see. I've got a long path in front of me and my future, it's like a yellow brick road. But it isn't yellow it's gold that's the difference and all I've got to say to you now is thank you cos at the end of the day you have literally have just gone bump with my eyes and made them open up and sit a match stick in between them like they are getting tired*

Figure 12. Example transcription extract illustrating participant impact (P1)

In Figure 13, another participant (P4) in the original research study (see chapter 4) commented spontaneously on the positive impact of the VARGT (first transcript extract) and on the beneficial collaborative process for commencing the eyeball analysis (second transcript example).

**Extract one.**

*P4: having it on the floor for movement, the kinaesthetic element to it and the physicality of putting things down, believe me it's a lot more engaging and interesting you know. Yeah you're more likely to get people working with you, collaborating with you, its more about them working for it*

**Extract two.**

*P4: the questioning afterwards we just finished now, any observations that I have and you also have observations as well, that's very very useful to get you more input. Did you notice when you said things I joined in, otherwise I'm thinking "oh, what kind of thing do you want me to say?" and I followed your lead so that was a good signpost*

Figure 13. Example transcription extracts illustrating participant impact (P4)

**VARGT: Statistical analysis**

The extensive information gleaned through the RGT can be analysed in a number of ways dependent on the research or clinical focus (Grice, 2002; Fransella et al., 2004). Transferring the information from the VARGT into a numerical grid for statistical software inputting is straightforward, simply requiring the user (outside of the participant or client session) to convey the element ratings into a standard grid directly into the electronic system for statistical analysis. The VARGT creates the same data output as any RGT, but in a different format that is more beneficial for the participant whilst adding depth and meaningfulness to the process and resultant data collection. For this thesis research study, data collected from the VARGT were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis first, and the resultant numerical outputs were entered into the Idiogrid software (see Grice, 2002). Idiogrid is the most up to date statistical analysis package allowing quantitative analyses to be undertaken to compliment the qualitative data. Analytical outputs for this thesis research study will be presented within the research chapter and will not be commented upon here.

## **VARGT: Researcher and practitioner application**

Repertory grids are purported difficult to fake (Easterby-Smith, 1980), and the VARGT is easy to use, engaging, collaborative, kinaesthetic and exposing. The emerging self-insights can be more easily owned given the elicitation process, and the eyeball analysis is a reflective and often cathartic process. The use of the VARGT and rationale within this thesis demonstrates its ability to engage people around sensitive topics, where they would ordinarily find it difficult to engage due to defence mechanisms such as shame, or because they had not yet experienced a safe space in which to process and express their own interpreted experiences and reflections since conviction. These observations create numerous opportunities for researchers and practitioners alike to implement the VARGT as a tool to improve engagement to glean richer data or superior therapeutic alliance.

It is imperative to practice using the VARGT and consider exploratory questions that will help with the laddering process to completely individualise the construct continuums. When constructs are to be supplied, for example to be able to compare against numerous participant grids, they need to be based on current observational or theoretical understanding. They should be exposed to external auditing processes, following defensible selection based on relevant literature reviewing, practitioner feedback, and peer review. Supplied constructs risk the production of an idiosyncratic grid and can skew the clustering of principal components, so need mindful selection.

Pre-prepared laminated grids will allow materials to be reused, and the invention of an electronic version available on a portable handheld tablet would further improve data collection and management. The utility of an electronic application to undertake the VARGT with the right programming could enable the entered data to be converted directly into a format for Idiogrid inputting and analysis following a collaborative eyeball analysis. Key statistical interpretations could then also be collaboratively discussed, building on the therapeutic alliance between researcher-participant or clinician-client. Whilst this would improve ease of portability and data management, it may lose its kinaesthetic value if the participant is unable to data input autonomously in forensic settings. It may detract from the benefits of the more physical kinaesthetic experience (i.e., of card placement), but may also be more in

tune with our generation and be better suited to those with mobility issues. Any electronic based application therefore would need to be developed in consultation with users and piloted with participants.

### **VARGT: Limitations**

Whilst logistically the VARGT functioned well when utilised within the thesis research study, it may reveal weaknesses and flaws, inviting improvements and further modification when used further. It is acknowledged that the VARGT was used with volunteering participants, which may influence the levels of engagement observed. The subsequent statistical analyses were not shared with participants, which could encourage longer-term iterative reflections. Neither were the VARGT grids re-administered at a subsequent time point to measure longer term impact and any changes, positively or negatively, in the participants' construal of their legal situation and views of others significant to it.

The VARGT would not be suitable for use with participants having eyesight impediments. It may also require adaptations to be used with participants with low functioning given the use of the RGT generally rather than the visual element. The required space and furniture required to replicate this VARGT is essential and any improvisations need to consider an individual's mobility and physical health.

### **Conclusions**

This chapter has presented technical instructions and theoretical considerations for designing, devising, and implementing a visually adapted repertory grid technique to maximise participant engagement in the research process. It provides a complete description of the processes, integrating hints and tips, as well as transcript extracts to illustrate application. Limitations, alongside the research and practical application potential of the VARGT, are presented to encourage mindful replication. The VARGT has varying potential for clinician and researcher applications and provides a unique collaborative engagement tool. With improved engagement and research-practitioner understanding of their subjective realities it is hoped that this client groups' criminogenic needs can be better understood and thus met by professionals.

## CHAPTER 4: *'It's so hard to get out of that bubble'*. An Interpretative Phenomenological and Repertory Grid Analysis with men who have committed stalking offences.

### Introduction

An estimated 1.1 million people experience stalking each year (Office for National Statistics, 2017). The number of stalking cases recorded by police represents less than 1% of actual cases, with many victims experiencing up to 100 incidents before talking to the police (Suzy Lamplugh Trust, 2016). Conviction rates are increasing in the UK, with the Crown Prosecution Service recording a 69% increase last year from the previous (POSTnote, 2018), although a suggested reoffending rate of between 25 and 55% from recorded information exists (e.g. McEwan, Daffern, MacKenzie & Ogloff, 2017; Suzy Lamplugh Trust, 2018). Unfortunately, legal sanctions remain of little consequence for the majority of stalking cases (see Benitez, McNeil, & Binder, 2010; POSTnote, 2018). Whilst the rate of conviction increases, the consequent demands on practitioners, coupled with an absence of treatment options for those who perpetrate stalking, is concerning (Purcell & McEwan, 2018).

Stalking can escalate to physical assaults, but almost always will cause psychological damage to victims, and third parties. It is a complex pattern-based crime (see Pathé, Mullen & Purcell, 2002) for criminal justice agencies to manage, with victims continuing to experience the crime upon, and after, reporting it. The Protection of Freedoms Act (2012) created two new offences of stalking defining it as *'Repeated attempts to impose unwanted communications and/or contacts on another in a manner that could be expected to cause distress and/or fear in any reasonable person'*. The new Stalking Protection Act (2019: 1) makes *'provision for orders to protect persons from risks associated with stalking; and for connected purposes'*, and crucially, uses the term 'stalking'. This advances previous legislation by giving police more imminent powers to protect victims, and intervene earlier with perpetrators with greater confidence. It also confronts the issue of seemingly innocuous behaviours, stating that risk associated with stalking *'may arise from acts which the defendant knows or ought to know are unwelcome to the other person even if, in other circumstances, the acts would appear harmless in themselves'* (2019: 2). Despite this progress within UK legislation, there persists a recognised

need to develop stalking legislation further to differentiate stalking from harassment on aspects such as obsession, fixation and persistence (see POSTnote, 2018). With regards to methods of stalking, there are purported to be few differences between online and offline stalkers, thus the standard approach to all stalking offenders would be to understand the motivation and responsivity issues, before considering treatment and management options (Cavezza & McEwan, 2014). These authors suggest that cyber stalking is indistinguishable from stalking carried out offline with regards to group comparisons, and noted the co-occurrence of methods within stalking behaviours undertaken by their sample. One important distinction was noted related to lower rates of physical violence used by online stalkers in comparison to offline stalkers (Cavezza & McEwan, 2014), which is unsurprising given the proximity factor.

Stalking behaviours are dynamic, diverse, relentless, and have varying underlying motivations (Nijdam-Jones, Rosenfeld, Gerbrandij, Quick & Galietta, 2018), yet forensic risk assessment tools have been developed and validated (see the Stalking Risk Profile (SRP): MacKenzie, McEwan, Pathé, James, Ogloff, & Mullen, 2009; validated by McEwan, Shea, Daffern, MacKenzie, Ogloff & Mullen, 2016). However, consensus amongst practitioners exists regarding the complexity of interpersonal working relationships with those who stalk, with the fundamental challenge being their '*unwillingness to engage and poor motivation to change their behaviour*' (Purcell & McEwan, 2018: 410). Yet establishing a therapeutic alliance is empirically linked to positive therapeutic outcomes (e.g. Ross, Polaschek & Ward, 2008), and there is a general acceptance that the most robust approach to treatment for non-delusional stalkers is psychological intervention (e.g. Mackenzie & James, 2011).

Using cognitive-behavioural therapy within forensic practice is prominent and is recommended with those who have perpetrated stalking (see MacKenzie et al., 2009; Purcell & McEwan, 2018). With developing influences, variant models have been introduced to the wider field of forensic psychology, such as *What Works* (Hollin & Palmer, 2006) and the *Good Lives* model (Ward & Stewart, 2003), both with their strengths in assumed application to clients and populations of offenders. Perhaps less well-known and evaluated with offender groups, indeed to date not utilised with those commit stalking offences, are those treatments considered as third wave generation approaches such as Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT: Hayes, Masuda, Bissett, Luoma & Guerrero, 2004; Hayes, Strosahl & Wilson,

1999) and Compassion Focussed Therapy (CFT: Gilbert, 2009), heavily influenced by more contemplative-based practices, such as Buddhism (Howells, 2010).

The need to explore treatment options and effectiveness of such with people who stalk was asserted nearly two decades ago (e.g., Mullen, Pathé & Purcell, 2001), although since then only one published empirical study is available. This study adapted Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT) for stalkers given the personality disorder associations (Rosenfeld, Galietta, Ivanoff, Garcia-Mansilla, Martinez, Fava & Green, 2007). They found a zero reoffending rate for completers as opposed to 27% reoffending for the non-completers within a year. Despite a growing awareness of stalking offending, the empirical literature base particularly regarding effective treatment interventions is still lacking (Purcell & McEwan, 2018). A comprehensive theory or theories upon which to base these is required.

Despite a persistent assumed relationship between stalking and psychopathology (see Nijdam-Jones et al., 2018), few stalking cases are directly borne out of psychopathology. Whilst many show features such as depression, substance misuse, personality disorder, and to a lesser extent, pervasive developmental disorders (Purcell & McEwan, 2018), they argue these can be contributory, as opposed to causal factors, a view supported by the systematic review presented in chapter 2 and the research analysis herein. Whilst the presence of personality disorder traits has been purported common amongst those who stalk (e.g., Nidjam-Jones et al., 2018), a recurring finding has been an absence of the antisocial type (e.g., Harmon, Rosner, & Owens, 1995; Meloy & Gothard, 1995; Meloy et al., 2000). The link between stalking and psychopathy (as a severe subtype of antisocial personality disorder) has therefore been questioned. Particularly given stalking is most commonly driven by a desire for close attachment to the victims whereas psychopathy depicts a lack of such desire or capacity to form close attachments (see Meloy, 1988). Although there have been relatively few studies undertaken, those that have replicate the finding that psychopathic traits are rare amongst those who stalk (e.g., Storey, Hart, Meloy, & Reavis, 2008). Storey et al. (2008) highlighted conclusions that the motivations of those who stalk possessing psychopathic traits would do so for motives other than to attain a relationship. They posited the likelihood that motives would be for status (i.e., to rectify a narcissistic

injury), to bully, or to achieve sexual gratification, and featuring a more predatory aspect. Thus relevant to a sub-set of stalker, namely Predatory.

Cognisant of the conceptually convoluted and entwined manifestations of personality, Brennan and Shaver (1998) undertook to evidence through their research that attachment theory and styles can be used as a way of understanding the development, and later manifestations of personality disorders. This thesis aligns with this approach given the systematic review conclusions (see chapter 2), although recognises the need to firstly consider pervasive developmental disorders, such as Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) as a separate entity for completeness. The presence of pervasive development disorder such as ASD amongst those stalking acquaintances or strangers has been observed (e.g., Post, Storey, Haymes, Campbell & Loughrey, 2014; Stokes, Newton & Kaur, 2007). ASD is deemed a lifelong neurodevelopmental condition (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of mental disorders, 5<sup>th</sup> ed., [DSM-5], American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013). Whilst those with ASD are not considered to be more at risk of committing offences (National Autistic Society, 2017), lacking in social interaction and perspective taking skills, whilst having a tendency for preoccupying obsessions, can leave the ASD individual vulnerable to employing persisting stalking behaviours in an attempt to attain a love interest (Post et al., 2014). The hope of a fantasised relationship with a desired love object serves to fill the person's intimacy void (Purcell & McEwan, 2018).

Understanding stalking in this way for those with ASD leads to the hypothesis that with social skills training, exposure to peer interactions, and building general social competence, prosocial alternative behaviours can be employed to prevent further stalking (Stokes et al., 2007). This is achieved by addressing the very deficits which allow fantasies of relationships and related obsessions to flourish (Purcell & McEwan, 2018), particularly if identified early when the obsession has not taken on a function of its own. Ultimately, people who stalk and have ASD are pursuing a desire for a relationship and intimacy using inappropriate behaviours to initiate contacts (Stokes et al., 2007). These authors reported that despite assumptions, with age and maturity an improved ability for attaining and maintaining healthy adult relationships was not observed. Moreover, this sub-group of stalkers were found to persist longer in their pursuits despite negative responses than typical adults



(Stokes et al., 2007). The most likely typology for those who stalk who have ASD grossly affecting psychosocial functioning is the *Incompetent Suitor*, who may feel chronically lonely and socially inept, seeking friendship and sexual relationships (see MacKenzie et al., 2009). These can also be experienced by a sub-type of *Intimacy Seekers* who experience ASD traits (although higher functioning), but who also may rely on fantasy to satisfy their relational goal, as a substitute for a real relationship, impacting on the longevity of pursuits. A key difference between these two typologies is also the presence of a morbid fixation on the victim, prevalent in *Intimacy Seekers* (MacKenzie et al., 2009). Regardless of typology, with a combined predisposing obsessional tendency due to ASD, the sense of entitlement ensuing creates a therapeutic challenge (Mullen, Pathé, Purcell & Stuart, 1999).

There is an absence of a universally accepted hypothesis for stalking (Purcell & McEwan, 2018), although some key theories assist in attempting to explain stalking behaviour. This section will provide an overview of attachment theory, relational goal pursuit theory, and the psychodynamic concept of narcissistic vulnerability in order to explain stalking, and highlight how they knit together. Attachment theory (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991) was one of the first offered. The standard attachment theory suggests that when separated from an attachment figure we will experience distress. With varying attachment styles our reactions to persistent activation of the attachment system will differ (Davis, Swan, & Gambone, 2010). Most relevant to stalking, the preoccupied (anxiously attached) individuals will show hypersensitivity to this activation given their own experiences of inconsistent or intrusive caregiving. Inconsistent caregiver support is thought to lead to the development of a preoccupied attachment style, which leaves an individual with a low threat threshold, experiencing associated anxiety, and an enmeshment with attachments throughout life (see Brennan & Shaver, 1998). This activation hypersensitivity magnifies their distress, leaving them prone to anxiety and anger, as well as coercive controlling behaviours in relationships as they desperately seek attention and reassurance of their acceptance by their partners (Davis et al., 2010). This theory has received support for providing a sound explanation for the psychological processes that trigger and perpetuate stalking behaviours (see Lewis, Fremouw, Ben & Farr, 2001; MacKenzie, Mullen, Ogloff, McEwan & James et al., 2008; Marazziti, Falaschi, Lombardi, Mungai & Dell'Osso, 2015). It conceptualises stalking as behavioural demonstrations of attachment pathology (Dutton, Saunders, Starzomski & Bartholomew, 1994; MacKenzie et al., 2008; Marazziti et al., 2015;

Meloy, 2007). People who stalk are deemed to possess a negative self-perception, yet a positive view of others, and are emotionally dependent on attempts to gain the acceptance and approval from desired others (Marazziti et al., 2015). Research findings have suggested that those who stalk, as a group, were more likely to have an insecure attachment style (particularly preoccupied) than the general population (e.g., Dutton et al., 1994; MacKenzie et al., 2008). Essentially, people who stalk, as a group, will have predisposing deficits in forming and maintaining healthy intimate relationships (e.g., Lewis et al., 2001). These predisposing psychopathology features were also concluded in the systematic review contained in chapter 2 of this thesis.

Indeed, MacKenzie et al. (2008) noted a significant proportion of their stalker sample held negative self-views as characteristic of a preoccupied attachment style as well as an associated rejection sensitivity and heightened emotional response. They suggested that stalking may have roots in an attempt to restore self-worth, albeit in a dysfunctional way, aligning with relational goal pursuit/goal-linking theory (see Spitzberg & Cupach, 2003). Stalking has been commonly explained theoretically using Relational Goal Pursuit (RGP) theory (Cupach & Spitzberg, 2004; Cupach, Spitzberg, & Carson, 2000; Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007). RGP theory offers an account of why some people are likely to persist in attempts to reconcile a relationship after a relationship breakup (Cupach et al 2011), therefore relates to the *Rejected* typology of stalker (see Appendix B). It posits that relationships can be conceptualised as desired end goals (Davis, Swan, & Gambone, 2012) with stalkers overinflating the importance of the relational goal given they link it to a higher order goal such as life happiness (Cupach, Spitzberg, Bolingbroke, & Tellitocci, 2011). Therefore, when attainment or maintenance of this goal is threatened it is pursued more steadfastly (Cupach et al. 2011). The person stalking is seeing 'success in attaining the desired relationship as necessary for achieving happiness and they feel their self-worth is predicated on attaining the desired relationship' (Cupach & Spitzberg, 2004, p. 101). RGP theory suggests that individuals experiencing insecure (preoccupied) attachments are more likely to engage in stalking (Cupach & Spitzberg, 2004). This is because of the reliance on an intimate relationship constituting success and providing a sense of self-worth. The more hierarchical this goal is, the more pivotal to one's overall sense of self (Carver & Scheier, 2014). Those who stalk therefore do so because their fundamental goal is to uphold and/or restore self-worth (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2004).

RGP theory advocates that five facets of goal-directed thinking patterns and emotions explain stalking following relationship breakdown (Brownhalls, Duffy, Eriksson, & Barlow, 2019). The inflated importance of re-establishing the ended relationship (relational goal) becomes focal in achieving the higher order goal of life happiness. This concept is termed **goal-linking**. The person stalking for this aim is confident the goal is attainable and persistence ensues (**self-efficacy**). Additionally, the resultant non-achievement causes **rumination** and the stalker focusses on their own distress given the linked, higher order goal of self-worth and happiness. Resultant negative feelings (**affective flooding**) linked to this goal and victim ensues causing an enduring pursuing-rejection cycle (Spitzberg et al., 2014). Those who stalk are hypothesised to justify their pursuits despite failure utilising **rationalization**. This psychological mechanism helps defend psychologically against rejection and associated negative feelings. It is also seen as a cognitive process allowing them to escape guilt thus allow continued pursuit (Brownhalls et al., 2019), and to focus on seeing themselves as hurt by the rejecting partner rather than them hurting the ex-partner (Johnson & Thompson, 2016).

RGP theory is well supported empirically by studies evaluating the five facets (see Brownhalls et al., 2019; Cupach, Spitzberg, Bolingbroke, & Tellitocci, 2011; Johnson & Thompson, 2016). Literature suggests some facets are more predictive of stalking behaviours than others, namely 'rationalization' and 'rumination' (Brownhalls et al., 2019). Whilst the theoretical model accounting for relational goal pursuits in context of stalking requires further empirical exploration, the RGP model is promising (Davis et al., 2012).

The link between the longevity of persistence of stalking and problematic attachment issues has been suggested (Johnson & Thompson, 2016). The authors make links between stalking persistence and the Relational Goal Pursuit (RGP) theory (Cupach & Spitzberg, 2000), in that attaining the goal will remain undeterred given the importance assigned to it. Cupach and Spitzberg (2000; 2004) suggest that when linked to primary conditions of psychological wellbeing such as self-worth, as suggested with those who stalk (e.g., Mackenzie et al., 2008), the relational goal pursuit is imperative. Essentially, it is asserted that to

understand persistence in stalking, both RGP and attachment theory should be attended to (Johnson & Thompson, 2016). Stalkers with high levels of attachment anxiety will have difficulty relinquishing a relationship or pursuit of such, given their primary relational goal (MacKenzie et al., 2008). This anxiety manifests in emotional dependency upon partners and a preoccupation with a fear of rejection (Dutton & Winstead, 2006). Facing abandonment or rejection when prone to attachment anxiety triggers intense emotional arousal which can lead to, and perpetuate, the stalking (Spitzberg, Cupach, Hannawa, & Crowley, 2014). Despite this clinging to the lost relationship, Johnson and Thompson (2016) note 40% of their sample engage in violence towards the target, which seems counterintuitive. They speculated that rather than a genuine desire to hurt the victim, such aggression comes from not securing their relational goal, causing them frustration. The preoccupying pursuit of those who stalk according to RGP theory, is such that the perpetrator does not accept or act upon obvious negative consequences towards themselves, others, or the victim (Cupach & Spitzberg, 2004).

It is not surprising attachment theory and relational goal pursuit theory knit together well in explaining stalking given they share some similar structures and aspects. These include, but are not limited to, sharing a core motive to achieve a satisfying intimate relationship, thus goal-directed and linked to self-worth and life happiness. Central to understanding stalking in both is also the failure to self-regulate following threatened and actual loss of an important relationship, and experiencing the associated distress of not maintaining or achieving the higher order goals (Davis, Swan, & Gambone, 2010).

Within attachment theory, fundamental psychodynamic models of attachment are thought to link pathological narcissism to stalking (Meloy, 1999). Indeed, 'Insecure attachments reflect strategies for managing a greater level of narcissistic vulnerability than exists in secure attachments' (Pistole, 1995: p. 115). This underlying psychodynamic aspect may also be pivotal to understanding the strength of the goal-directness to re-establish the relationship within RGP theory, unsurprising given an insecure attachment style is present in a large proportion of those who stalk (see MacKenzie et al., 2008).

When postulating similarities between narcissistic vulnerability, and attachment styles and the RGP theory it is the fundamental belief that only intimacy with a particular person will increase their happiness and self-worth, that creates a dependent goal-linking phenomenon. Where rejection is introduced, the strength of goal linkage drives the pursuer's efforts to meet their goal (Cupach & Spitzberg, 2004). Rejection is said to feel more painful and embarrassing in such individuals given it has come from the one individual who they believe can fulfil a primary goal, which is fundamental life happiness (Davis, Swan & Gambone, 2012). These three concepts/theories are linked and can be knitted together to sequentially explain the psychology behind stalking. Narcissistic vulnerability depicts the underlying fragile sense of self and constant need of validation from attachment others and attachment theory conceptualises how attachment anxiety develops and is manifested in relationships and stalking (i.e., concerned with and needing to maintain the status of a relationship for self-worth purposes). Attachment styles revolve around the degree to which one is managing vulnerability and self-esteem (Pistole, 1995). RGP theory places emphasis on the goal pursuit mechanisms in an attempt to restore life happiness due to a reliance on a relationship for self-worth and life happiness.

Narcissism was coined by Freud (1914/1961) intended to conceptualise an intrapsychic system for ensuring self-soothing, goals and relationships acquisition, and the valuing of self and others (Pistole, 1995). When this structure has fragility the above components are affected and the person is left prone to narcissistic wounding (known as narcissistic vulnerability) given they have insufficient mechanisms to self-soothe and protect the sense of self-worth (Pistole, 1995). The concept of pathological narcissism is characterised by a number of features. An underlying vulnerable sense of self causes self-esteem dysregulation and a use of relationships to preserve a fragile self-esteem, inevitably causing a dysfunctional, non-reciprocal intimate experience (Ronningstam, 2005). The preference for focusing on anger as opposed to shame feelings leads to emotional dysregulation (Logan, 2009). Indeed, the narcissistic personality has been conceptualised by Kohut (1972, 1977) as a shame disorder. The association between stalking and narcissism is quite common within the literature (e.g., Douglas & Dutton, 2001; MacKenzie et al., 2009; Meloy & Gothard, 1995). In line with such research, those who have stalked are deemed to experience negative self-views. This is suggestive of a sub-type of narcissism known as narcissistic vulnerability. Cain, Pincus and

Ansell (2008: 643) provide a helpful overview and distinction: '*Subjective reports of positive or negative self-esteem appear to be a primary characteristic differentiating narcissistic grandiosity and narcissistic vulnerability*'. With diagnostic systems pathologising the former, and focusing on grandiosity, they fail to have discriminant validity and effectively ignore the full spectrum of narcissistic presentation (Cain et al., 2008). Narcissism has many variations and there is more research needed into how healthy aspects of narcissism can become pathological (Logan, 2009).

To date the only common feature shared by all typologies<sup>12</sup> of stalker (asserted by Mackenzie & James, 2011), is that of a strong sense of entitlement to the victim. This sense of entitlement, to physical access, to their time and/or attention, and to fulfil their own needs, serves as the perpetuating feature in relation to justifying one's actions (MacKenzie & James, 2011). Regardless of typology, two further elements are purported by MacKenzie et al. (2009) to underpin all stalking episodes, presenting engagement barriers. These are, a disregard of the victim's responses, appearing to lack empathy, and the employment of socially unacceptable behaviours to gain the focus of their target, suggesting interpersonal skills deficits. Additional problematic traits such as rigid thinking and lack of insightfulness have been associated with those who stalk, also analogous with barriers to achieving collaborative professional engagement (MacKenzie et al., 2009). Clinicians have asserted that narcissism is characteristic of every person who stalks and that this aspect of personality negatively impacts upon the ability for professionals to develop a therapeutic alliance and engage in any meaningful professional contacts (e.g., MacKenzie et al., 2009; Meloy & Gothard, 1995). Taken together, these interpersonal manifestations may be better conceptualised and understood as attachment pathology. Indeed, considered in preparing for engagement attempts and developing case formulations, rather than listed as obstacles to engagement.

In practice, Meloy and Gothard (1995) observed that there was a clear tendency for those who stalk to use projection, with aggression directed towards the victim, noting the use of denial and minimisation. Denial has been postulated as a form of

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<sup>12</sup> The stalker typologies referred to relate to those developed by Mullen, Pathé, Purcell and Stuart (1999) which categorises offenders based on their initial motivations. See Appendix B.

dynamic psychological self-support mechanism, which cannot be rescinded until the need for self-support is no longer required (Jonoff-Bulman & Timko, 1987). For some the employment of fantasy defended against feelings of loneliness and isolation in stranger stalkers (Meloy & Gothard, 1995). The need for one more contact with the victim to apologise, or give closure, was reported on by Meloy and Gothard (1995), noting the stalkers' lack of recognition of the negative effect this would have. Any victim contact is purported to provide temporary positive reinforcement to the stalker, in turn predicting subsequent approach behaviours (Meloy, 1999). Authors concluded that narcissism was evident amongst the sample and suggested that ex-partner stalkers experienced abandonment rage from narcissistic sensitivity, which functionally defended themselves psychologically against the grief of loss of the victim, driving the obsessional pursuit.

Those convicted of stalking offences seldom volunteer themselves for treatment. Therefore, court mandated treatment or periods of imprisonment might provide opportunities to engage (MacKenzie et al., 2009). On this basis, McEwan, Mullen and MacKenzie (2009) suggest taking a collaborative and empowering stance in engagement, incorporating motivational interviewing techniques (Prochaska & diClemente, 2005), fully supported by a skilled MDT approach (Mullen, Pathé & Purcell, 2001). Perhaps due to the relentless pursuit of the victim creating an urgency in professionals to intervene, and the complexity of attempting to develop a professional relationship with those who stalk, a *done to* approach to assessment and research has emerged. Indeed, there is a stark absence of empirical data reporting on the individual experiences of those who stalk. That is, on how they construe their reality for stalking episodes, which could be a crucial missing empirical piece of knowledge. Johnson and Thompson (2016) invited future research to explore how the contextual and motivational factors may alter over time for the person stalking, associated with greater persistence in their stalking behaviours. There has been little research commenting on this, and yet the damaging psychological effects on victims through increased persistence is well-established (e.g., Johnson & Thompson, 2016). Treatment efficacy once stalkers engage with professionals is not robustly understood (Purcell & McEwan, 2018), and desistance information for this offender group is absent. The immediacy of this need is paramount given the assertion that those who stalk are resourceful people, some succeed in continuing their harassment while incarcerated (Pathé, Mackenzie & Mullen, 2004).

## Study rationale

There is value in developing positive working relationships with offenders (e.g., DeSorcy, Olver & Wormith, 2016), and stalking-specific literature claims that abstinence following prosecution is assisted by a directive therapeutic relationship (Mullen et al., 1999). Practitioners engaging with those convicted of stalking offences however experience challenges, which is acknowledged within the literature: '*The most striking aspect of treating stalking offenders is the impact that this client population has on the therapeutic relationship*' (Rosenfeld, Fava & Galiotta, 2009: 97). Additionally, there is a pessimistic view surrounding clinical attempts to rehabilitate stalking perpetrators utilising psychotherapy (Sheridan and Davies, 2010). These observations are unsurprising if attachment pathology, narcissistic vulnerability and relational goal pursuits are present.

Understanding the idiosyncratic nature of stalking behaviours may help improve practitioner insights and working psychopathological hypotheses to assist engagement. Further, this may provide new ideas for risk management and rehabilitative support, in turn protecting victims. This is the first study to use the Repertory Grid Technique (RGT: a derivative method of assessment of Kelly's [1955] Personal Construct Theory), with people convicted of stalking, or related offences, and the first study to explore the use of a Visually Adapted Repertory Grid Technique (VARGT: see chapter 3). This methodology was chosen to explore personal construct systems of those who had committed stalking, or related offences. Intended to do so in a non-directive, non-threatening way, to improve collaboration with the researcher, and allow participation that is more active and free flowing in sharing lived experiences. It also allowed uncensored self-concepts to be made explicit and give indications to their current cognitive position in respect of their offending behaviour. Adaptations were made to reduce cognitive loading, seen in previous forensic psychology based studies using repertory grids (e.g., Kitson-Boyce, Blagden, Winder & Dillon, 2018). This study utilised the novel VARGT for this aim, but also to reduce participant experience of direct psychological challenge from researcher-led questions around sensitive topics. The intention was to maximise engagement and collaboration with a complex client group, who may have difficulties with interpersonal relationships, and readiness to share, as well as articulation of personal self-disclosures. This study aimed to yield robust empirical



findings to inform our understanding of the perceptions of this participant group. This was in order to provide valuable insights for improving impact within professional engagement opportunities.

## **Methodology**

This was the first study employing a mixed methods approach to investigate the individual experiences of those convicted of stalking, and related offences. The combined methodology was intended to capture individual experiences, interpretations, and constructed realities whilst providing statistical thoroughness and rich insights pertaining to what drives those who stalk, and what may help stop and rehabilitate them. This mixed methods approach was intended to elicit rich quality data from an otherwise elusive participant group for which there is no published qualitative research literature. The combined methodology is inductive and exploratory, and adopts a constructivist position, disputing the existence of an objective reality. This section explains the study design and underlying phenomenological perspective aligned with the original research aims. It describes the rationale for employing IPA and the repertory grid technique, and the marriage of the two to form this mixed methods design.

## **Epistemology (theory of knowledge), Ontology (study of existence/reality), and Phenomenology**

The fundamental research aims of the project demanded the consideration of qualitative methods with an inductive, exploratory and subjectivist ontological approach. The epistemological and ontological position was that the constructed reality of participants could be accessed from free narrative, and that this subjective and interpretive reality is more important than that of the observer, an interpretativistic as opposed to positivistic stance in research. The theoretical phenomenological position underpinning this study is constructive alternativism, which asserts that we construe reality in unique ways that make sense to us individually (Cummins, 2003), and as such there will be subjective alternatives. This study was concerned with the significance of experiences for participants and their meaning making. Phenomenology is concerned with the existence and experience of individuals; their idiographic experiences are of prime importance and the

interpretation of such by that individual (hermeneutic aspect) provides rich and telling information.

### **Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)**

IPA is a qualitative and analytical approach to psychological research (Larkin & Thompson, 2012), which captures individual's experiences and their interpretation of their world, events and people (Aresti, Eatough & Brooks-Gordon, 2010). IPA espouses rich data collection by empathic semi-structured interviewing, progressing to an interpretative position to give meaning and context (Reid, Flowers & Larkin, 2005). As such, it demands a lengthy and iterative process, benefitting from intermittent peer validation (Larkin & Thompson, 2012). IPA essentially nurtures the concept of the participant being the expert in their experiences of the topic area, with interviewing styles, having a loose structure and emphasis on rapport building, allowing the participant to tell their story, their way (Smith & Osborn, 2007). Rich idiographic novel data is produced via the flexible approach of IPA. This is a key strength when researching populations not well understood, requiring small, purposive samples, from which data should remain experience close (Smith et al., 2009). It is suited to research questions around particular experiences and interpretation of such, by particular people, focussing on a particular topic (see Smith & Osborn, 2007).

The IPA process of qualitative research aligns with hermeneutic phenomenological epistemology and provides access to a snapshot of the participant's relatedness to others and the world (Larkin & Thompson, 2012). It also encompasses the critical and conceptual interpretations of the researcher, through *double hermeneutics* (Smith and Osborn, 2007). Inspecting these multi-layered, sense-making constructions of one's consciousness (phenomenology) is complex. For example, Husserl (1927 [see Giorgi, 2012]) conceptualised the *natural attitude* (contemporaneous presupposed construing of experiences), and the reflexive advancement of this being the *phenomenological attitude* (the subjective and interpretive perceptions and reflections of the phenomenon).

IPA is a methodology concerned with accessing richness of data pertaining to an individual's experience, an idiographic focus, as opposed to a nomothetic focus (see

Braun & Clarke, 2013). Nonetheless, in the latter stages of analysis commonly appearing interpreted themes are combined, producing superordinate themes amongst the whole sample (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014), and sample generalisations can be cautiously eluded to (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). Individual differences are of prime importance and add to the discussions, supporting or challenging interpretations. The application of IPA within this novel research study was chosen in order to best appreciate the experiences and subjective interpersonal reality of those convicted of stalking offences, when objective behavioural observations fail to provide comprehensive insights. IPA is purported to be an integrative approach, with the common aim of understanding the phenomenological experience of the participant (Smith et al., 2009), hence can be complemented by a repertory grid technique.

### **Repertory grid technique (RGT)**

The use of the repertory grid method with offenders is well established as an aid to assessment and formulation and as a measure of psychological change (e.g., Blagden, Mann, Webster, Lee & Williams 2017; Blagden, Winder, Gregson & Thorne, 2014; Mason, 2003; 2008; Yorke & Dallos, 2015). Given the outcomes of the method are not obvious from the procedure, it is deemed less susceptible to socially desirable responding (Rowe, 1976), and thus useful for exploring aspects of behaviours which are inherently undesirable (Mason, 2008). It is also purported in this way to be able to minimise interviewer bias in the quest to understand another person's actions (see Hare, Durand, Hendy & Wittkowski, 2012).

Personal construct psychology (PCP: Kelly, 1955) underpinning the RGT, is a constructivist phenomenological approach to research and clinical practice, disputing the concept of an objective reality in human experience, in any one situation. It purports we interpret ourselves, others, and situations, from our idiosyncratic and fluid psychological framework (Banister, Burman, Parker, Taylor & Tindall, 1994). The framework content, sequentially built and constantly revised during one's life journey, is structured around the meaning we attach to previous experiences. Our individual and modifiable frameworks subsequently explain the mechanisms for the view within PCP that disputes the existence of an objective reality in any one situation in respect of the human experience. Kelly (1955)

theorised that these frameworks contain our personal constructs from which we interpret past, new and anticipated situations. As such, *'People can thus be viewed metaphorically as personal scientists with their own theories, hypotheses, and unique methods of testing the accuracy of their predictions.'* (Grice, 2002: 338).

Derived from Personal Construct Theory (PCT: Kelly, 1955) the repertory grid technique (RGT; Winter, 2003) provides access to these subjective realities and is the most familiar technique within Personal Construct Psychology (Banister et al., 1994). This technique exposes these frameworks that constitute our subjective reality, largely predisposed by our previous experiences (Banister et al., 1994). In research, the RGT allows the idiographic sense-making framework of an individual to be made explicit (e.g., Easterby-Smith, 1980; Blagden et al., 2014), enabling researchers to gain a richer understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Howitt, 2010). It allows the researcher to learn the constructs and contextual interpretations made by participants of their experiences and world (Neimeyer, Bowman & Saferstein, 2005). Their use within research, including clinical and forensic settings, is established (e.g., Blagden et al., 2014; Faccio, Castiglioni & Bell, 2012; Leach, Freshwater, Aldridge & Sunderland, 2001; Mason, 2008; Winter, 2003; Turpin, Dallos, Owen & Thomas, 2009) and can be easily modified to suit the researcher's needs (Grice, 2002). Its validity, measured by an ability to understand a person's construct system, is purported to be respectable (Fransella, Bell & Banister, 2004). It is considered that with thoughtful approaches to administration and any adaptations, that the reliability and validity of the RGT is relatively unaffected (Winter, 1992).

### **Visually adapted repertory grid technique (VARGT)**

There is no standard repertory grid method, and so adaptations can be made by researchers to meet their research objectives, within a wider framework of principles (Winter, 2003). Given this was the first study to engage with men convicted of stalking using qualitative methodology, the VARGT was developed to complement the IPA methodological research design by involving a kinaesthetic, collaborative and visually transparent map of participants' personal construct systems. The use of the VARGT was intended to reduce contemporaneous cognitive loading and instead allow participants to view significant relational aspects exposed on their grids in an autonomous and empowering manner. It was envisaged that the resultant complex

and idiosyncratic personal construct systems, in respect of relationships and stalking experiences, would become visually accessible to participants themselves, enabling guided discovery reflections.

The VARGT was a crucial component of this mixed methods research study, unique in three important ways. It was the first study employing a mixed methods approach to capture the individual experiences and constructed realities of adult males convicted of stalking; to utilise the repertory grid technique with those convicted of stalking; and to pilot the use of a visually adapted repertory grid technique (VARGT) in a research setting. Chapter 3 provides a detailed account of the VARGT, and how it can be administered and replicated, whereas chapter 5 discusses the benefits of its application.

### **Blending of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis and the Repertory Grid Technique**

Although IPA does not stipulate a specific technique for understanding an individual's personal constructs like Kelly's Personal Construct Theory (1955) derived Repertory Grid Technique, it does share the same phenomenological position (Smith & Osborn, 2007). This mixed methods approach of IPA and the use of repertory grids is an uncommon approach, although has been shown to add depth of understanding for social and criminal phenomena and shows compatibility of methodology in doing so (Blagden et al., 2018; Blagden et al., 2014; Yorke & Dallos, 2015). Indeed, the repertory grid technique can complement IPA with its deep exploration of idiographic processes (Horley, 2008), the blending combines qualitative methodology with a quantitative analysis ability. Whilst repertory grid analysis can be conducted qualitatively given the rich data yield, a bespoke computer software programme (Idiogrid: Grice, 2002) is also utilised to provide an additional layer of quantitative analysis. *'IPA can offer a broader picture of the dominant shared understandings whereas grids offer a complementary detailed picture of how the constructs are organized into clusters and interrelate'* (Yorke & Dallos, 2015: 128).

In context of this research study, the integration of the repertory grids method into the wider IPA methodology seemed logical. The shared phenomenology whereby

we interpret and assign our own personal meaning to experiences, that which makes sense to us and supports or helps revise and effectively determines our personal construct systems, fit with the aims of the study. IPA underlies the process of interpreting the broader sense-making of verbalised experiences throughout the interview, whereas the VARGT provided an engagement structure and allowed for statistical repertory grid analyses to be undertaken to further understand the participants' personal construct systems from which they psychologically interpret their experiences. Creating this degree of triangulation was intended to improve the validity of the study as a novel investigation of the experiences of those having committed stalking offences.

### **The current study and specific aims**

The aim of this research study was to access meaning-making of individuals' stalking behaviours and their relationships with others. Utilising underlying interpretative IPA methodology and the VARGT was intended to address the research questions of what drives those who stalk, and how practitioners can best respond to their needs. Being able to collect rich data through fundamentally empathic and collaborative techniques appealed given there is no known published qualitative research engaging those who commit stalking offences. The aim of using the VARGT was to further contextualise participants' construed experiences particularly concerning concepts of self and others, and to do so using a gently exposing, collaborative, and kinaesthetic (indirect) approach.

Professionals commonly report difficulties with engagement and cite issues with lack of insight, entitlement and cognitive rigidity (Mackenzie et al., 2009), yet there has been no exploration of this with those who stalk, to gain an understanding of their own constructed realities. Indeed, there is a complete absence of published qualitative research studies on the perspectives of those who commit stalking offences. Whilst their goals may be understandable (i.e., to acquire a relationship), stalking behaviours are hurtful and dysfunctional, even counterintuitive. This study wanted to access insights into how people who stalk reconcile this cognitively and yet remain steadfast in their pursuit. Furthermore, it aimed to allow the participants to freely articulate their views on the functions and culpability of their actions, and be open to all pertinent aspects they deemed relevant in the research participation

opportunity regarding understanding stalking. This study aimed to access this understanding to improve practitioner responses to this client group.

This research study and the use of the VARGT hoped to offer the field novel findings from perpetrator insights regarding the psychopathology and functional drivers of stalking, and what they deemed barriers to professional engagement, assessment, treatment and management processes. It was intended for the findings to contribute to the developing international work applying models for meaningful and therapeutic engagement with those convicted of stalking, and related offences. This study aimed to bridge this knowledge and practice gap by accessing the expert perspectives of the people convicted of stalking, or related offences.

## **Method**

### **Ethical approvals and specific considerations related to risk**

Research approvals were obtained from Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) national research committee, Nottingham Trent University research ethics committee, and from relevant HMPPS midlands region prison Governing Governors. The British Psychological Society Code of Human Research Ethics (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition; 2014) was adhered to at all times.

Given the intended participant sample, there were additional ethical considerations for ensuring the wellbeing of those recruited. Whilst this in itself is of utmost importance as a researcher and practitioner, it was also considered that any unintended ruminatory and emotional responses to the topic of their stalking episodes and victim(s) could in turn lead to an increase in risk to the victim (see MacKenzie et al. [2009] regarding the concept of 'psychosocial damage to the stalker'). The potential self-gratifying effect of allowing participants unchallenged time to talk about their victims and pursuits was reflected upon in the design stage. Given practitioner experience, and mindful of researcher responsibilities, it was determined that any demonstrations of unhealthy rumination, an increase in aggravating negative emotions and any indications of possible further risk to the victim(s) would lead to early termination of the interview. Consequently, urgent

signposting to support avenues for both participant and primary victim (via appropriate agencies) would be undertaken, and risk management strategy providers would be consulted to minimise any resultant risk of harm to the participant and victim.

Conversely, it was acknowledged that the researcher-participant relationship may prove to be a positive experience for participants given the encouragement of unchallenged narratives. In addition, the researcher's practitioner role determined that any identified participants would not be invited to take part if there had been previous meaningful risk assessment related contact. This was due to the considered risk of biasing, which would affect the data beyond the usual double hermeneutics processes. It was further determined that after interview the researcher would be unable to undertake practitioner psychological risk assessments with participants due to possible knowledge bias and reduced level of objectivity. The risk of attachment and stalking victimisation was considered, and as with practitioner processes, supervision support would be accessed for any concerns experienced. Any such concerns would also proportionately be reported to a senior manager within the security and offender management units in the prison, in order to manage risk with early identification.

### **Participant recruitment**

Purposive sampling from within HMPPS Midlands region was undertaken. This enables researchers to make more valid and generalisable causal explanations of social phenomena (Cowley, 1995). Fitting with IPA methodology, the small sample was purposively selected for their ability to provide a quality perspective on this topic and to comprise a good level of homogeneity. As suggested by Guest, Bunce and Johnson (2006), participants were invited to engage with the study based on the predetermined criteria set based on the established research aims. Purposive sampling criteria made assumptions that participants will not have undertaken any stalking-related treatment intervention, will not be suffering serious mental illness currently, or have an extremely low IQ. It would be unlikely for such people to be held in prison custody, but if identified it would be unethical to include them within this particular study given the tasks involved in interview. Pre-determined exclusion criteria existed for those experiencing serious mental illness at the time of offending, and those convicted of a current sexual offence where stalking was purely predatory



for sexual gratification. Such factors would reduce their ability to provide insight into the drivers of their behaviours outside of these aspects, limiting the study outcomes in light of the original aims.

Relevant professionals within HMPPS Midlands prisons were contacted in line with the research application approvals, requesting identification of potential participants and supplying them with a *Participant Information Sheet* and *Participant Consent Form* (see Appendix F for research materials). These constituted invites for individuals to take part and gave instructions on how to respond if they wished to. HMPPS database access via the OASys system was also granted in order for the researcher to assist in identifying those suitable to be invited to take part in the research.

### **Sample Size.**

Seven adult males engaged in this study, which is within the suggested range to provide an opportunity for robust qualitative data analysis (Guest et al., 2006). With IPA the importance is placed on small sampling (quality not quantity) using purposive sampling ensuring homogeneity of sample (Smith et al., 2009). Homogeneity was achieved in this study by recruiting adult males, who had been convicted of stalking or related offences, and who were being held in prison custody.

In determining an adequate sample size for this study, the theoretical concept of saturation within qualitative research as a guiding principle was considered (see Fossey, Harvey, McDermott & Davidson, 2002; Mason, 2010). Guest et al. (2006) found that the majority of analytical codes supporting the range of overall themes were apparent within the first six interview data sets. Review papers suggest varying ranges for reaching saturation in qualitative studies, with six being the minimum amount (e.g. Morse, 1994) and a range of six to eight when homogeneity within the sample is achieved (Kuzel, 1992). It is purported that the greater the homogeneity, the sooner data saturation can be reached (Guest et al., 2006). However, with IPA it has been noted that a small sample yielding rich data is the overall objective as opposed to looking for saturation (Guest et al., 2006). Indeed, it

has been argued that the concept of data saturation in qualitative research is based on researcher qualities, and not easily quantifiable (Guest et al., 2006).

Taking the above into consideration with the initial overall design and during data collection stage, a number of factors determined the participant total of seven used in this study. A minimum participant number of six was set as per the guidance above, and the level of expected homogeneity across the sample. Pragmatically, the depth and breadth of data expected to be gleaned from conducting the VARGT integrated within IPA methodology, and a slow uptake rate by participants meant participant numbers were sensibly capped at eight. Data saturation occurred earlier than this, with very few new themes recurring, possibly due to aspects related to the use of the VARGT with all participants. However, further participants were recruited to maximise the sample size to eight. Following eight interviews, only seven could be successfully transcribed, constituting approximately 21 hours of interview data.

### **Procedure**

Consenting participants were interviewed using an underlying IPA methodology and collaborated in undertaking a novel repertory grid method, the VARGT. Appendix F contains the semi-structured interview schedule (designed following consideration of the guidelines supplied by Smith et al., 2009) and VARGT administration instructions, whilst chapter 3 details how to replicate the VARGT in full, illustrating the visual aids used. A sparse semi-structured interview schedule with associated prompts was utilised in order to facilitate initial discussion around their conviction for stalking or related offence. It was kept purposely sparse to attend to the focus of the participant empathically (Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008), and utilised as an aide memoire. The interviews were audio-recorded in full using an encrypted Dictaphone and soon after transcribed, assuring anonymity of records from this point onwards.

Participants were informed that they would be guided through an exercise to help the researcher better understand their experiences in regards to relationships and stalking. Given the forensic setting, and within the consenting boundaries, participants were encouraged to provide their personal experiences without concern for judgement in terms of the usual risk assessment processes, given this was not the purpose of the interview. Time was incorporated for general rapport building,

gathering demographic information, and a pre-VARGT exploratory question about views on their stalking related conviction. This provided additional information regarding the participants' emotional stance at the time of interviewing and their initial range of focus regarding their experiences. Notes were taken contemporaneously to record the elicitation of constructs emerging from elements for each participant, which were later referred to when reviewing the place of origin of hierarchical constructs and principal components.

The average interview length was two-and-a-half hours. Transcription focussed on the words used, and any utterances, sighs, pauses used that signified unspoken meaning (orthographic transcription), with identifiers removed at this point. A reflexivity journal was kept throughout data collection to capture the researcher's experiences of participants, key aspects of the interview instructions to revise, and the overarching story given by the participant of their experiences. It was also used continuously during the iterative process of data analysis, to assist in and recording of, decision-making.

### **Analytical methods**

To strengthen analytical findings the guidance on IPA analytical processes provided by Smith et al., 2009 was followed and applied to the project from the start in order to remain consistent with its assumptions. A good level of homogeneity of the group on several factors was also achieved, therefore presenting relatively few interpretative concerns in the analysis of stalking as a phenomenon (see Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). The mixed methods approach aimed to strengthen support for IPA outcomes and expose otherwise difficult to access data through use of the VARGT. IPA procedures were applied to the full transcripts from the free narrative pre-VARGT questions, through element and construct elicitation, element/construct ratings, and the overarching eyeball analysis. It also captured the experience of participants using the VARGT. Subsequent repertory grid analysis using Idiogrid software (see Grice, 2002) was undertaken and assimilated to strengthen support for, or challenge, the IPA themes. IPA being flexible and iterative, applied at the individual level, was subsequently complemented by the repertory grid analyses, which is fixed in nature. In this sequence the convergent or divergent repertory grid outcomes to the IPA outcomes were reported on without biasing the qualitative analysis.

### **Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis.**

Smith and Osborn (2003) suggest guidelines for a flexible application of this methodology, which have been employed. The structure for conducting IPA is sequential, although the analysis is complex, repetitive, iterative and evolving, hence the importance of maintaining a reflexivity journal. Verbatim transcriptions were produced from audio-recording of the whole interview period, and checked and re-checked for accuracy prior to coding. Recordings allowed for the interviews to flow, whilst also capturing essential data, although non-verbal communication was largely lost (Smith & Osborn, 2007). Reading for content initially took place to allow for *bracketing*, a process of suspending critical evaluation based on researcher inferences, i.e., drawn from practitioner experience, and *free coding*, making transparent the researcher's theoretical and practitioner-based influences in attempting to understand the text (see Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008; Larkin & Thompson, 2012). Coding was then undertaken more systematically on three pre-reflective to reflective levels (*descriptive, linguistic* and *conceptual*: see Smith et al., 2009) initially whilst listening to the audio-recordings of the interview in order to better capture context, tone and the *feel* of the interview and participant. Coding constitutes a process for reducing the transcripts dimensionally, interpreting the data, yet maintaining an overall focus on the idiographic experience (Smith et al., 2009).

The initial codes were repeatedly reviewed to allow for patterns of meaning to be interpreted by the researcher in identifying common and divergent themes (Larkin & Thompson, 2012). This was undertaken with individual cases prior to progressing the process across the sample, aiming to view each case and transcript individually as opposed to searching for similar themes from the case before and any divergent themes (Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008). Visual groupings of codes using coloured sticky notes around untitled themes helped shape the initial stages of identifying clusters of codes and concepts. In line with guidance to further reduce the data and intensify its meaningfulness for answering the research question, divergent codes such as those deemed isolate or not answering the question were largely discarded (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Chapter 5 details researcher-practitioner reflections on a discarded dataset of meaningful codes, solely concerning the therapeutic engagement utility of the VARGT, which was pertinent to the overall thesis, but not addressing the research question.

A hierarchy of themes was developed providing a visual representation of the significance of themes occurring across the sample (Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008). Superordinate themes were all representative of a very high degree of recurrence across the sample (Smith et al., 2009) with subordinate themes accounting for at least three-quarters recurrence. Attending to recurrence in this way is suggested to enhance the validity of the results (Smith et al., 2009), although the degree of subjectivity within this is acknowledged. The hierarchy of themes also visually represents the researcher's determination of superordinate and linked subordinate themes, addressing the research question. Narrative accounts presented in quotes provide examples of idiosyncratic significance, whilst psychological theory and concepts introduced within the reporting of themes represents a robust explanation of participant's interpretations of experiences (Larkin & Thompson, 2012). This double hermeneutics analytical process assimilates the participants' focus of concern, experience and meaning of that, with researcher-led identification of codes, subsequent clustering, and links made to existing psychological knowledge (Smith et al., 2009).

### **Repertory Grid analysis using Idiogrid software.**

Additional to the qualitative analysis of VARGT outcomes, i.e., participant engagement and reflections, Idiogrid (Grice, 2002) was utilised to provide an additional layer of quantitative analysis to the data. A number of analysis functions were performed and summarised below (see Grice, 2002). To ensure all outcomes were considered, regardless of IPA outcomes, a range of statistical analyses were reviewed, such as univariate, bivariate and principal components analysis. Univariate statistics offer information about factors such as averages and extremity of responses, which can indicate the meaningfulness a participant gave to the construct (i.e., if responding in the mid ranges it may denote little thought), and any rigidity of thought (i.e., by responding only at the extremes). Bivariate statistics show the fundamental relationships between pairs of elements or constructs. Principal Components Analysis (PCA) shows statistically and pictorially how the participant views their self-concepts in relation to the other elements along the construct dimensions. Self-identity plots (SIPs) visually represent how an individual's self-concepts are being understood in relation to relevant others on the topic. To further inspect the principal components of the sample, Slater Analyses were also

performed, constituting hierarchical cluster analysis, yielding both group, as well as individual-level, analyses.

### **Additional validity features.**

The collaborative eyeball analysis undertaken provided a contemporaneous validity check by ensuring the researcher's understanding of the constructs, bivariate correlations, and patterns, identified in each participant grid, by the participant themselves. Additional to the employment of the validity checks outlined, consultation with psychologist and psychiatrist practitioners international renowned stalking experts (e.g., Dr Rachael MacKenzie and Dr Troy McEwan), and supervisors regarding the final analysed themes provided a further layer of validity checking. The process also provided a soundboard for reviewing the interpretations made, and prompted links back to the original data. The aim was not to collate others' views on the data and interpretation, rather to ensure the final themes and accounts of them were credible.

### **Reflexivity**

In qualitative research the notion of researcher subjectivity is valued and an essential facet. Capturing critical reflections on the production of knowledge, and the researcher influence on this, is known as reflexivity (Braun & Clarke, 2013). The concept of being reflexive denotes reflections have led to self-change and advancements in thinking. A reflexivity journal was kept throughout data collection and analytical procedures, to capture reflections on pivotal points of iteration, interpretations and decision-making. This channeling of the researcher's journey incorporates reflective and reflexive analysis (Finlay, 2003) in an attempt to fully immerse in, understand the data, and create an audit of how this has been shaped by their interaction with the study. Making explicit the researcher interpretations of participant's experiences exposes the complementary and biasing effect of personal and practitioner based experiential knowledge. This was particularly useful given the influence of practitioner experience and natural use of clinical terms in the analysis process.

In line with the overarching thesis aims, IPA focused on what drives people who stalk and how practitioners can best meet their needs. However, there was a large amount of data that was pivotal to the participant experience, but not related directly to the focus of the study. The journal helped to capture this broader picture of unintended findings and the reflexivity (see Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014) highlighted the wealth of information pertaining to the therapeutic value of the VARGT that was offered spontaneously. An appreciation of this unanimous aspect of participant experience was not dismissed and forgotten, but instead given voice separately, and discussed in chapter 5.

The analytical journey often swung between being immersed in the whole participant story and viewing the codes through the lens of answering the research questions. Whilst this lengthened the process, the intention to analyse in this way suited the researcher qualities and ideals for this study overall. The reflexivity journal provided a vital space to record critical decision-making, for example around final theme confirmation and understanding determined hierarchies and overlaps. To illustrate, there appears an overlap between the subordinate themes of *All-consuming focus* and *Blinkered view*, which contribute to two separate superordinate themes. Reviewing the underpinning data and engaging in critical discussion over their conceptual convergence and divergence, with an appreciation of the inevitable crossover of concepts within themes, it was decided they remain as originally determined. The determining factor was that the underlying psychological functions of the subordinate themes were fundamentally different, with one representing the drive and all-consuming focus on attaining a deeper level goal, the other capturing the strength of the underlying goal pursuit, overriding any concern for legal sanctions and personal consequences.

The research journey was continually iterative. It acknowledged the personal and practitioner biases, and indeed the researcher's own personal construct system pertaining to those who stalk, the rehabilitation of offenders, and criminal justice structures as influential to the design, implementation and analysis of the research study. Initial transcript data processing involved bracketing off natural attitudes given existing practitioner experience, and research-led literature reviews. This was undertaken not in an attempt to remove bias, but to recognise it and understand its influence, and enhancement during the double hermeneutics processes. Bracketing

is seen as a process to highlight and re-process researcher preconceptions of the data to prevent early dilution and bias of the collected participant interpretations (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). An example of such was free-coding transcripts to identify such natural and concepts, allowing for a more objective final analysis of the data once accounting for those conceptual biases.

With the timeline of data collection, the journal was a useful place to capture the contemporaneous researcher experience of the participant's initial feelings and interpretations. Specifically, what their provided story was telling me about them, their sense-making, and what was important to them as individuals. It also allowed the researcher to capture any interpersonal dynamics and practical factors that may have affected the collected data, for example, how well they understood the tasks, potential levels of denial and anxiety that could be referred to later in analysis to explain potential divergence. The journal also logged reflections on quality checks, using the criteria provided by Yardley (2000) for qualitative studies, and evolving, data driven iterations, influenced by participants and researcher literature reviews and professional discussions.

### **Sample Demographics**

Seven adult males engaged in this study (see Table 6 for sample demographic information). Demographic information illustrated a good level of homogeneity and some divergence. Whilst the focus on adult males was purposeful for promoting homogeneity, those who stalk are generally men, with a female victim (e.g., Marazziti et al., 2015). All participants had convictions of stalking, or related offences, none of which included physical violence. Participant ages ranged from 27 to 51 years old ( $M = 35.3$ ;  $SD = 5.2$ ), which is consistent with previous sample demographics (see systematic review in chapter 2), and Miller (2012) asserting most stalkers are aged in their 30s. Six participants were white British and one was white Polish. In five cases the victim was an ex-partner (previously lived with), one victim was described as an ex-intimate (although a brief, distance relationship of two months), and one an historical acquaintance from school. Using motivational typologies to categorise this sample (Mullen, Pathé, Purcell, & Stuart, 1999), five were of the *Rejected* typology (participants 1, 4, 5, 6 and 7). One was *Intimacy Seeker* (participant 3), and one was unclear given the relationship between the participant and victim was difficult to ascertain (i.e., reciprocal intimate relationship



or virtual, online contact whereby only the participant desired an intimate relationship). Participant 2 was most probably of the *Rejected* typology, but if not, would fit within the *Intimacy Seeker* typology. Methods for stalking largely included approach behaviours combined with preceding surveillance behaviours; that is, using both offline and digitally-assisted, online methods. Two participants committed mostly digitally assisted, online stalking. Six participants reported co-morbid symptoms of mental illness, and two disclosed pervasive developmental disorders (PDD), which were described as ‘ADHD’ and ‘Mild Asperger’s syndrome’. Personality disorders were not assessed for, although participants were asked about any diagnoses previously given. Whilst the prevalence of depression was common (as found in previous samples, e.g., McEwan, Mullen & MacKenzie, 2010), there were no reported diagnoses for personality disorders.

P No.	Age	Sentence length	Self-reported diagnoses	Relationship to victim	Method
P1	30	4 mths	Depression; Anxiety	Ex-partner	Offline/Online contact
P2	28	36 mths	Depression; Anxiety	Ex-intimate of 2 mths	Online only/Third party
P3	27	Unsentenced	Depression; Mild Asperger’s	Past acquaintance	Online/Offline for surveillance
P4	51	12 mths	None	Ex-partner	Offline/Online contact
P5	31	9 mths	None	Ex-partner	Offline/Online contact
P6	46	Missing	ADHD; Depression	Ex-partner	Offline contact
P7	34	5 mths	None	Ex-partner	Offline/Online contact

*Note.* All participants disclosed experiencing depression during the stalking episode

Table 6. Sample demographic information

Of the seven men, three had convictions for stalking with sentence lengths ranging from 11 weeks to an estimated three years (unsentenced participant). This could show consistency with available sentencing lengths data, which states that in 2015 the average custodial sentence for stalking in the UK was 14.1 months (Ministry of Justice, 2017). Two had convictions for harassment, which formed part of more recognised crimes, i.e., sharing images of a sexual nature and fraud, although part of the stalking behaviours. This could suggest the current stalking legislation is not deemed strong enough to be able to capture the patterns of variant behaviours within it and attract a proportionate sentence. Two had convictions for breach of restraining order and breach of non-molestation order, both attracting four months in custody. These breaches were committed as part of a longer pattern of stalking behaviours yet the criminal record, current conviction, and sentence length did not appear to reflect the severity of their persistent behaviours against the same victim when compared to the stalking conviction title and associated sentence length.

### **Analysis and discussion**

With the research aims at the fore, in-depth interpretations of this study's findings have been combined with a discussion of the identified themes, linked to relevant empirical literature. All analyses undertaken are referred to within the IPA themes structure. Firstly, the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is presented and discussed dominating the findings and representing the shared researcher-participant understanding. Subsequently, relevant analyses of the repertory grids pertaining to the research aims are presented, which detail how participant constructs were organised and interrelated.

#### **Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis**

The IPA themes focussed on the research aims, based on the accessed lived experiences of those convicted of stalking, or related offences. Table 7 displays the three determined hierarchical superordinate themes and their relationship with the subordinate themes.

Superordinate themes	Subordinate themes
Narcissistic vulnerability	Chasing validation All-consuming focus Self-worth restoration
Deterrence	Blinkered view Professional support Prison: 'A wakeup call'
Difficulty accepting the label	Stalker stereotype Distancing Self-perception shift

Table 7. IPA superordinate and subordinate themes

*Narcissistic vulnerability* can be contextualised as a need for a constant supply of validation from another, based on a self-worth deficit. This fundamental superordinate theme encompasses *Chasing validation*, with this being an *All-consuming focus*, and explains the compensatory manifestation of *Self-worth restoration*. This was hierarchically significant, strongly reoccurring within participant analyses, thus will help to explain and underpin the proceeding themes. *Deterrence* as a superordinate theme captured the essence that there is no deterrence once the pattern of stalking for validation commences, given it is a *Blinkered view*. This superordinate theme also incorporates the subordinate themes of needing *Professional support* with the associated connotations that this may have acted as a deterrent to stalking, and that *Prison* was 'A wake up call'. *Difficulty accepting the label* of stalker incorporated emotive narratives around the *Stalker stereotype*, and a resultant need for *Distancing* from this. *Self-perception shift* signifies the participant's ability to accept past stalking behaviours once shifted to a positive self-concept position, i.e., *self-now*.

#### **Superordinate theme one: Narcissistic vulnerability.**

Hierarchically, this superordinate theme was paramount. All participants focused heavily on their personal and relationship insecurities, inadequacies or skills deficits.

These affected their ability to attain or maintain healthy intimate relationships, and later drove the behaviours leading to the stalking related convictions. Participants described their insecurities and loneliness influencing levels of self-esteem, whereby the target of their stalking was experienced in that moment as their only sense of a true meaningful connection. They needed to feel like they were *something* to that person. This experience was irrespective of whether they had had histories filled with previous intimate connections or none at all. Broadly speaking, research suggests a link between emotional loneliness, intimacy-deficits, self-esteem and offending (Marshall, 1989), and with the current sample the formidable strength of the dependency on the target that evolved, was undisputed. These underlying psychosocial vulnerabilities drove the need for a supply of validation from another person (contextual to a real or imagined intimate partner), suggesting narcissistic vulnerability.

Three subordinate themes were part of this superordinate theme. These themes in sequence capture the experience of narcissistic vulnerability amongst the sample, in context of their individual pursuits. They are (a) *Chasing validation*; (b) *All-consuming focus*; and (c) *Self-worth restoration*.

### ***Chasing validation.***

This subordinate theme captures the essence of what perpetuated participants' stalking behaviours. Despite some heterogeneity amongst the sample (i.e., relationship to victim, initial motivation for stalking, and methods to stalk), obtaining validation to support their fragile sense of self from contacts with the victim was the most fundamental objective. This insatiable and relentless need perpetuated their intrusive behaviours.

The following extract illustrates the links made between stalking (*hanging on*) and low self-esteem.

*Someone with low self-esteem is going to hang on to someone...that's the way I see it when I think back to how I was (P2)*

This narrative, the sample codes supporting this subordinate theme, and the repertory grid analyses, underpins the notion that those who stalk have an underlying fragile sense of self-worth. Participants were explaining a need of others, which seemed to relate to addressing or filling a gap in one's self-worth. In this respect, for some, the attachment to the target is primarily about them and their needs as opposed to the desirable compatibility between them per se. It was not uncommon therefore for participants to have made inflexible decisions about wanting to be in, or remain, part of the victims' lives, positively or negatively, given the egocentric validating effect of this. The extract below epitomises the gravity of this.

*It is not as if I want to hurt her as such, I want to be a positive force in her life, but she will not allow it. I've been a negative impact instead which for me is better than being absolutely nothing at all to her. She is not out there getting on with it without a thought for me. I put myself in her path and she is now acknowledging me, she is validating me (P3)*

This narrative around being validated regardless of behaviours and thought processes suggests deeper level relational goals. None of the participants ceased their stalking offending prior to incarceration. Whatever the participant reasoning was for their persistence, fundamentally the disrespect of their victims' wishes was evident in their pursuit of narcissistic validation and avoidance of psychological injury from loss.

It was common for participants to pursue others to validate them, additional to the stalking target, in order to ensure a supply of attention and ego preservation, as represented in the following extract.

*When I'm with a girl... when they go funny with me or they're off for some reason I crave attention. Not for people to feel sorry for me, but to know that's someone's interested in me (P5)*

Two participants self-reported diagnosis of autistic spectrum disorders (ASD). ASD is a lifelong condition manifesting in deficits interpersonally, also in obsessional thinking and related behaviours. Whilst commenting upon their propensity for obsessional thinking, links with stalking were not made. Instead, the sense of being different was strong, which they believed hampered their ability to attain, and maintain, intimate relationships. The below extract illustrates the perceived links.

*The reason stalkers do it is because of their poor social skills, their inadequacies, their insecurity. It is being expressed in an unhealthy way because of their social incompetence (P3)*

Formulating stalking behaviours, understanding predisposing, precipitating and perpetuating idiographic factors, is essential. For example, those with ASD, whereby the goal is to attain a relationship in the context of generic social skills and psycho-emotional deficits, may require different intervention pathways to others (e.g., McEwan & Strand, 2013; Stokes et al., 2007). It is not the ASD that causes people to stalk per se, rather the psychological deficits that they are trying to fulfil in an obsessional, relentless and rigid way. Stalking in the context of ASD may keep active the fantasised goal of a relationship with the target, which brings associated positive feelings (see Purcell & McEwan, 2018). The narrative supports the assertion by MacKenzie et al. (2009) that the sense of entitlement to the desired target's attention often coexists with a deficit in social skills amongst those who perpetrate stalking.

The participant's voices talked about low self-worth, a need to be validated by the victim, and general relationship insecurity. This was supported by the VARGT analyses, which exposed underlying insecure and preoccupied attachment style characteristics, through associated constructs regarding relationships (see repertory grid analysis section). For context, Bowlby's attachment model (1980) purports internalised attachment styles are developed from childhood and applied across the lifespan, determining how one gives meaning to relationships. This shapes expectations for care and attentiveness from others, which is closely aligned with one's sense of self-worth (Pistole, 1995). The preoccupied attachment style originates from an autonomy-restricting and inconsistent parenting pattern, which leads to the adult living in fear of rejection and questioning the quality of relationships (Lewis et al., 2001). This style leads one to focus intensely on their partner, displaying neediness and clinging (see Pistole, 1995). In line with this, it is hypothesised that the self-esteem needs of the narcissistically vulnerable partner are of prime importance. There will be an expectation for the other partner to assist in regulating their fragility of self-worth and associated emotions and behaviours (Pistole, 1995). Therefore presenting a sense of entitlement. This egocentric concern for preserving emotional security is said to drive the preoccupied individual

to enter into relationships purely for this function (Newcomb, 1981), leading to subsequent patterns of failed relationships.

For some this manifested in jealousy within the relationship prior to its ending, further indicating insecurity. Jealousy was associated with increasing emotional investment and commensurate fear of loss.

*It goes alright at first but then when I start getting feelings for somebody and it's a bit more serious, I get a bit jealous. (P5)*

Once a level of emotional investment had been reached, anxiety from an underlying narcissistic vulnerability was triggered.

*I worry about her something stupid, what's she doing, who with... her cheating on me. That is a big thing in my head, you already know how it feels (P1)*

The function of this jealous anxiety seemed to be a psychological attempt to prepare oneself for the narcissistic injury or to prevent it. The attempts of course are fruitless, leaving the individual in a state of distress due to an inability to control the actions of another. These self-defeating manifestations are likely to result in an unhealthy intimate relationship, or even manufacture its ending.

Denying the end of a relationship and chasing validation through the constancy of hopeful contacts ensured a temporary safety net in the face of a threat of narcissistic injury. This could be conceptualised as adaptive in the protection of the ego, but maladaptive for building an emotionally intimate and healthy relationship with a partner. This hope in the face of adverse information is illustrated in the following extract from P5.

*I'd send emails, probably 2 or 3 a day for the whole 4 months, just trying to sort it out because she had gone quiet with me in the past when we've argued but then after a week or so she comes round (P5)*

Stalking behaviours could be conceptualised as a threat response. When important attachments are threatened, intense anger can be experienced and dysfunctional behaviours intended to preserve the bond employed (Bowlby, 1980). The majority of

the sample casually acknowledged the negative victim impact, but their pursuit of satisfying their own needs superseded this. This suggested choice rather than a victim awareness or empathy deficit. Whilst individuals with ASD are suggested to have problems appreciating the impact of their inappropriate behaviours towards victims (Stokes et al., 2007), this was not found to be the case for P3. Whilst his VARGT analysis exposed a constricted personal construct system, the IPA captured his appreciation of victim impact and perspective taking ability. In superseding this knowledge some participants justified their stalking as simply attempts to get answers as to why the victim had decided to leave the relationship. This is illustrated in the extract by P1.

*I never was able to trust my own judgment. I've seen it with my own eyes and I couldn't deny it. I still needed the golden word. Was it happening or wasn't it happening? (P1)*

Even with tangible answers stalking continues, suggesting there were deeper psychological reasons. The experience of participants was focused on an inability to cope with their construed uncertainty about, or avoidance of, accepting the end of the relationship, although the relationship had clearly been ended by the other party. Despite seeing that a previous partner had moved on to a new relationship, accepting the end of a relationship did not seem a viable option, and was feared given the emotional distress it causes. In this situation, who would be there to supply validation? The justification for needing direct verbal contact with the victim may mask the fundamental objective of validation; either to reconcile or force the victim in a position where it would be difficult to simply be brushed them off like they meant nothing. This sense of entitlement to proximity and contact is posited as fundamental to those perpetrating stalking (see MacKenzie et al., 2009). It is deemed conceptually different from narcissism in the grandiose sense and a trait confined to this particular context as opposed to a generic personality feature (MacKenzie et al., 2009; Meloy 1999). Those who stalk tend to cling to a conviction that they have a right to have their desires fulfilled and will act accordingly, i.e., that they are deserving of answers simply as they demand it.

Individual analyses, complemented by repertory grid findings, appeared to suggest the presence of insecure attachment styles, supporting the findings of the systematic review (see chapter 2), in relation to prevalence amongst those who stalk (e.g., MacKenzie et al., 2008). Participants independently made associations



between their attachment disruptions and resulting psychological dependence on others, a characteristic that followed them into adult intimate relationships and associated stalking behaviours. Until the ego is restored by whatever means, the stalking (chasing) remains the only option to maintain or strive for this intrinsic sense of psychological security (validation) from another. Pistole (1995) argues that those with insecure attachment styles, compared with secure, are simply managing a higher level of narcissistic vulnerability, which manifests in their behaviour strategies. Chasing validation from others will only ever be temporary.

### ***All-consuming focus.***

Participants described their stalking episode experiences as intense and negatively consuming. They characterised the drive to stalk using terms such as, '*focus*', '*addiction*' and '*obsession*'. To illustrate the compulsion to stalk, P2 explained: '*It's like if you're hungry, you're focused on food*'. The stalking episodes were characterised as relentless experiences, from which they felt they had no ability to escape. The following extract highlights the strength of this all-consuming focus.

*It's so hard to get out of that bubble of all the anger and the feelings. It's just there and you're locked in and you just can't escape it, it just holds you (P2)*

Parallels between stalking and addiction have been previously suggested. For example, Marazziti et al. (2015) describe stalking as a form of addiction with characteristic cravings, relapse, mental ill health, and loneliness arising from the loss. Analysis drew attention to participants' recognition of the self-defeating psychosocial damage it causes and the powerlessness nevertheless to stop. P3 explained the impact of stalking on himself, extending his experience to those who stalk as a group (see extract below).

*You're not living life to the full if you're stalking. You're that obsessed, you're so fixated to an unhealthy extent on this person that you're missing out on life. You're totally focused on this person, you're behaving in self-defeating ways, I mean look at where it's got me (P3)*

The self-imposed psychosocial damage to the person who stalks persists given their inability to abandon their pursuit (MacKenzie et al., 2009). Social networks are often sacrificed due to the high level of consuming preoccupation (Purcell & McEwan, 2018), purported by this study to be in order to achieve the higher relational goal of

preserving self-worth. Gaining such validation from stalking activities will only be short-lived and related relief from anxiety temporarily felt. Indeed, Meloy and Fisher (2005) presented data from neuroimaging studies of romantic love that suggests stalking may be associated with heightened activity of subcortical dopaminergic pathways of the brain's reward system (later supported by the findings of Burkett & Young, 2012). Further, Marazziti et al. (2015) assert that stalkers have an attachment style leaving them hypersensitive to abandonment, dependent on others' acceptance of them, and thus are constantly anxious. When faced with actual or potential abandonment, the stalker devolves to protest, being unable to accept the loss (Marazziti et al., 2015) and the associated deep narcissistic injury. The function of the perseverant behaviour maintains the sense of purpose regarding the investment of identity and other factors in that relationship, in response to threat of its loss (Miller, 2012). Neurobiologically speaking, Marazziti et al. (2015) have linked this dependency on another individual with the increased activity found within the brain's reward system.

Whilst persistence was not a focus of this study, anecdotal findings showed that the participant stalking for the longest period (over a decade), had targeted a past school acquaintance and had a diagnosis for High Functioning Autism. This finding supported previously reported associations (e.g., McEwan & Strand, 2013). Those stalking strangers or acquaintances typically enter into a fantasy relationship to fulfil their needs, and experience associated delusional disorder or cognitive rigidity and infatuation (see MacKenzie et al., 2009). Regardless of any underlying psychopathology, or relationship to the victim, the participants' experiences of the 'hold' stalking had over them sounded the same.

Participants experienced their stalking as fuelled by emotion. Rationality to alter behaviours under such conditions therefore could prove difficult, even with insight. P4 described his experience as being 'governed' by negative emotions in the context of the all-consuming focus of stalking.

*You're being governed by your emotions essentially. This stalker behaviour is all about negative emotions (P4)*

None of the participants experienced the episodes without emotion, or with rationality. Participants were seemingly under the power of their underlying psycho-

emotive responses to the perceived, or actual, loss of a love interest. The emotional impact of an intimate relationship break-down (short- or long-term) or the failure to attain one was overwhelming and appeared to negatively spiral. MacKenzie et al. (2009) comment on the link between facing the finality of a failed relationship or pursuit episode, and symptoms of depression commensurate with grief. The extract below illustrates this sentiment from the sample codes, and extends this further to indicate the interconnectedness with self-loathing, shame and feeling a failure.

*It was like an illness. I was lost in a whole maelstrom of upsetting negative thoughts, depression, and self-loathing (P4)*

Links have been made between narcissism and symptoms of depression (see Ronningstam, 1996) and it is proposed that a narcissistic injury (i.e., loss or humiliation) causes such symptoms (Logan, 2009). The compulsive experiences shared by the sample regarding their stalking behaviours may parallel these findings in that it is a means by which to fend off depression, shame and intense anger from the narcissistic injury suffered (Ronningstam, 2005). The initial impact on the mental health of participants from a narcissistic injury (rejection or abandonment) and the desperation to avoid the loss and injury was stark. All participants expressly discussed experiences of depression, and sometimes co-morbid anxiety, in relation to the commencement and continuation of their stalking behaviours. In the presence of narcissistic vulnerability and preoccupied attachment styles to protect this, relationships serve as extensions of oneself and the quality of this is synonymous with their sense of self. This was subtle amongst the sample but nonetheless present. The extract below from P2 is contextual to a two-month long, developing relationship. He described having invested emotionally and financially to woo the love interest, who had not reciprocated his feelings. Rather than give up and move on his assumption based on low self-worth, was that he initially could do better to keep her. The assumption would be that if he rescued the developing relationship he would feel temporarily good enough.

*Using the boat analogy, I've become in love with the boat and I want to save the boat whereas there's probably other boats there, a lot better, but I'm trying to save my boat (P2)*

Sorotzkin (1985) described how others become incorporated into the sense of self, and fundamentally relied upon to preserve it, in the narcissistically vulnerable

individual. When the other person's admiration is lost the damage to the cohesive sense of self is overwhelming, evoking feelings of shame due to connotations of not being good enough (Sorotzkin, 1985). Both of these deep psychological injuries are intolerable, thus precipitating stalking as a means to restore a sense of self, validation, and to guard against shame by preventing loss or blaming the other and exacting revenge (termed narcissistic rage; Kohut, 1972). This sense of entitlement is suggested to be linked to an overinflated expectation of others, leading to inevitable disappointment when their own needs are not met. This projection onto the victim, of their failing to meet their needs, threatens the sense of self and provokes conciliatory anger, a conceptual theory that is seen in individuals with narcissistic personality disorder (Purcell and McEwan, 2018).

Qualitative data analysis concluded that the majority of the sample were insightful shown in the reflections of their offending-related thoughts, emotions and behaviours. This finding is in contrast to previous practitioner assumptions (e.g., MacKenzie et al., 2009), and could suggest lack of insight may be better conceptualised as being positioned in the pre-contemplation stage of readiness to change (see Prochaska & diClemente, 2005). Having a sense of entitlement to the victim has also been reported by professionals, but in light of the study findings here, may be better conceptualised as the all-consuming need to restore a damaged sense of self that is already fragile and vulnerable. The negative emotions associated with the self-worth injury drive the obsession to do something to restore self-worth and alleviate it. The behaviours are functional to control external events rather than address internal responses. The resultant stalking behaviours provide temporary relief, hence the relentlessness of the pursuits, but the toll it takes is damaging, as expressed by P4; *'I was worn out and exhausted'*. In response to each previous failure to restore an acceptable sense of self, the negative emotional experience and stalking behaviours escalated.

### ***Self-worth restoration.***

After the commencement of stalking to avoid loss, and the associated negative emotional state, participants experienced secondary reactions to their circumstances at some point in the episode. Although the descriptions of motives differed within the sample, the essential function of the stalking was to restore some

self-worth. This was either by avoiding the reality of the loss and attempting reconciliation, trying harder to be in the victim's life, or by actively seeking revenge to gain a sense of justice. The following extract is in context of the links participants made between their own feelings of hurt and the actions taken towards the victims. For P2, whose stalking was digitally-assisted, the intention was to exact revenge and punish the victim for ending a short-term, causal relationship. He was trying to win back his self-esteem and feel validated, lessening the psychological damage to himself.

*I wanted to hurt her because I felt like a fool, I felt mugged off (P2)*

To illustrate further, the following quote from P3 alludes to this deeper level function of continued stalking as a *defensive strategy*; 'I was punishing her ...for me not being good enough for her'. Some participants entertained degrees of violent thoughts about their victim, although none disclosed having actually been violent. Johnson and Thompson (2016) made links between relational goal pursuit and increasing levels of persistence in those who stalk, and they questioned the high persistence levels of ex-intimate partner stalkers if the goal was no longer reconciliation. The assumption was perhaps that the relational goal was intimacy, whereas the superordinate theme from this research study suggests the relational goal is actually more fundamental; a need for validation due to narcissistic vulnerability. This may explain the intensity of the *bubble* participants felt trapped inside, with an associated inability to simply abandon their pursuits. Furthermore, the need to punish the victim psychologically, and in some cases physically, to restore validation.

Those commenting meaningfully upon their violent thoughts ( $n = 3$ ) and taking pleasure from exacting revenge, did so with embarrassment. The function of violent and homicidal ideation for P3 were fundamentally about validation and self-worth restoration. The below extract, whilst the most extreme of the sample disclosures, depicts the link between violent fantasy and the need for validation.

*I couldn't bear the thought of her out there living her life, on separate paths, and me having absolutely no part and no importance in that. So if I were to act on those thoughts then I've played a part in her life, I've authored the end of her life, so I've made myself of some significance in her life story (P3)*

Stalking-related rage was commonly experienced; deemed a characteristic feature of those who stalk due to the reaction to rejection and associated humiliation, channelled to regain a self-fulfilling sense of power (Douglas & Dutton, 2001). An underlying narcissistic vulnerability creates intense responses to ego threats, quickly evoking self-righteous actions to punish the perceived perpetrator, ultimately with the goal of restoring self-esteem (see Malmquist, 1996). According to Logan (2009), those less affected by their narcissistic features can gain the necessary redress through fantasy, restoring their validation and sense of power.

Participants all mentioned how they had not resorted to violence, however the majority shared experiences of knowingly and purposely causing distress towards the victims. Despite an awareness of wrongdoing, the deeper psychological need to restore self-worth and validation after injury was insurmountable for participants, as the below extract from P3 illustrates.

*I could see I was in the wrong, but there's part of me that'd say, hang on a minute I'm going through all this pain over her and she can just swat me away, like swatting an annoying fly (P3)*

Malmquist (1996) describes the justification of behaviours such as these in terms of striving for restoring self-esteem, their fundamental being, with the more pathological narcissist needing to externalise blame. Anger becomes the primary emotional response, given sadness for the vulnerable narcissist is internalised (Twenge & Campbell, 2003). The justified and self-righteous responses to narcissistic injury thus have a restorative function, being crucial in avoiding intolerable emotions, such as shame (Logan, 2009). Abandonment rage from narcissistic injury is believed to provoke attempts to devalue the target (Meloy & Gothard, 1995). With an already unstable sense of self, the person who stalks seeks self-worth from their intimate partner, and primitive defences become activated to protect the sense of self in the face of actual, or perceived, abandonment (Douglas & Dutton, 2001).

The psychological interpretation of the subordinate themes taken together is that stalking was functional for participants in attempting to satisfy their own need for validation by another. Fundamentally, the focus of stalking is not really about the

victim as a person, which may be presumed, but deeper psychological needs of the person stalking. This makes sense given the distress their stalking causes them. Five out of the seven participants talked about the current positive and supportive role models they had in their parent(s), most commonly their mother. No assumptions were made about this in respect of attachment styles given participants were not probed specifically about their childhood experiences of parents. Furthermore, because the repertory grid technique elicits a snapshot of element-construct correlations in the present. However, this finding could suggest participants' experienced one form of consistency from this caregiver and perhaps this supply of validation from a main caregiver is sought in, and expected of, partners.

The overarching superordinate theme narcissistic vulnerability conceptualises the need for validation from another. It captures how the apparent stalking motives which appear idiosyncratically understandable, are actually smokescreens for the deeper psychological motive and relational goal. The function of stalking is thus to restore validation, and associated self-worth, in order to relieve or prevent psychological distress. Narcissistic vulnerability leaves one unable to independently manage feelings of weakness and inadequacy, and to be self-reliant in achieving goals and maintaining self-standards in order to preserve self-esteem (Pistole, 1995). In this vein, *'Preoccupied attachment can be construed as a defensive strategy in which narcissistic vulnerability is managed through merger with the partner'* (Pistole, 1995: 120), *'to merge with an idealized other who bolsters feelings of worth'* (Pistole, 1995: 123). The current study's results provide support for the linked conceptualisations of narcissistic vulnerability, preoccupied attachment styles, and stalking. Figure 14 illustrates the nested conceptualisation of this. That is, the current study purports the view that at the core of stalking is narcissistic vulnerability and the preoccupied attachment style acts as the defensive strategy against further psychological attachment harm. Stalking behaviours themselves constitute the defensive threat response, seeking the relational goal acquisition of validation. Stalking can be considered to be the final attempt at self-worth restoration before admitting the loss and what that means for the individual.

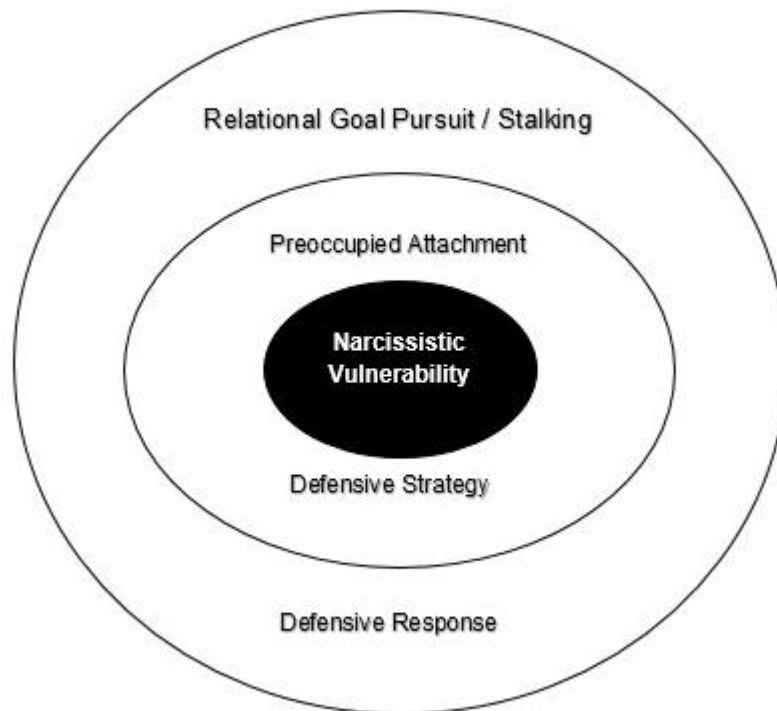


Figure 14. Nested conceptual diagram for stalking

### **Superordinate theme two: Deterrence**

Participants were unanimous in their experiences that nothing would have deterred them. They were also largely consistent in their views of what may have helped. There was also a rational acknowledgement that being stalked has a negative impact on the victim. Within this hierarchical theme, participant codes clustered around three main subordinate themes, which were, (a) *Blinkered view*, which essentially describes how legal sanctions and victim impact did nothing to deter their pursuits; (b) *Professional help*, which was deemed lacking; and (c) *Prison* providing the 'wake up call' and necessary hiatus, providing time for reflection on their stalking.



### ***Blinkered view.***

The experience of participants was unanimous in that nothing would have stopped them in their stalking pursuits. The below extract illustrates the strength of dedication to the goal pursuit.

*When I was stalking I was so dedicated to it. Nothing would stop me, it was my main focus (P2)*

This links to having fundamental relational goals, which supersede any other considerations. This hierarchy of need offers reasoning to the high violation rates of protective injunctions, which in turn casts doubt on their effectiveness in isolation (Mullen, Pathé & Purcell, 2009). The experience of stalking was introspective and consuming; a *blinkered view*. On the other side of the coin, it was clear that participants did not see stalking as rational on a calm, cognitive level, as P3 highlighted; *'Everybody could do without a stalker'*. Participants' own pursuits to address their needs were the only thing of importance, despite the consequences for themselves or others. The extract below from P2 illustrates the egocentric and rigid view held by participants during their stalking episodes.

*I didn't care about anyone else, I just cared about me. I didn't care how anyone else felt, I cared how I felt (P2)*

This is supported by the assertions of MacKenzie and James (2011), who highlighted that without psychological treatment intervention, the stalking drivers remain, against which legal sanctions have little, if any, noticeable impact as a deterrent.

In contrast to practitioner inferences (e.g., see MacKenzie et al., 2009), stalking perpetrators have been purported to have the same levels of empathy and sensitivity towards others as comparative non-stalking adults (Lewis et al., 2001). Participants in this study had an awareness of victim impact, albeit putting their own goal pursuits first, perhaps explained by the psychological pull of the narcissistic vulnerability. To describe those who stalk as lacking in insight and victim awareness may therefore be somewhat misleading. The participant experiences seemed more akin to having an indifference to their victim's fears and desires (terminology used by MacKenzie et al., 2009).

This blinkered view showed in considered defiance in the face of legal sanctions such as restraining orders. This was expressed by P6 as rage directed towards the judge, who would be seen as denying him his fundamental, psycho-emotional needs.

*I said to the judge kiss my ass man! When you release me today I'm going there (P6)*

Whilst the majority of the sample had no previous criminal record, the police warnings and arrests did not deter them. The stalking behaviours of each participant continued in every case. As the below extract highlights, there was a greater need in existence.

*I'd been arrested twice, had 3 warnings from the police but that didn't deter me, it didn't scare me off, so overwhelming was the need for her (P3)*

The stalking related thoughts and behaviours helped temporarily soothe the need for self-worth and address feelings of inadequacy, meaning no deterrent based on external management would be enough.

Given the strong underlying psycho-emotional drivers for achieving their relational goal of self-worth and validation, ceasing their pursuits was deemed impossible. A sense of helplessness due to this blinkered perspective was emerging in this context amongst the sample. The extract below explains how the pursuit would only stop when the person stalking wanted to stop and feels they can, although as P2 describes, this is not an easy position to attain alone.

*It's that realisation thing. You need someone to pop your bubble, well help you pop it because no-one can pop it for you. As much as people hold your hand you're still going to feel that nothing is going to help you. It's up to you to do it yourself (P2)*

Behaviours in isolation may have been deemed harmless, hence receiving consecutive warnings in many cases, which may have served to collude with the participants' views regarding the seriousness of their offending behaviours. Participants did not adhere to more formal restraining orders either, and despite a range of reasons, essentially the consequence of imprisonment seemed implausible.

*I didn't realise how serious a thing it was to be honest. I didn't think I would go to prison for breaking it (P7)*

This is in line with assertions by Purcell and McEwan (2018) that often, those who stalk do not see their behaviours as warranting criminal sanction. It supports the urgency for the new Stalking Protection Act (2019) and associated Orders for protecting the victims, to become embedded and quickly and consistently applied. It also shows the need to further improve societal views on stalking, and the power of the legislation available to protect victims and address stalking behaviours proportionately.

This blinkered view may not be attributable to a universally rigid and constricted thinking style amongst those who stalk, as previously suggested by MacKenzie et al. (2009). Repertory grid analyses for the whole sample showed only two participants had constricted (rigid) thinking styles (as discussed in detail later), which suggests the rigidity of thought may be contextual to stalking, and associated predisposing and precipitating factors. If this is the case, it provides further support for the relational goal pursuit theory (Cupach & Spitzberg, 2000), and as such skills based training on improving flexible thinking in general per se may not be beneficial in addressing stalking behaviours.

### ***Professional support.***

A theme was determined in relation to deterrence, which captured the sense that professionals could have done more to help participants with the problems that were contributing to their offending. The extract below illustrates the experiences of one participant in regards to accessed clinical help.

*I tried to go counselling in the past and every time I went to see a psychiatric nurse they'd always say they'd come back to me and I used to get brushed off every time saying we'll close the case (P5)*

Analysis suggested that participants had been referred to access help for mental health difficulties related to the stalking, perhaps due to the assumed causal link by professionals (see systematic review in chapter 2). What was clear was that the service provision experienced and participant expectations of this vastly differed. The sense from analytical codes across the sample also referred to the need for

professional support. As illustrated in the quote from P1, those that did access support felt let down; *'I needed professional support and it fell short.'*

Participants wanted to be heard, understood and empathised with, beyond this they were generally unable to articulate what the specific underlying psychological deficits were that needed addressing: *'Get help, open up to people, and get support from a psychotherapist'* (P4). Fundamentally, participants referred to how beneficial opening up to others about their experiences could have been. The benefits were seen as two-fold: for psychosocial support, and to be able to verbalise their inner driving thoughts. The below extract from P3 describes the turmoil experienced with stalking related thinking.

*Get it out there because if it's left up here in your head you can't make sense of it, it's a nightmare. Talking about it and hearing yourself speak, turning those thoughts into words rationalises it... get it all out there, talk to people and receive their feedback (P3)*

The extract tells of how P3 knew his thoughts were irrational and how sharing them with others may have helped him. Many participants referred to the need for meaningful occupation in the sense of keeping themselves busy and their minds active. They identified that being occupied enabled a temporary distraction from stalking-related thinking. In sharing these experiences participants made associations between inoccupation and the influx of thoughts. Subsequently that evoked strong emotions which were driving the stalking behaviours. P5 described this experience for him, capturing this association.

*I'd always think about her and some days when I had something to do, that I was concentrating on, I was alright. But when I'm bored that's when it would escalate in my head, that I'd want to contact her (P5)*

This consuming introspective state was recurrent amongst participants and many shared experiences that linked distraction to temporary relief from escalating intrusive thoughts. With P5, the narrative around the relentless thoughts suggested periods of comparative calm, and escalation leading to further stalking contact. This may mean that the pull to make contact for assumed fundamental validation purposes became stronger during periods of inaction. If being meaningfully occupied has a temporary relief effect, allowing the person stalking to become less consumed they may be able to reap the rewards of meaningful employment, and

community and family ties. Maruna and Mann (2019) highlight these as effective desistance factors based on current empirical evidence, in addition to associated self-efficacy and a sense of self-worth. The ability to become less consumed by the stalking pursuit by occupation and distraction had only temporarily effect. This suggested more fundamental needs were active, thus these attempts at meaningful occupation and engagement with the community may only be effective post therapeutic treatment. In essence, without addressing the underlying, fundamentally strong narcissistic vulnerability, non-stalking related occupation, regardless of meaningfulness, may not be as rewarding, and not beneficial for supporting desistance.

This subordinate theme characterised participants' needs for interpersonal professional support. Being able to share personal thoughts and emotions, and to engage in meaningful occupation was deemed of value. Addressing stalking related emotions and thinking patterns are deemed key aspects in best practice guidance on stalking treatment according to Purcell & McEwan, 2018. Additionally, Mullen et al. (2009) identified rumination as underpinning stalking episodes that persist, characteristic of a preoccupation with the victim and underpinned by significant emotional arousal, recognising their contribution. This study provides support for these stalking related support needs. An accumulated hypothesis is that the fundamental need for continued validation from another, regardless of attempts at reconciliation or revenge, is to avoid intolerable psycho-emotive responses to loss. This threat to the narcissistically vulnerable person evokes intense emotions, as described throughout this analysis and discussion section. The observed emotional dysregulation is deemed a contributor to stalking, independent of its association with either attachment or personality disorder (Purcell & McEwan, 2018). This research study supports this, and provides a deeper understanding of why this may be the central feature, and why providing purely emotional regulation skills may not be enough to address such a psychologically fundamental deficit of narcissistic vulnerability. Given these deeper level processes, building a collaborative and compassion-based therapeutic relationship seems a plausible suggestion to begin treatment approaches with those who stalk. This study leads to the suggestion that the VARGT could be a useful vehicle for this and that third wave interventions may assist in carefully deconstructing the stalking relationships with the victims which are based on their own narcissistic vulnerability.

### ***Prison – ‘A wakeup call’.***

The impact of a prison sentence acted as a *wakeup call* for most participants. For many, this was their first prison sentence, and those most impacted upon had received the lengthier sentences. A prison term was experienced as functionally beneficial as it provided an interruption and a time for reflection, as illustrated by the extract below.

*When I came to prison it was a big wakeup call. It was like someone had thrown cold water over my face and gave me a backhand. It really hit home, I realised what I'd done and before that I hadn't really thought about it (P2)*

Prison, for most, was experienced as an external restriction required to break the relentless cycle, an interjection that provided them some respite from their own pursuits. With their internal self-management skills lacking given the fundamental psychological goals creating a relentless insatiable need, imprisonment was experienced as a positive thing. The following extract shows the reluctance to accept prison as punishment by the participant and his parents, yet it was the very thing that put a meaningful roadblock in his way to stalking, both physically and psychologically.

*This has done me good prison, it really has. We were striving to keep me out of prison but in actual fact I think it's what I needed (P3)*

Whilst this reflected the experiences of the majority of participants, one was unable to take a reflective perspective on his pattern of behaviours. He was heavily consumed by the hope of reconciliation, describing his ex-partner and victim as his *everything*. The sentences he gained from consistent breaches were short, and whilst negatively impacting on his ability to maintain consistent accommodation and employment, which increased his emotional distress at his ever deteriorating life circumstances, they failed to have the same reflective impact. The short sentences did not deter reoffending and did not provide a lengthy enough period for processing and reflecting upon the stalking behaviours. It did not give adequate time for him and professionals to plan for his resettlement without the victim in his life, nor provide the victim a substantial period of respite herself. As the extract below highlights, the short sentence, perhaps due to a failure to view the offending as pattern-based, did not assist him in accepting the damaging and criminal behaviours he had been engaging in. P6 believed the judge to be wrongful in his decisions.

*Because I knocked the door I've come back for 22 weeks, just to ask for my dad's number... 22 weeks, you're mental you are! (P6)*

In summarising this superordinate theme, which has connectedness with the first, the experiences of not being able to stop stalking were pivotal. Participants were unanimous that legal sanctions did not provide a deterrent, reasonable prison sentences provided reflective space, and that they had a need for professional support, not just punishment. Research findings have questioned the effectiveness of injunction orders (Benitez et al., 2010), and regardless do not protect victims longer term in respect of addressing stalking behaviours through necessary rehabilitative engagement and treatment intervention. Despite unacceptably high offending and reoffending rates, showing that legal sanctions alone are ineffective, research evidence around treatment options remain lacking (Purcell & McEwan, 2018).

### **Superordinate theme three: Difficulty accepting the label.**

Participants unanimously held a negative view of stalkers and interestingly always referred to them as male. The label itself provoked visibly emotive responses and verbalisations such as, *'it's a vile word'* (P4). The behavioural connotations related to the label 'stalker' were heavily stereotyped, thus initially difficult to align their own offending behaviours with. They also viewed the stalker as someone who was seriously mentally ill. This theme incorporates clustered experiences of the sample around (a) the *Stalker stereotype*; (b) needing to distance themselves from this label (*Distancing*); and (c) consequential *Self-perception shift*.

### ***Stalker stereotype.***

Participants were able to convey their views regarding what constituted a stalker with ease. The codes clustered around the word and label itself, the assumed behavioural indicators, and underlying psychological deficits of those considered stalkers. In terms of the behaviours, participants largely identified following and surveillance as the characteristic features of stalking, as illustrated by this extract from P5.

*A stalker in my head is somebody who'd wait for someone, know their routine because they've followed them around (P5)*

Participants were also fairly consistent in their personality descriptions of stalkers when narrating their rating placements of the *stalker* element on the visually adapted grids. The descriptions by P1 infer those who stalk are inherently evil and mentally unwell.

*Stalker ... evil, sick, twisted. Something wrong in his head. He's not a full picnic, there's something wrong (P1)*

With the commonly held assumptions amongst participants about stalker characteristics and psychopathology, it was clear to see why they could, and would, view themselves as very different. There were misconceptions particularly around mental illness given the onlooker interpretations of stalker behaviours being irrational and self-defeating quests. This misconception is present in the literature for stalking and is challenged in the systematic review (see chapter 2), as well as by Nijdam-Jones et al. (2018) in their review of psychopathology amongst those who stalk.

In describing the stalker characteristics when rating across construct continuums, the participants began projecting from their own personal construct systems, as expected given this is how one interprets new elements, laying assumptions down, which reflected their own internal drivers. The extract from P4 below illustrates this well, given his own stalking behaviours were intentionally to force the victim to stay in a relationship with him by sending fraudulent communication from a respected intermediary.

*The one who's preying someone has a deep-seated attitudinal problem to try to control and coerce. It's controlling an environment (P4)*

During analysis, it was a researcher reflection that when participants had been rating the *stalker* element on the construct continuums, they were also subconsciously describing aspects of their own stalking behaviours when rating *self-past*, for example *trying to force an outcome*. This was because the ratings of such, had shifted from the initial elicited constructs where *stalker* was being discussed, for example as *evil*.



In physically aligning the *stalker* and *self-past* elements on the VARGT grid and then reviewing the overall placements, participants began to expose shared constructs between the two, indicating their reflections on the internal experiences of stalking. This was also the case for supplied constructs. The extract below provides an example of how participants would generally talk through their placement of *stalker* along supplied constructs and spontaneously add a projected assumption. These added reflections provided an insight into participants' interpretations of the *stalker*, drawing from their own experiences.

*A stalker is living in a fantasy world because he's obviously chasing something that's not real (P5)*

Many of the constructs assigned to the *stalker* element were recurring amongst participants and likely reflect the general public perceptions. Such character assumptions allowed participants to generally distance their offending behaviours from the behaviours of the *stalker*, deemed undesirable. Holding onto stereotypes perhaps allowed the participants to distance their own offending from the label of stalking, making initial dialogue around stalking easier, without triggering defensive responding. Having the *stalker* element in the VARGT separate from the self-concepts was important for this process. This set the engagement experience tone for later participant-led exploration beyond distancing and gradual movement towards accepting similar behaviours and underlying problematic constructs shared with the *stalker* (discussed later in this superordinate theme, and further described in chapter 5). This process appears akin to that described by Miller and Rollnick (1991), described as *rolling with resistance*, pivotal within motivational interviewing.

### ***Distancing.***

The participants in this study all initially distanced their own offending from their perception of a stalker, doing so to varying degrees. This was perhaps reflective of their initial position in terms of denial, minimisation, or acceptance of their stalking offending, manifesting due to varying needs to protect their sense of self. *Distancing* was a term identified to collectively capture common verbalisations such as '*There's a difference between my offence and a stalker*' (P7). Given the connotations of what a stalker is according to the participants, this distancing seems unsurprising, although without this context this could sound like outright denial. This level of distancing, or denial, made sense as a psychological defence mechanism,

particularly useful for someone who may have narcissistic vulnerability, providing free-reign to portray oneself positively, thus reducing negative emotions that may be hidden in respect of shame and cognitive dissonance (see Ware, Blagden & Harper, 2018).

In terms of behavioural manifestations, it was easy for participants to distance their behaviours from stalking, with participants feeling marginally more comfortable determining their offending as harassment. The extract below from P5 demonstrates the tendency to provide a contrast in behaviours between theirs and that of a stalker.

*The extent of my messages classed as a stalking. I didn't follow her home or anything like that. I have never done that. I'd only gone to see her that once. I don't think it's stalking but it's definitely harassment (P5)*

Other means to distance included the perceived impact on their victim and the content of the contacts. For example, participants perceived that digitally-assisted (online) contact could be seen as non-threatening, even where restraining orders were in place. There was also a misunderstood notion that to cause distress to another by stalking or harassing, the issuance of threats needed to be proven, which it is not. This is illustrated in the extract below.

*They weren't offensive in any way. There were no references to violence or threats (P4)*

For the majority of participants, uncomfortable ambivalence was palpable as they attempted to focus on their intentions rather than the actual pattern of behaviours, breaches of legal sanctions, and victim impact.

*A conviction of stalking... I really don't think that's what I should have got charged for, but I know I'm wrong. I personally don't think I should be in prison now. It was only messages being nice (P5)*

The above extract shows the ambivalence experienced. P5 acknowledged the conviction followed by mild dispute and justification. Addressing these psychological barriers of *ambivalence* could be a useful stage of professional engagement (see Miller & Rollnick, 1991), with the understanding that denial can act as a defence mechanism (Ware et al., 2018). A shared understanding of what constitutes stalking

in UK legislation and myth-busting may also prove beneficial. Given the potential role of minimising behaviours in keeping someone psychologically safe (see Ware et al., 2018), particularly relevant for those with narcissistic vulnerability, the ability of the VARGT to gently probe and explore stalking was useful. Furthermore, it did so without avoiding underlying problematic behaviours or the word stalking, appearing to show therapeutic potential (see chapter 5). The ability for participants to gradually self-identify problems in functioning leading to their convictions for stalking is beneficial for offender rehabilitation (see Ware et al., 2018). This is especially important given the rare and short engagement opportunities with those convicted of stalking, or related offences, in custody, and the need to build a therapeutic alliance with those who may experience shame and guilt (see Clark & Harding, 2012).

The label stalker, and associated perceptions, unsurprisingly led to uncomfortable cognitive dissonance amongst participants. Given participants had aligned their *self-past* with the *stalker* elements themselves, distancing based on the shared constructs became difficult. The majority of participants were unable to acknowledge their stalking behaviours, and related characteristics until they had aligned their stalking offending (*self-past*) with the *stalker*, and distanced the *self-now* from those characteristics, using the VARGT. The extract below is illustrative of initial dissonance-based responses of participants when reflecting on the rating patterns of the *stalker* in alignment with *self-past*.

*I'm putting the stalker the same as myself past, but then I'm in denial about being a stalker so ahh... (P1)*

The biggest barrier appeared to be with the label of stalker rather than the eventual ability to reflect upon the unhealthy construct manifestations at the time of their own stalking offending. The label and the stereotypes associated with stalking made it easy for participants to distance themselves from it, which acts as a psychological defence against shame, required by individuals with narcissistic vulnerability. The need to distance from the label of P5 shows the disdain for the word.

*It's that word 'stalker', I hate it... I know that's what I'm labelled as now but I don't think what I did classes as stalker (P5)*

This research study supports the notion that educating people who stalk regarding legislation and indeed the pattern-based impact is crucial (Purcell & McEwan,

2018). If for no deterrent impact, it provides a level of shared understanding and language from which to anchor assessment, treatment intervention, and risk management plans.

This need to distance suggests that as a society, but especially for practitioners, compassion for the drivers of, and not the behaviours themselves, may pay dividends in helping prevent or bring pursuits to an end earlier on with the right treatment intervention. For example, if stalking becomes seen as criminal (as opposed to unfathomable and committed only by those with mental illness), with clear legislation and societal awareness, then it may evoke less shame-based defensive reactions. Moreover, more chance of people perpetrating stalking accepting or requesting help with their problem behaviours and underlying thoughts and emotions. Indeed, Purcell and McEwan (2018) suggested practitioners seek to understand the stalking behaviour as a response to life circumstances, and assist people in conceptualising their behaviours as ineffective tactics to achieve their goals. This research study provides sound evidence that the VARGT provides a replicable vehicle for this and helps develop a motivation to change, with tangible values-based goals (see chapter 5).

### ***Self-perception shift.***

This aspect was striking amongst the sample. Initially nobody could identify with being a stalker, yet through the guided discovery processes of the VARGT and eyeball analysis, participants were able to diffuse the overwhelming negative power of the label stalker. They did this on reflection by having aligned *self-past* with *stalker* characteristics themselves. The extract below captures this cognitive dissonance.

*I don't want to label myself as a stalker, and I don't like that I've got the same traits as one (P5)*

Qualitatively, all participants aligned their *self-past* closely with the *stalker* element, and repertory grid bivariate statistical analysis supported this, showing that the concept of *self-past* was most correlated to the *stalker* element in four of the seven participants (correlations ranged from 0.77 – 0.90). This was stark and pivotal in producing self-guided insight and the beginnings of acceptance on a more meaningful level, beneficial for therapeutic gain (see chapter 5). Participants

experienced shifts in self-perception and level of acceptance regarding their stalking offending by focusing on the behaviours and mindset assumptions, as opposed to needing to accept the label. The following quote from P5 below captures the essence of the narratives from the sample when reviewing placement ratings of elements and noticing their qualitative alignment between *stalker* and *self-past*, 'A stalker is a stalker because he's obsessed... maybe I do get obsessed'. Participant-led and psychologically safe deconstructing of defence mechanisms using the VARGT was apparent.

This universal pattern of alignment was difficult to initially accept and made more comfortable by viewing the patterns on their grids for *self-now* and *self-future* placements, which were often on the polar end of the construct continuums to *self-past* and *stalker*. This allowed them to reflect more easily on past behaviours, whilst more comfortably sitting in the *self-now* context. The VARGT proved useful in protecting aspects of the current sense of self. Suggesting further collaborative engagement using compassion-based treatment principles in therapeutic intervention could prove fruitful. Compassion Focused Therapy (CFT) is a system of psychotherapy developed by Paul Gilbert (2009), appropriate for people who have high levels of shame and self-criticism and who have difficulty in feeling warmth toward, and being kind to, themselves or others. This overall ethos, in light of the experiences of participants seems fitting.

The guided reflections evoked from the VARGT were significant in demonstrating self-perception shifts. When reviewing the completed grids, participants began to put their past behaviours in context of being contradictory to their superficial goal of the relationship attainment. They made comparisons with others and began to reflect independently on their goal pursuits and where the behaviours of the *self-past* had led them. For example, the extract below shows P3 beginning to respect the wishes and rights of the victim as opposed to putting his own needs first.

*She's got every right to fall in love with somebody. What makes me more entitled to her than this guy. I mean what have I ever put into Kate's life but harassment. This guy has earned Kate's love. There's a reason she kisses him but she gives me funny looks (P3)*

The comparisons made between the self-concepts (*self-past*, *-now*, and *-ideal*) were experienced as motivating, and allowed a safe shift away from *self-past* and become more reflective upon the associated offending behaviours, whilst being able to safely discuss the *self-now* and *self-ideal* in much more positive terms. Comparing behaviours and personal values to those of positive and negative others also helped to shape their views on how they wanted to behave in interpersonal relationships.

The Self-Identity Plot (SIP: Figure 15) illustrates the points highlighted within this subordinate theme, and is highly representative of the sample. Derived from the VARGT analysis, the SIP shows how P2 was viewing himself in relation to others, and how he understands significant others contextual to concepts of *self-now*, and *self-ideal*, within the topic of relationships and stalking.

**Self-Identity Plot for P2**  
Indifferent Area Limits = 0.80; 1.20.

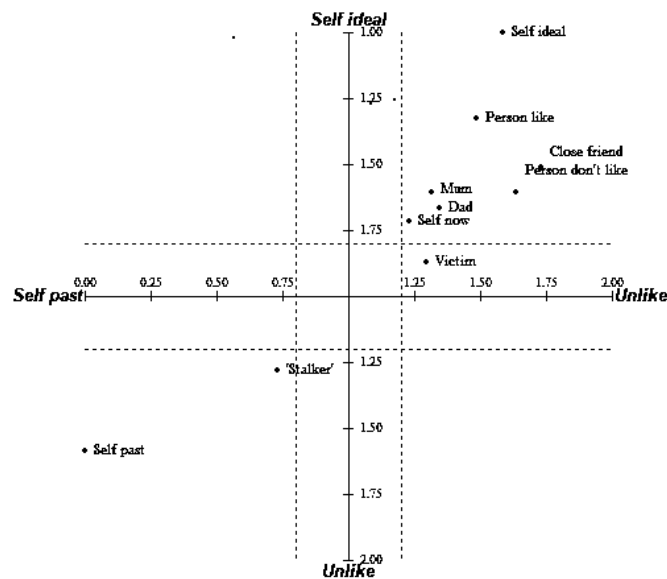


Figure 15. Self-Identity Plot (SIP) for P2

In terms of self-perception and self-perception shifts, this SIP statistically and visually supports the qualitative analysis of alignment of the *self-past* with the

*stalker*, which was an important feature for all the participants. It also shows the contextual negativity of these two elements (i.e., aligned with *self-past* and unlike *self-ideal*), compared to the plotting of all other elements. This illustrates the positive correlations of self-ideal and all remaining elements, albeit to varying degrees (e.g., *person like* being closest to the *self-ideal*). Importantly, it shows how *self-now* is construed as transitioned positively away from the concept of *self-past*, and closer to *self-ideal* on the three self concepts trajectory. Indeed, attending to the distance between the self-now and self-ideal concepts has been the focus in some repertory grid studies to measure change (Leach et al., 2001). That is, any therapeutic intervention which decreases that distance is deemed positive (see Winter, 2003). The *self-ideal* element allowed participants to inadvertently make explicit their own values-based goals in terms of personal characteristics in the context of relationships. The constructs dominating the concept of the *self-ideal*, and any idealised others, such as those plotted close by, provide meaningful goals in therapy (supporting similar arguments asserted by Winter, 2003). Correlated constructs with these idealised elements make clear the expectations. Perceiving similarities with, and an identified closeness on statistical outputs between, self-elements and idealised others is seen as positive (Winter, 2003). The SIP outputs for participants showed the conceptual transitions made from *self-past* to *self-now*, but also illustrated an interspace to transition through in order to align with the *self-ideal*. Researcher reflective notes postulated potential high expectations of oneself in line with the underlying vulnerable narcissism, a realist view of current circumstances, and/or a manifestations of an underlying insecure attachment style, showing others as closer to the self-ideal concept than the participant now. It was further reported that despite those who stalk having negative self-views, only the stalking-related self-concept (*self-past*) was viewed negatively, as plotted in the negatively viewed quadrants of the SIP and PCA diagrammatic outputs.

In summary of this third superordinate theme, the research demonstrated the overwhelming emotional experience that leads to self-destructive and victim-damaging stalking behaviours that appear to contradict the verbalised motivations of those who stalk. The emotional experience is distressing and takes over any rational thinking around achieving their fundamental goals as they hang on to an existing idea. MacKenzie et al. (2009) suggest that the verbalised motivations of those who stalk may alter over time, although often reflect attempts by the person stalking to rationalise their behaviour to others on a superficial level with regards to

what it is they are attempting to achieve. On a deeper level, this research suggested that the goal being pursued would be protected for fear of exposing a weakness, something not easy to do for the vulnerable narcissist. To remain mindful of the initiating motivation then will provide the most accurate objective hypothesis as to the function of stalking (MacKenzie et al., 2009) upon which engagement, assessment, treatment and management planning can be developed. Appreciating this need in a compassion focussed way may allow those who stalk to perhaps be more open to consider prosocial alternative behaviours to satisfy their needs and accept treatment intervention support.

The self-perpetuating stalker stereotypes seemed to have an impact on the participant's ability to see themselves as having committed stalking offences or labelling themselves a stalker. Many were able to identify similarities between their *self-past* and *stalker*. This could suggest that the impact of the stereotypical stalker portrayed in the media and in entertainment is having an adverse effect on society being able to identify exactly what stalking is. This may hinder CPS, police, and the victim themselves from identifying stalking, as well as friends and family, and the perpetrator themselves from spotting and acknowledging stalking behaviours. Societal education and awareness of the general principles of what constitutes stalking needs attention. This is not to stigmatise and vilify those committing stalking offences, but to be able to intervene and support those involved sooner. The label was a barrier to acceptance of the offending behaviours and delving into their offence pathways, the VARGT allowed for this barrier to be lifted and acted as a vehicle for participants in varying degrees to disclose and reflect.

### **Analysis of repertory grids**

The use of repertory grid analysis complemented IPA findings in contextualising the lived experiences within their related social worldviews. Repertory grid analysis outputs using Idiogrid (Grice, 2002) were reviewed pertaining to the IPA themes and overall research aims, focussing on aspects of confirmatory or contradictory information from a statistical perspective. The subsequent analytical discussions are framed loosely around the structure of superordinate themes of (a) Narcissistic vulnerability, which will include relevant discussions around the nested concepts of



attachment style and relational goal pursuit; (b) Deterrence, in the respect of constricted thinking patterns and being *blinkered*; and (c) Self-perception shifts.

### **Narcissistic vulnerability**

The idiosyncratic construct labels and principal components analyses added to the richness of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. A qualitative review of superordinate constructs drawn from the construct elicitation auditing process (see Bell, 2005), and relating to the participants' current psychological framework of interpretation applied to the concept of relationships, indicated continued insecure attachment styles (e.g., negative self-view and positive view of others). Analysis of construing (Principal Components Analysis [PCA] and Bivariate statistical analysis: Grice, 2002) across participants showed a unanimous negative view of *self-past* whilst offending, with the construct correlating most commonly being low self-worth. In comparison, only two participants construed the *self-now* in negative terms. Indeed, low self-worth strongly correlated with *self-past* across the sample (ranging from 0.58 to 0.95, with a mean average of 0.78). This was a supplied construct and the findings support the conclusions discussed in the systematic review (chapter 2) about stalking perpetrators having a negative self-view, and that this has links with insecure attachment styles. That is, preoccupied stalkers have negative self-views (MacKenzie et al., 2008), with stalking attributable to attempts to restore self-worth (aligning with goal linking theory; Spitzberg & Cupach, 2003).

Whilst this finding was clear for *self-past*, low self-worth (or associated features) only featured in the PCAs for half the sample (see Table 8 showing principal components and variance across the sample). This suggests that their current construing of *self-now* and *self-ideal*, alongside significant others in the context of relationships, was not dominated by judging self-worth. This could suggest it is a construct solely descriptive of *self-past*, and that they seek others with good levels of self-worth from which to gain validation. Another supplied construct, *Unconnected to others (or loner, isolated)*, featured in exactly the same ways with regards to *self-past* presence, compared to an absence in current interpretative influences perceiving others in the context of personal and relationship qualities.

Within Principal Components Analyses, a group repertory grid hierarchical cluster analysis, known as *Slater Analysis*, was undertaken, which is an analysis function within the Idiogrid software. This particular analysis illustrates the principal components' (which are clusters of core constructs) explanatory power, based on the amount of variance accounted for (Fransella, Bell & Banister, 2004). The core constructs elicited constitute those which '*govern the individual's maintenance processes and which are central to his or her identity*' (Winter, 1992: 11). Table 8 presents the findings, which illuminate the principal components of the participants' personal construct systems in respect of interpersonal and relationship qualities. Most participants' personal construct systems could be largely accounted for by two principal components (>80%), and most reflected a sceptical, negative and insecure mindset in relation to others. Participants tended to construe qualities for interpersonal relationships via self-concepts and significant others through continuums denoting such constructs as *Selfish-Caring*, which featured in four out of seven PCAs overall, *Untrustworthy-Trustworthy* and *Can't trust own judgement-Trusts own judgement*. These findings support the notion of those who stalk having insecure attachment styles.

P no.	Principal component no.	% of variance explained	Cumulative % of variance explained	Constructs most heavily loaded onto that factor
P1	1	59.79	59.79	<i>Quiet/collected-Open; Foolish-Smart</i>
	2	21.84	81.64	<i>Can't trust own judgement-Trusts own judgement Low self-worth-Feels good about self</i>
P2	1	58.16	58.16	<i>Stupid-Intelligent; Shy-Confident; Loner-Social</i>
	2	25.25	83.41	<i>Caring-Selfish; Trustworthy-Untrustworthy</i>
P3	1	87.70	87.70	<i>Unconnected to others-Connected to others; Unable to accept wrongdoing-Able to accept wrongdoing; Self-centred/ruthless-Caring; Brings others down-Encourages others; Cruel-Kind</i>
P4	1	82.15	82.15	<i>Hostile-Loving; Isolated by choice-Connected to others; Deviant-Compliant/harmonious; Ad hoc/chaotic-Reliable; Feels entitled-Humble/humility</i>
P5	1	42.37	42.37	<i>Tells lie-Honest; Needs to have power over others-Doesn't need to have power over others; Selfish-Selfless</i>
	2	39.51	81.87	<i>Low self-worth-Feel good about self; Obsession for truth-It is what it is attitude; Worrier-Careless</i>
P6	1	41.71	41.71	<i>Hardworking-Laziness; Exciting energy-No interest</i>
	2	32.75	74.45	<i>Low self-worth-Feel good about self; Selfish-Supporting</i>
P7	3	14.01	88.47	Unable to determine due to small %
	1	63.35	63.85	<i>Unpredictable-Focussed/Emotional control</i>
	2	17.80	81.65	<i>Decent/Being there-Less time for others; Bubbly/Good laugh - Miserable</i>

Table 8. Participants' Principal components accounting for 80% or more of the variance within repertory grids

### **Blinkered view and Deterrence**

The repertory grid PCA shows the relationships between elements and constructs (see Blagden, Winder, Gregson & Thorne, 2012), showing the amount of variance in the overall construing (Jankowicz, 2004). *'Each component is a statistical invention'*, representing the principal of an individual's personal construct system (Jankowicz, 2004: 129). Where there is a high amount of variance apportioned to the first component, the individual is suggested to be tightly construing, which indicates a constricted organisation of constructs in their personal construct system (Winter, 2003). A reliance on tight construing leads to overly rigid thinking. As a consequence, a person's predictions about the world become unvarying and rigid (Winter, 1992), making them less open to cognitive change as opposed to those with systems more loosely constructed (Mason, 2008).

The Principal Components Analysis (PCA) for P4 (see Figure 16) shows a rigid way of construing, diagrammatically shown with the closeness of the theoretical construct continuum axes. The participant had rated elements along the construct continuums in polarised terms, i.e., using extremes ends of the poles in construing them. All of the components of how he construes relationships, his self-concepts, others, and stalkers can be accounted for by one principal component (see Table 8). Such constricted thinking styles were not generally found amongst the sample, suggesting they are more flexible in thought and open to cognitive change. Only two participants (P3 and P4) demonstrated constricted thinking styles (see Table 8), yet both were experienced interpersonally as being insightful and reflective. They differed greatly in age, psychopathology (P3 having ASD thus assumed to display a constricted thinking tendency), and relationship to victim, although not in overall methods of surveillance and covert presence. P4 verbalised shame-laden experiences, and the PCA illustrated tight constriction. Tight construing has been conceptualised to protect the self from anxiety provoked for some by reviewing one's own core constructs (see Winter, 2003). This constricted PCA pattern may be more reflective of his emotional experiences at the time of engagement as opposed to a generic rigid thinking style, although this is pure supposition. The majority of the sample however showed healthy flexibility in their construct systems, perhaps further suggesting that their blinkered views and rigidity of thought during stalking is contextual only to that and driven by a more fundamental psycho-emotional factor, as opposed to a cognitive-based skill deficit.

**PCA (varimax) for P4**  
 Axis Range: -1.34 to 1.34

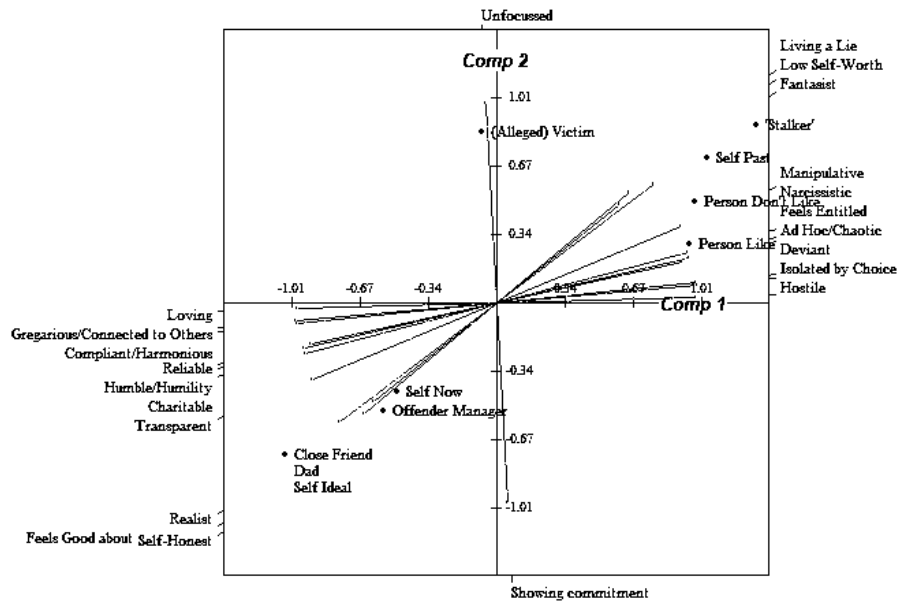


Figure 16. Principal Components Analysis for P4

Given all participants were fully engaged in the VARGT, it is concluded that construing in such a constricted way was indicative of rigid thinking pathology when stalking, which makes sense if they are psycho-emotionally driven, but possessing more flexible construing ability generally. Figure 17 shows the PCA for P5, representing a healthier personal construct system. It shows the participant considered the elements and construct continuums in more flexible terms and elements being rated perhaps independent of each other in more thoughtful ways. This resulted in greater discriminatory power of constructs being evidenced. It is suggested that this way of construing shows a healthier personal construct system, given the increased potential for developing newer insights due to this flexibility of consideration (see Dorrough, Grice & Parker, 2007). The majority of the sample were construing in this way, which challenges the suggestion that people who stalk are rigid in their thinking as a blanket assertion (e.g., MacKenzie et al., 2009). Instead, these additional findings suggest that despite the experiential blinkered views when stalking due to active nested psycho-emotional drivers (see Figure 14), they have otherwise healthy and flexible construal systems. This disputes therefore the

associated generic need to teach cognitive flexibility with those who perpetrate stalking. Post-stalking their ability returns, and during stalking episodes, this aim would be futile given the relational goal pursuits underlying the behaviours.

**PCA (varimax) for P5**  
 Axis Range: -1.34 to 1.34

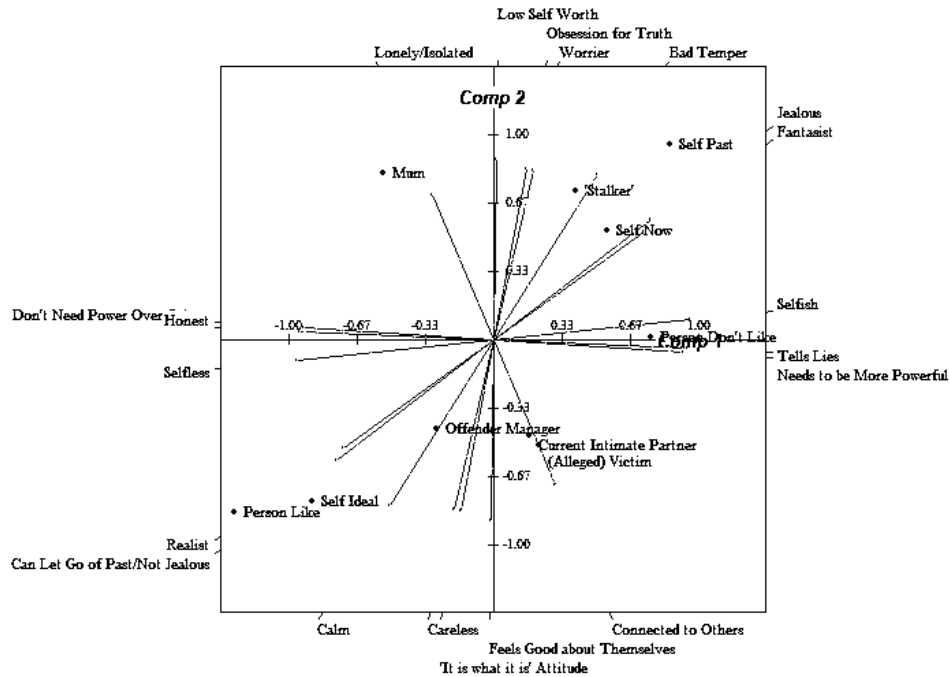


Figure 17. Principal Components Analysis for P5

Both PCAs presented show the alignment visually between the *stalker* and *self – past*, as seen with the majority of the participants, placing both in the negative quadrants of the grid. This could indicate insight with reflection in terms of offending behaviour aspects, a psychologically purposeful need to distance *self-now* and *self-ideal* from *self-past* in construing elements, or honest ratings of elements leading to this alignment. The latter is favoured when reviewing the IPA transcripts during participant eyeball analysis, their realisations of this alignment, and subsequent discomfort. This was further supported by the researcher reflexivity journal, and on the understanding of the difficulty for participants to have influenced the grids with socially desirable responding.

On an individual level, the PCAs, alongside the eyeball analysis processes, provided a wealth of confirmatory clinical information from statistical analysis. The PCA for P4 and associated element-construct correlation analysis shows that the *stalker* is characterised as a fantasist, manipulative, narcissistic, living a lie, and having low self-worth. This profile seems to fit with his functioning during the stalking episode. Furthermore, P4 has only one construct composing the second principal component of *Unfocussed—Showing commitment*. Only one element is firmly aligned (see Figure 16), which is the (*alleged*) *victim*. For P4, the victim was construed negatively, but essentially because he viewed her as lacking commitment to the marriage and their shared children, and leaving him. The PCA visual output provides pertinent information for clinical consideration, but would be useful to further discuss with the participant or client, to access difficult to articulate reasons for commencing stalking, based on the participant's own constructions of the grid.

### **Self-perception shifts**

The repertory grid analyses showed that five of the seven participants construed their self-now concepts positively, whilst construing self-past negatively. Even with their imprisonment, participants could see themselves as better off and better people than when they were stalking offending. The diagrammatical representations of analyses in Figures 15, 16 and 17 demonstrate the alignment of *self-past* and *stalker*, the distance from *self-past* to *self-now* (negative to positive quadrants), and a further transition (distance) to make to attain the *self-ideal* concept. Self-ideal, and indeed positive others deemed role models correlated constructs gave important information about the values the participants aspired to, which would change their previous negative self-views.

Bandura (1994) asserts that individuals seek proficient role models possessing the qualities and competencies one aspires to. These role models provide a tangibly conceptual social standard to work towards and covet. The closer they are personally, the more tangible the self-expectations as we learn the minutia, which can provide an added layer of self-efficacy (see Bandura, 1994). Whilst *self-ideal* construct correlations were available, which could be utilised in therapeutic sessions to advance this notion of making positive change, having an aligned significant other would be more powerful. Interestingly, where such elements were highly correlated, they tended to be between *self-ideal* and *mum* (0.79 and 0.84). This finding led to

researcher reflections around the characteristics identified in *mum* that participants benefitted from and admired, which tended to be related to being caring, supportive and validating. P4 aligned his self-ideal most closely with *dad* and *close friend* (see Figure 16), which on closer inspection of related constructs would provide valuable goal-oriented treatment aims for therapeutic engagement.

Finally, in relation to how practitioners can best respond to the needs of those who stalk, the statistical analyses derived from repertory grids provided additional victim-related information. To summarise, the PCAs showed that five of the seven participants construed their victims mildly negatively at the time of the data collection. However, perhaps of more concern, two participants construed their victims exceptionally positively. For example, P3 showed a *self-ideal* and *victim* correlation of 0.92, therefore highlighting his continued polarised adoration for her. Despite understanding that a relationship with the victim would never be attained, and they had never previously been in a relationship, P3 thought of her in very favourable terms, which could perpetuate his desires. P6 still hoped to reconcile with his previous partner despite her wishes and the formal interventions in place, and such positive associations in terms of relationship aspirations could increase the pull. These two participants were the only ones reporting diagnosis for autistic spectrum disorders (ASD); one with ADHD, and the other with High Functioning Autism. It is noted previously that such individuals have been deemed to pursue victims for longer periods (McEwan & Strand, 2013), although those conclusions were contextual to stranger or acquaintance stalkers as opposed to ex-partners, which is the case for P6. Whilst P3 was asserting his desire to access help to desist future stalking of the same victim, P6 was still at the pre-contemplation stage, which may be impacting on his positive view of the victim.

## Conclusions

The pivotal aims of this research study were to identify what drives those who commit stalking, or related offences. Furthermore, to elicit insight for shaping engagement, assessment, treatment and risk management practices with this offender group. The analysed insights can be utilised to address knowledge and practice gaps, particularly within, although not exclusive to, forensic psychology, for the benefit of those perpetrating stalking, their victims, and society in general.



Bringing stalking to an end requires a mixture of appropriate legal sanctions and therapeutic interventions (Mullen et al., 1999). With little progress seen internationally, this is still being asserted today (Purcell & McEwan, 2018).

This section outlines a summary of results in addressing the research question of what drives those who stalk, and highlights areas for practitioner application in responding to these criminogenic needs. Implications for theory and knowledge are also outlined, and a discussion of the main limitations of this research study are presented, followed by suggestions for future research subsequent to this study. This section concludes with a succinct formulation for stalking based on this research and final commentary on the research aims.

### **Summary of results: Implications for theory, knowledge and practitioner application**

The study participants' stalking behaviours were all driven by an underlying vulnerable narcissist need for maintaining a sense of self-worth. Whilst it is widely accepted that those who stalk are a heterogeneous group (see Nijdam-Jones et al., 2018), the current study demonstrated the universal presence of narcissistic vulnerability across *Rejected* and *Intimacy Seeker* typology stalkers. It was present regardless self-reported psychopathology, relationship to target, and the longevity of such, and also regardless of stalking methods employed. These two typologies share some commonality concerning initial motivation for stalking, such as a desire to re-establish (*Rejected*), or attain an intimate relationship (*Intimacy seeker*). The key differences are the non-existent previous intimate relationship with the victim and the additional use of fantasy regarding an imagined relationship in the *Intimacy Seeker*. The findings of this study are therefore only suggested applicable to these typologies also within the limitation of methodology and sample size in generalising results.

Whilst it is wise to understand psychopathology in order to prepare professionals to work more responsively with clients, the aim of this should not be about assigning a causal or explanatory disorder label to the stalker, and possibly neglecting the fundamental predisposing and precipitating factors. The use of the Visually Adapted Repertory Grid Technique (VARGT) allowed participants to access and share how

they see themselves compared to others, in a non-threatening way. This technique was ultimately responsive to their narcissistic vulnerability, avoiding the triggering of their psychological threat systems, enabling them to share meaningful insights about their primary relational goals.

This study shows support for the Relational Goal Pursuit theory (Cupach & Spitzberg, 2000) applied to stalking behaviours, entwining the notions of narcissistic vulnerability, and preoccupied attachment styles. In terms of succinctly describing these interconnected concepts, models and theories, Figure 14 has been presented. The outer layer of defensive responding by stalking due to the relational goal pursuit shows itself as almost addiction-like. That is, each contact (or attempt to attain their goal) brings hope.

The conceptual correlations made with narcissism and psychological vulnerabilities (such as insecure attachment styles and personality disorders) are not new, as detailed within this thesis. Indeed, in presenting practitioner views on stalking regarding psychopathology, it has been explained that '*What tends to differentiate between those who cease and those who continue on to offend is often their experience of disruptions of 'normal'/healthy development. This could be through traumas and pre-disposing personality traits, leading to personality disorder development, and commonly, features of narcissism*' (Dr R Darjee, personal communication, April 27, 2017).

Understanding engagement with people who stalk from an attachment pathology perspective may assist in conceptually reducing the view of the insurmountable barrier in building therapeutic alliance. For example, as Brennan and Shaver (1998) assert, it is not surprising for those having experienced inconsistent caregiver support to develop a preoccupied attachment style, given they learn to have a low threshold for threat and resultant anxiety. Individuals thus with preoccupied attachment styles (such as people who stalk) will be wary of any attachment based interactions and once developed, be enmeshed with the other, and constantly anxious about the status of the relationship. If they are used to inconsistency and the constant threat of their needs not being met, they may develop '*compulsive care-seeking*' behaviours to compensate (Brennan & Shaver, 1998: 869). Of course,

attachment styles will play out in professional contacts too, which makes appreciation of these deeper level psychological processes pivotal, and vital that endings in therapy are dealt with sensitively.

The superordinate theme of narcissistic vulnerability ran through all other themes, impacting on becoming blinkered with regards to their pursuits, despite facing legal sanctions, and later distancing themselves from the stalker label. Essentially, participants said there was no deterrent for their stalking and that only imprisonment acted as a *'wake-up call'*, that they had needed to reflect upon their psychosocial functioning and consequences of such. They wanted help, someone to open up to about their inner distress and goal pursuits. Unanimously, participants found engaging via the VARGT to be collaborative and insight-provoking, suggesting its value with this client group, particularly in the early stages of assessment and treatment engagement (see chapter 5). Participants unanimously and explicitly said nothing would or could have stopped them from stalking their victim. The use of the VARGT and IPA highlighted the strength of a well-hidden yet paramount superordinate theme of narcissistic vulnerability, which explained their pursuits. Attempts to rationalise their stalking behaviours serve as a cover for the internal and guarded pain of a damaged sense of self-worth, which is near impossible to tolerate, let alone disclose to others who may be seen as punitive. The tussles between criminal justice agency professionals and people who commit stalking offences become focused on these camouflaging justifications.

Whether due to ignorance, arrogance, justification, or poorly delivered legal sanctions, the participants did not see their behaviours as serious. They viewed their stalking behaviours only in respect of their relational goal, and as singular online or offline behaviours, as opposed to pattern-based. This suggests they viewed each as separate from previous failed attempts at self-worth restoration. The robust use of the new Stalking Protection Act (2019) and Stalking Protection Orders may assist both criminal justice agencies, and people who stalk, to better understand the seriousness of this pattern-based crime. Improved societal awareness generally may also help achieve this aim. Compassionately viewing the problem behaviours of people who stalk in context of the fundamental relational goal pursuit due to their narcissistic vulnerability may prove pivotal in helping offenders feel more able to

share their distress and request help. Additionally, it may help practitioners addressing the psychology behind the crime, alongside legislative sanctions.

Participants held disdainfully negative views of stalkers. Whilst the psychological aspects of their view of what a stalker is were varied and astute, the behavioural connotations were narrow and misleading. This seemed to have an initial impact on the participants' ability to see themselves as having committed stalking offences or labelling themselves a stalker. This could suggest that the impact of the stereotypical stalker portrayed in the media, on TV, and in films, adversely affects society's ability to identify exactly what stalking is. Societal education and awareness of the general principles of what constitutes stalking need attention. This is not to marginalise those committing stalking offences, but to be able to intervene, and support those involved, sooner. The label presented a barrier to discussing stalking behaviours and delving into their offence pathways, although the VARGT allowed for this barrier to be navigated around, acting as a vehicle for participants to reflect upon and disclose insight regarding their offending.

The practical implications for treatment approaches if one accepts the universal underlying narcissistic vulnerability are that questioning belief systems would be psychologically threatening to the stalker, given the already fragile sense of self-esteem, which is at the core of this condition (Sorotzkin, 1985). Such threat would be experienced as a narcissistic injury and the resultant emotional response would hinder chances of therapeutic alliance and collaborative risk intervention work. Pistole (1995) suggested that therapists can assist individuals with narcissistic vulnerability by validating their attachment and narcissistic needs related to self-worth, and the impact on intimacy and autonomy. Investigating behaviours under unexpected separation, essentially reviewing the mechanisms of attachment and narcissistic vulnerability when activated, was recommended by Pistole (1995), and essentially achieved in this study, illustrating stalking as the defensive response (see Figure 14).

Beech and Mitchell (2009) reviewed treatment pathways for those with attachment disorder, and highlighted that traditional talking therapies for managing associated problematic behaviours, thoughts and feelings may be experienced as self-critical and psychologically threatening by those with a preoccupied attachment style.

Engagement and treatment approaches therefore should be responsive in addressing threats and associated emotional responses that may hinder progress, as observed with the use of the VARGT in this study. Linehan's (1993) dialectical behavioural therapy encourages the development of self-compassion and soothing ability for intense emotional experiences, and has been trialled with some success with stalkers (Rosenfeld et al., 2007). Whilst not yet trialled with people who stalk in an evaluated manner, Gilbert's (2009) compassion-focused work appears to have face validity based on this study's findings because it is intended to develop and nurture one's ability for self-compassion, and for compassion towards others, fundamentally addressing the debilitating psychological impact psychologically of shame and self-criticism. Compassion-Focussed Therapy (CFT: Gilbert, 2009), known as a third wave cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) intervention, is a mode of psychotherapy based on the premise that caring behaviour aids personal development (as purported within attachment theory). It has a regulatory effect, whereby clients can focus on their problems compassionately, enabling a deeper exploration of presenting issues in a safe and empowering way, encouraging the development of a therapeutic alliance. This attention to the therapeutic experience helps reduce potential for triggering threat systems, thus managing associated guardedness and anxiety. CFT could, for example, help clients to reframe the stalking pursuits as manifestations of an underlying need for validation, with each contact being functional for avoiding the distressing emotional impact of loss and narcissistic injury.

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT: Hayes et al., 1999) is one of the most widely used third generation interventions and is empirically supported for a range of psychological and behavioural problems, including personality disorders (Johnstone et al., 2018). Whilst it has not been specifically used with and evaluated for those who commit stalking offences, it too shows appeal based on this research study's outcomes. It aims to teach psychological flexibility to help people respond functionally in the presence of difficult thoughts and feelings through changing their internal response. Third wave CBT interventions such as these have been growing in popularity and have broad empirical support (Hayes et al., 2004). Psychological case formulation provides a sound alternative to the reliance on psychiatric diagnoses (Johnstone et al., 2018), constituting a co-constructed (by the practitioner with psychological knowledge, and the client with experiential expertise) hypothesis about the functions of problematic behaviours, such as stalking. The VARGT

process and output demonstrated the value of this and its inherent therapeutic impact on this research study's participants. This was an unintended, yet important finding given the quality of the therapeutic alliance is pivotal in increasing any ability for change due to the motivating impact, but also in considering the increasing longevity of engagement improving chances of realistic, long-term change (Logan, 2009).

Based on the research findings in the current study, it makes sense that following case-appropriate responsivity assessments (i.e., for serious mental illness, pervasive developmental disorder, and IQ), the marriage of the VARGT as a non-threatening, collaborative and therapeutic case formulation tool, with an appropriate intervention such as ACT or CFT, seeking to address narcissistic vulnerability, could be useful in responding to the criminogenic needs of people who stalk. This suggested link to addressing stalking-related offending behaviours would of course need to be trialled and evaluated.

Purcell and McEwan (2018) assert that instead of aiming to address underlying personality or attachment disorder, cognitive-behavioural approaches should be utilised to address stalking behaviours. This study however seems to suggest a hybrid of both, essentially needing to address the underlying narcissistic vulnerability, and recognising the need to address specific skills deficits around responsivity issues (i.e., ASD manifestations, and possible under-developed VIQ; see systematic review conclusions in chapter 2), and maintaining boundaries with the use of legal sanctioning. Previous recommendations calling for treatment interventions for those who commit stalking offences to be developed (Suzy Lamplugh Trust, 2016) have only recently gained momentum, although as Purcell and McEwan (2018) highlight, there is still a vast knowledge and practice gap in this respect. This research shows that narcissistic vulnerability is the psychological deficit fundamental to people who stalk, which requires treatment intervention, and that the use of the VARGT enables engaging, collaborative and insight-provoking case formulation tasks to be undertaken. It supports assertions made by the Suzy Lamplugh Trust (2018) that in order to manage people who stalk, the motivations and inherent fixation need to be fully understood, rather than simply relying on standard HMPPS offending behaviour programmes, which teach interpersonal skills, but do not address the psychological underpinnings that drive the behaviours. That

is not to say that such accredited programmes cannot be of value as a secondary or tertiary treatment provision. HMPPS offending behaviours programmes still have not been adapted to offer intervention for those who commit stalking offences to target the non-violent yet fixated, psychologically damaging behaviours (Purcell and McEwan, 2018).

Given attachment styles and disorders are contended to be enduring, they are purported to be fairly stable and unaffected by treatment intervention (Lewis et al., 2001). However, this current research suggests a third wave CBT approach may assist given the fundamental narcissistic vulnerability amongst those who commit stalking. In the absence of clinical trials and evaluation of these interventions however, it would be remiss to assume its potential in intervening with those committing stalking offences. Neglecting to incorporate what works research (as reviewed by Maruna & Mann, 2019) into treatment planning would be foolish, and indeed, as highlighted within this current study, so would ignoring the desistance-based research. This collective research outlined in Maruna and Mann (2019) advocates the rehabilitative benefits of meaningful employment (including any meaningful occupation of time), a secure sense of self-worth and feeling of efficacy, as well as more general senses of connectedness to others and purpose in life. These were all aspects referred to by this study's participants in connection to their periphery needs and potential desistance-based aspects.

Two out of seven of this study's sample disclosed diagnoses for an Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Considering the needs of individuals with ASD who stalk is particularly important as treatment approaches may be different (see Purcell & McEwan, 2018), therefore ensuring an accurate case formulation is essential. Given this proportion in the current sample, and the conclusions made within the systematic review (chapter 2) regarding the prevalence of Personality Disorder-Not Otherwise Specified (PD-NOS), prevalence may have been previously underestimated. Indeed, individuals with ASD who stalk may have been overlooked in regards to their offending behaviours as often they are non-violent in nature, and the individuals could be observed by criminal justice agencies as inadequate socially, but essentially harmless. Individuals presenting with PD-NOS, now referred to as Personality Disorder-Trait specified in the *DSM-5* (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013), with cluster A and/or C traits are recommended to be

reviewed for the presence of ASD (Lugnegard, Hallerback & Gillberg, 2012) as standard practice. The overlap in manifesting criteria can be common according to Lugnegard et al. (2012), who caution that where ASD is ascertained, a personality disorder diagnosis does not meaningfully add to case formulation, and should be avoided or rescinded, in favour of understanding the impairments experienced by ASD individuals (Lugnegard et al., 2012). For all cases, understanding the personal construct system of people who stalk in relation to their offending behaviours and wider relationship goals is important for identifying treatment needs. The repertory grid Principal Components Analysis can assist in supporting or questioning developing formulations, given the constricted thinking patterns that those with ASD may show.

Stalking is for validation. In fact, this notion of being known to the victim and in their thoughts regularly is concomitant to being validated. Those with narcissistic vulnerability, which is defended by an insecure, preoccupied attachment style, need a constant supply of validation from others. The resultant relational goal pursuit (stalking) is thus strong and enduring. Focussing on addressing narcissistic vulnerability as opposed to identifying secondary manifestation-level symptoms (i.e., psychopathology such as personality disorders and cognitive rigidity), may be key to developing successful treatment approaches. As with the label stalker, narcissism is also viewed with negative connotation, therefore Miller (1992) attempts to avoid the use of narcissism in this context. Manifestations, referred to as *self-affirming activities*, can form the basis of tangible goals to focus on in ACT and CFT principled intervention. Indeed Miller (1992) presents an argument and structure for developing new healthy sources of self-affirmation before attempting to address the symptoms and manifestations of vulnerable narcissism. The argument is that these manifestations uphold the sense of self and compensate for the debilitating self-esteem deficit, so to attempt to deconstruct them without a meaningful replacement would be remiss.

### **Main limitations and future research**

A concern inherent in all qualitative research is the assumed limitation in generalising findings from a small convenience sample. However, this purposive sampling, representative of those convicted of stalking, or related offences, and the purposeful methodology provide rich evidence of the psychological functions of



stalking. For novel research areas, for example qualitative or mixed methods studies with people who stalk, it provides the necessary exploratory first step in understanding what drives those who commit stalking offences, and how their needs can be responded to. This provides a platform for subsequent research studies replicating the elements within this one and/or trialling and evaluating the practitioner implications, or suggestions for further research highlighted.

Males were purposefully recruited to add an additional layer of homogeneity amongst the sample, and also because of an assumed gender difference in psychopathology. However, even with some heterogeneity amongst the sample, the findings seemed clear and consistent. Notwithstanding, replication studies utilising female samples, ASD individuals who stalk, and separately the other typologies of stalker could produce interesting challenges to, or support for, the findings of the current study, given the demographic and typology make-up of the current sample. The current study's sample was drawn from custodial forensic settings, providing homogeneity and also perhaps a biasing factor, presumed from their stalking hiatus.

With IPA, the researcher leads the iterative and interpretational journey. Whilst the sample size was ample and homogeneity levels were achieved, the emergent data from the mixed methods study were vast and relied upon researcher-led double hermeneutics processes. Despite the use of reflexivity journal, re-auditing of participant transcript data and codes, and conducting validity checks, the reliance on double hermeneutics can be seen as limiting the robustness of findings. On this basis, limitations can also exist in respect of how much can be accessed of a participant's subjective experiences based on what they choose to verbalise, and indeed what they can articulate (Smith & Osborn, 2007). The administration of the VARGT (as with any RGT) can be demanding and time-consuming, limiting its appeal, although it provides a mixed methods approach with IPA, which exposes usually guarded psychological information that is deemed difficult to feign. The incorporation of the VARGT therefore provided the additional robustness of more statistically quantitative data, supporting data analysis. Repertory grids however only capture a snapshot in time of a person's construct system, given they map an ever-fluid framework.

Key suggestions for future research based on an internationally recognised lack of treatment effectiveness studies with those who perpetrate stalking (Purcell & McEwan, 2018) would be to further investigate what drives stalking (i.e., commencement, recurrence after cessation, and persistence in episodes) from a qualitative (or indeed mixed methods) approach, given this is the first of its kind. Further exploring the notion of narcissistic vulnerability amongst people who stalk seems pivotal, as does piloting of treatment interventions as identified in this chapter, such as ACT and CFT. Utilising, improving, or developing measures of narcissistic vulnerability, conceptualised within this study, may be of benefit in providing more robust investigatory studies of this psychological feature amongst people who stalk.

The continued quest to understand the psychopathology of people who stalk, by concentrating on mental disorders alone, is flawed. This is supported by Nijdam-Jones et al. (2018), who asserted the need to explore further the relationship between the traits identified and stalking. In the same way, identifying any pervasive developmental disorders amongst people who stalk would be crucial (although they have not been considered in the study by Nijdam-Jones et al. [2018]). The present study provides support for favouring collaborative case formulation approaches as opposed to pursuing diagnoses in holistically explaining stalking in the majority of cases. Given the success of the VARGT in this study, it seems prudent to recommend replication studies are undertaken for exploring the value as a methodological tool, collaborative engagement tool, and indeed use as a psychological measure of change in treatment intervention trials (as has been previously utilised by Mason, 2008).

### **Final commentary**

Stalking amongst this sample appeared to be functional to controlling the avoidance of further harm to a fragile sense of self, thus goal-directed. Narcissistic vulnerability seemed entrenched, fuelling an undeterred relational goal pursuit. Supporting the need to move away from labelling, this thesis has employed this psychodynamic term as a way to succinctly capture concepts as opposed to any intent to assign another diagnostic label. Sensitive engagement seems to be required in collaborating with those who commit stalking offences in assessment and intervention engagement (i.e., around the labelling, and the impact of their existing

narcissistic vulnerability). Treatment approaches to address underlying narcissistic vulnerability as the primary goal may be intense and long-term, given how it develops over time. Addressing treatment needs on this fundamental emotional level will be required before expecting more cognitive level intervention to greatly impact. With the high reoffending rates and entrenched treatment needs, treatment intervention alongside appropriate legal sanctioning is recommended, and could be lengthy. However, with current short sentencing lengths and poor identification of stalking generally, the provision of this, if it were available within HMPPS, would be challenging. Improvements in these areas, with provision of HMPPS psychological interventions at the earliest point of identification, seem sensible. Given the nature of the treatment needs and the disruptiveness short sentences can cause, piloting of problem-solving courts, operational in Northern Ireland, with suitable stalking perpetrators could prove fruitful. These are criminal justice approaches offering court-agreed treatment instead of imprisonment in specific cases and have been implemented and evaluated with success (see O'Hare, 2018), also showing cost efficiency.

This study's findings offer practitioners and policymakers new insights for application to the engagement, assessment, treatment and management considerations, of those who commit stalking, or related offences. The therapeutic impact on participants resulting from engagement with the novel VARGT suggests its potential as a research and clinical tool with this client group. It is hoped that the current study provides the research and forensic psychology fields with novel and rich insights into the experiences of those convicted of stalking offences.

## **CHAPTER 5: Application of the Visually Adapted Repertory Grid Technique: Researcher-practitioner reflections**

### **Introduction**

This chapter outlines researcher-practitioner reflections on the novel use of a Visually Adapted Repertory Grid Technique (VARGT) within qualitative research in forensic psychology. It constitutes a practice-based chapter, sharing valuable reflections on its application within psychological research, as well as forensic psychology assessment, and treatment, of clients. These researcher-practitioner interpretations are illustrated with selected semantic-level transcript extracts from participants' experiences of the technique (see chapter 4 for originating study). Additionally, they are framed within existing psychological literature pertaining to therapeutic aspects of engagement with clients. This section highlights pertinent literature in context of the reflections presented later, followed by an overview of the rationale for the development and use of the technique within a qualitative study methodology.

Viewing human nature as intrinsically good underlies Rogerian theory (Rogers, 1959). Subsequent clinical approaches asserted the need to positively value others in order to respond to low self-worth and without this self-efficacy would be hindered, as would a motivation to change (Jones-Smith, 2016). The value of fostering a therapeutic alliance is well established and has been linked to treatment effectiveness (e.g., Bordin, 1979; Raue & Goldfried, 1994). Linked to attachment theory, this alliance relieves anxiety as the client is empowered to make positive changes (Ross, Polaschek, & Ward, 2008). The concept of collaboration defined as active participation by both client and therapist is a key component of a therapeutic relationship, and essence of the therapeutic alliance (Hatcher & Barends, 2006). Autonomy and guided discovery feature heavily in conceptualising what constitutes therapeutic alliance (e.g., Kazantzis, Fairburn, Padesky, Reinecke & Teesson, 2014). Guided discovery allows the client to develop self-understanding with ownership (Dattilio & Padesky, 1990), which has a motivating effect. Knowledge developed through this process as opposed to being told (a basic tenet of Piaget's

cognitive model [1972]) is purported to hold more value for clients and thus positively impacts on treatment effectiveness (Overholser, 1995).

Rogerian theory asserted that for therapeutic change to occur, the client would need to experience unconditional positive regard and empathic concern. Sharing some fundamental principles, third generation interventions have been growing in popularity and have broad empirical support (see Hayes, Masuda, Bissett, Luoma & Guerrero, 2004). For example, Compassion-Focussed Therapy (CFT; Gilbert, 2009) is a mode of psychotherapy that teaches compassion, based on the premise that caring behaviour aids personal development aligned with attachment theory. It has a regulatory effect as clients focus on their problems compassionately, allowing exploration of issues in a safe and empowering way, developing a positive therapeutic relationship, thus reducing threat system guardedness. Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT; Hayes, Strosahl & Wilson, 1999) is one of the most widely used third generation interventions and is empirically supported (see Johnstone et al., 2018). It teaches psychological flexibility regardless of the presenting issue. Based on the systematic review and research outcomes in chapters 2 and 4, the underlying premise and aims of these interventions appear to have face validity in their application to those who commit stalking offences. Crucially, their fundamental compassion-based principles may be necessary ingredients to any engagement opportunities with this client group.

In line with the third wave humanistic approaches, Motivational Interviewing (see Miller & Rollnick, 1991; Miller & Rollnick, 2004; Miller & Rose, 2009) incorporates an empathic, client-centred stance in order to evoke and develop motivation to change, most widely applied within addiction treatments (Jones-Smith, 2016). This approach aligns with the Trans-Theoretical Model of behavioural change (TTM; Prochaska & diClemente, 1983), otherwise known as the Stages of Change Theory, a behavioural change model based on sequential stages. According to Bandura (1994), self-belief in efficacy can be improved through experiences with positive and idealised social role models, especially with whom they can identify some comparables. Indeed, it is suggested that we seek role models whom we aspire to, based on the premise of vicarious learning and the positive impact this has on improving self-efficacy and subsequent affect (Bandura, 1994). Contextual to this thesis however, developing and maintaining a therapeutic alliance in forensic settings can be challenging given the basic human need for autonomy is less

achievable (Deci & Ryan, 2000), and with perceived treatment coercion (Young, 2002). Furthermore, forensic settings will host those most likely to have been impacted upon by attachment problems, which negatively influences how therapeutic alliance can develop (Ross et al., 2008). Crucially, however, it is the therapist style which has been shown to influence approach outcomes substantially (Miller & Rose, 2009), and achieving therapeutic alliance is pivotal.

In research terms, the use of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) in psychology research allows for an empathic semi-structured approach to data collection, which progresses to an interpretative position to give meaning and context (Reid, Flowers & Larkin, 2005). This fundamentally empathic phenomenological approach appealed in respect of the originating study (see chapter 4). Particularly, given there was no known published qualitative research with people who stalk, commonly reported to have difficulties with engagement due to a lack of insight, sense of entitlement and cognitive rigidity (Mackenzie, McEwan, Pathé, James, Ogloff & Mullen, 2009). The aim of using the Repertory Grid Technique, visually adapted in the originating study, was to further contextualise participants' construed experiences using a gently exposing, collaborative, and kinaesthetic (indirect) approach.

The Visually Adapted Repertory Grid Technique (VARGT) was developed intentionally in order to reduce cognitive loading and challenge from researchers' traditional exploratory approaches, hoping to maximise engagement. The repertory grid technique has been purported to be able to complement Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis with its deep exploration of idiographic processes (Horley, 2008), in combination providing a robust mixed methods approach. This mixed methods approach has been shown to be compatible and valuable in exploring social and criminal phenomena on forensic settings (see Blagden, Mann, Webster, Lee & Williams, 2018; Blagden, Winder, Gregson & Thorne, 2014; Kitson-Boyce, Blagden, Winder & Dillon, 2018; Yorke & Dallos, 2015). Repertory grids have been used in both forensic (e.g., Blagden, Winder, Gregson & Thorne, 2012) and clinical (e.g., Leach, Freshwater, Aldridge & Sunderland, 2001; Winter, 2003) settings. The most common use historically was for informing case formulations in clinical practice, from which hypotheses about behaviours can be developed (for example, see Blagden et al., 2012; Mason, 2008). The repertory grid technique

(RGT: Winter, 2003) has been extensively applied in research studies. For example, it has been applied when exploring poorly understood personal constructs for complex psychological issues, such as denial in sex offenders (Blagden et al., 2012), and accessing interpersonal beliefs with patients experiencing delusions (Paget & Ellet, 2014).

Personal Construct Theory (PCT: Kelly, 1955) purports that we continually define and redefine our concepts of self through a repertoire of constructs, which are both idiosyncratic and fluid (Turpin, Dallos, Owen & Thomas, 2009). Repertory grids (an assessment technique derived from PCT and developed by Kelly, 1955) provide snapshots in time on a given topic, making a person's personal construct system overt, exposing even the most psychologically defended aspects (Turpin et al., 2009). Personal Construct Psychology's (PCP: Kelly, 1955) central premise is personal agency, that we are actively construing experiences (Horley, 2008) based on a dynamic psychological framework from which we make sense of ourselves, others and the social world generally (Banister, Burman, Parker, Taylor & Tindall, 1994). This suggests ownership of will power given we choose our constructions of situations, which impact upon our emotions and behaviours, determining the actions we take (Horley, 2008).

Whilst there are so many potential uses for the RGT, it has not been previously used in its own right to enhance collaborative engagement with a difficult to reach client group through visual adaptation, nor as a therapeutic tool. MacKenzie et al. (2009) developed the Stalking Risk Profile (SRP), structured professional judgement tool and asserted the importance of understanding underlying responsivity factors when devising treatment approaches. They highlight the small window of opportunity to engage with those convicted of stalking, often created by criminal justice intervention, suggested the use of Motivational Interviewing (MI: Miller & Rollnick, 1991) within engagement approaches. However, there is not yet any empirical research to demonstrate engagement intervention effectiveness with this offender group and currently there are no stalking related psychological offending behaviours programmes (Purcell & McEwan, 2018). This chapter demonstrates the ability of a Visually Adapted Repertory Grid Technique (VARGT) to contribute to achieving those aims. Additionally, it reports on the ability to maximise engagement in

research, and those within a forensic setting deemed hard to engage, yet are crucial experiential experts in the subject matter.

### **Application of the Visually Adapted Repertory Grid Technique (VARGT)**

Chapter 4 details the mixed methods research study which explored the experiences of adult males who have committed stalking, or related offences. The study utilised a novel Visually Adapted Repertory Grid Technique (VARGT: see chapter 3), designed to improve research participant engagement. The VARGT was essentially utilised as a complementary structure for the flexible Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) interviewing schedule, providing an opaque and non-threatening collaborative tool of engagement. As part of the original study's analytical coding process, a strong recurring evidential base for the therapeutic benefit of the VARGT was observed. That is, related codes were frequent, poignant, and found in all participant transcriptions. The researcher's experiences, captured in a reflexivity journal, also supported these unanticipated findings. Whilst the codes were not directly relevant to the original research questions, but of value and pertinence to contributing to practice gaps in engaging meaningfully with people who stalk, these were extracted for reflection herein. This chapter details the experiences and related interpretations contextual to existing literature, of participants and researcher-practitioner, organised largely by the applied stages of the administration of the VARGT. Whilst IPA was undertaken to identify codes, this chapter relies upon the practice reflections of the registered forensic psychologist practitioner and researcher to share valuable insights, rather than further analysis.

### **Researcher-Practitioner Reflections**

The data set, constituting therapeutic impact codes, from an initial Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, derived from the original study (see chapter 4). They originated from a sample of seven adult males, with a mean average age of 35, all of whom were held in HMPPS prison custody at the time of participation. None of the men had undergone any form of therapeutic intervention to address their stalking offending behaviours, nor taken part previously in research. This offered a good level of homogeneity within the sample who engaged with the VARGT processes. To provide a structure to the reflections, the subject of participant talk is



organised loosely around two fundamental aspects. Researcher-practitioner reflections are anchored by the participants' transcription data, supported by personal observations, and complemented with a discussion of relevant existing psychological literature. This approach was taken given the sample were not systematically probed for experiences around the therapeutic benefits of the VARGT. To structure reflections two overarching aspects relevant to both research and practitioner application are presented, which are (a) A tool for engagement; and (b) Therapeutic value. Table 9 sets out sub-headings for reflection interpretations within these to provide additional structure for this chapter. Overall, the content of both overarching aspects of the utility of the VARGT illustrate the various ways in which it allowed the sample to self-discover and express insights, and reflections, autonomously. The sense of therapeutic alliance, identified from the codes, developed in the short engagement sessions, a surprising aspect given the sample were drawn from an offender group clinically observed as difficult to engage with and lacking insight. Therapeutic alliance ran throughout the codes as a whole.

Overarching aspects	Reflection interpretations
A tool for engagement	Visual aids Self-guided disclosures Building alliance
Therapeutic impact	Deconstructing barriers Enlightenment Motivation to change Sharing negative self-reflection Moving away from the past Concluding participant reflections

Table 9. Researcher-practitioner reflections regarding the VARGT application

### **A Tool for Engagement**

These reflections are organised around the tool itself and overall engagement style. The VARGT used in the research interviews was positively experienced despite expectations to discuss stalking offences. The style of engagement using this technique was non-judgemental, contextual to the research aims and the researcher's obligations to uphold the welfare of the participant. That is, interested in the experiences of the individual, providing validation, and standing outside of any risk assessment judgments taking place to provide unconditional positive regard.

### **Visual aids.**

The incorporation of visual aids into the interviews was experienced by the sample as therapeutic, as opposed to a shame-inducing investigation process. The collaborative tasks and non-judgemental style were valued, suggesting potential for therapeutic alliance to develop.

*It's very different to interviews with probation, I mean they're making judgments, and it feels like more of a police interview, and pretty cringey actually having to talk about it in such detail. This is more like therapy of course isn't it really, it's quite close to therapy, because there's tools (P4)*

This was an interesting point suggesting insight and awareness, with a shame-based response, denoting a recognition that the behaviours had been dysfunctional. Understanding shame as a barrier in itself is helpful in working together with those who commit stalking offences. The overall engagement style allowed for such vulnerable disclosures, which in treatment could be pivotal in a subsequent compassionate based focus, reducing the stagnating impact this barrier can have on addressing related treatment needs.

An obvious barrier to discussing offending behaviour that was commonly verbalised was embarrassment. Sharing self-discovered realisations and disclosing their vulnerabilities suggested an underpinning safe and therapeutic experience. The extract below demonstrates this with an insight regarding a psychological aspect contributing to their stalking offending that previously had been inaccessible or kept psychologically guarded due to embarrassment.

*Maybe it's that sexual jealousy thing. I feel embarrassed talking about stuff like that but I'm trying my best (P5)*

### **Self-guided disclosures.**

This type of self-guided disclosure in practice can be rare with this offender group, yet of significant value in order to compassionately assist an offender to accept wrongdoing and develop motivation to address the underlying psychological problems and skills deficits. In further contrast to practitioner experiences, the sample appeared to welcome the opportunity to discuss their experiences. They demonstrated insight, even recognising how without opportunities for safe and open exploration of offending functions, comfortable stories would develop naturally about the stalking episodes, veering away from the actual functions of the behaviours.

*This is the first time I've actually had a formal conversation with someone about it so it's very helpful for me. It's instructive for me, to think and try to remember the feelings when I was writing the emails and when I was, you know, what my motives were really for putting the cameras in the house. So it's important for me to focus on those feelings at the time. And things coming through, what I really remember was a sense of complete fear and panic and hopelessness about what's going to happen, what I'm going to lose you know, so that's struck me (P4)*

Being able to engage in this way has numerous therapeutic benefits, which are significant when considering the short single engagement session, and complex psychopathology including attachment and shame-based issues possibly present. The VARGT is a tool that is non-direct, non-judgemental, insight-provoking and exposing; a technique differing from common assessment procedures in forensic contexts which aim to be objective (Horley, 2008). The significance of building this therapeutic alliance for therapeutic change is empirically supported (Ross et al., 2008). There were explicit verbal associations made regarding the interpersonal engagement style and the tool used, with the positive experience. The kinaesthetic aspect of this technique and visual focus for the participants made the interview more engaging. The sample codes underpinning this reflection illustrated the VARGTs collaborative, non-directive, and interesting approach. The below extract captures the essence of this from one of the participants.

*Having it on the floor for movement, the kinaesthetic element to it and the physicality of putting things down, believe me it's a lot more engaging and*

*interesting. You're more likely to get people working with you, collaborating with you (P4)*

### **Building alliance.**

Despite agreement that the therapeutic alliance is related to treatment effectiveness, there has been relatively little advancements in studying how it develops (Ross et al., 2008). A popular theory explaining how working alliance develops was provided by Bordin (1979), who asserted that three key factors, if present, positively affect treatment outcome: goals, tasks, and a bond. Providing a therapeutic task focus and employing a tangible working alliance within client interactions is purported to aid a genuine sense of collaboration and investment (Bordin, 1979; Serran, Fernandez, Marshall & Mann, 2003). The essence of this, as illustrated above, was recurrent and strong in participant interviews and identification of codes. Being able to find a way to develop alliance in a therapeutic and research sense is beneficial for all, and for a number of reasons. Achieving this with those experiencing personality disorders, preoccupied attachment styles, or any manifested motivational difficulties is known to be difficult (e.g., Meyer, Pilkonis, Proietti, Heape & Egan, 2001; Ross et al., 2008), however, crucial given it has been empirically linked to positive therapeutic outcomes (see Ross et al., 2008). Indeed, it has also been linked as a protective factor against post-treatment recidivism (Taft, Murphy, King, Musser & DeDeyn, 2003).

The visually represented personal construct system and the element placements, including past, present and future self-concepts, provided a static and easy to refer to framework. This allowed participants to share a number of insights, and was the most lingered on stage of the VARGT. Participant-led reviews of the completed grid (referred to within the RGT as *eyeball analysis*) ensured idiosyncratic thus meaningful identification and interpretation of correlations, differences and patterns. The VARGT eyeball analysis is the final stage of collaborative participant engagement. Participants were invited to reflect autonomously on what they noticed when visually reviewing their personal construct grids with element ratings completed. Reflections identified the nature of the emergent constructs, the patterns of placements of elements, and the interrelationships between certain elements against constructs. This guided discovery was experienced as interesting and empowering.

*It is interesting the looking part of this process. I have to look back at the circumstances of my offending and think about what my mind-set was and how I actually felt at the time of my offending; what my feelings were like (P4)*

The VARGT, as an exposing visual aid, helped the group access their mind-sets at the time of offending, providing an unguarded account of the functions of the stalking offending and characteristics of self-past, which would most likely make them vulnerable to this type of offending.

### **Therapeutic Impact**

The VARGT in its totality was experienced as empowering and motivating. Through its transparency and exposing representation of an individual's personal construct system it is thought- and insight-provoking.

#### **Deconstructing barriers.**

As part of the VARGT, significant people related to the topic of stalking and the three self-concepts, *self-past*, *self-now*, and *self-ideal* were written on coloured cards. These were placed on a visual grid by participants corresponding with how they rated them along construct continuums, for example *caring-selfish*. The *stalker* card provoked uncomfortable feelings within this sample, particularly when correlations with *self-past* placements were visually obvious. This provoked considered disclosures of the emotional attachment to the word and contextual barriers seen by others as denial.

*The card with stalker on, I won't forget that in a hurry because it's a very ugly word and a very ugly thing that goes with it. I think it's good not to be in denial about things, so there's a real impact for me. It's a very emotive term, but it's very useful as well. If someone is in denial, to see that is really important. Obviously getting people to define for themselves the terms, define these indicators, is very important (P4)*

Recognising the impact of shame on offenders' ability to move forward into therapeutic engagement is important (Blagden et al., 2014). This recognition and responsive interactional tactics could improve the quality of any engagement

opportunities with those who commit stalking offences, as opposed to focusing on denial with an offender, which could be related to the label of stalker. Accepting these barriers may allow for therapeutic alliance to build and a later educative session on legislation to ensue successfully.

### **Enlightenment.**

The VARGT experience was enlightening for all participants, although inevitably to varying degrees akin to being therapeutic. Codes clustered around the sense that the VARGT was enlightening due to its ability to reveal aspects of functioning and personality with regards to stalking behaviours and relationships that they themselves had observed from the exercise directly as opposed to being told by professionals. The VARGT further benefits from the repertory grids' resilience against response bias (Blagden et al., 2012) providing more accurate insight for the participant-client and researcher-practitioner through its exposing capability as an activity and in the grid outcome (Turpin et al., 2009). There was an enthusiasm for the VARGT to be made accessible to others, such was their experience, and potentially the most psychologically guarded of participants was adamant about its capability.

*I would really look at this on a bigger mass production. Because at end of day, hand on heart, I honestly thought you couldn't actually do this to me and open my eyes. But how foolish I actually was. I would say you need to get it out there, you really do (P1)*

The RGT (and therefore the VARGT) allows a closer examination of participants' construed self-concepts in relation to each other and significant others (Blagden et al., 2017), adding an otherwise hidden layer of personal meaning to transcribed interviews (Blagden et al., 2014). Indeed, it is purported to constitute a form of therapeutic discourse through its directedness and purpose, rather than evoke and provide enlightenment (Jankowicz, 2004). This reflective chapter somewhat disputes this, given it appears to provide both experiences for participants engaging with the tool, although this difference could be due to the visual adaptations made to the original RGT which does aid collaboration (for details on how it differs, with visual examples, see chapter 3).

The experiences of participation utilising the VARGT were positive beyond expectations. Codes captured an energy, also seen in the researcher's reflexivity log, created by the valued experience of self-led awareness.

*I wanted to see the actual change for myself and I really couldn't see it in words alone but by doing this chart, my days, my eyes are open, my eyes are so open that I can already see that I've got a long path in front of me, and my future. All I've got to say to you now is thank you because at the end of the day you have literally just gone "bump" with my eyes and made them open up, sitting a matchstick in between them (P1)*

The ability to see the placements of elements, such as the self-concepts (*past, now and ideal*), in comparison to people they did not like or the role models they aspired to be was further motivating. The reflections allowed participants to feel good about characteristic aspects of themselves that they felt they had made changes to. They unanimously reflected on the correlated constructs for when they were offending and that of a stalker to how they rated themselves now, and considered the achievable journey to reach their construal of an ideal self. The visual representations of this provided exposing and tangible evidence. Additional to self-awareness development, this was a motivating and self-worth supporting exercise.

### **Motivation to change.**

As part of the VARGT, participants inadvertently identified role models whom they aspire to, that they construed positively within their own personal construct systems and wanted to work on becoming more like them. Being able to identify and idealise others, and related aspirational characteristics, is empowering (Yorke & Dallos, 2015). The sample quickly developed an awareness of these, which provided clearly defined goals on visual observation of the placements of ideal self and idealised other(s) and current self-concepts. With a deep idiographic contextual understanding of the constructs, such clarity provided hope and self-efficacy. These experiences allowed participants to self-determine future action, a transition from pre-contemplation stage thinking for the majority of the sample within the one session. The extract below is a simple illustration, but was provided by a participant who had displayed all-consuming and entrenched patterns of stalking behaviours for over a decade. He had also disclosed a psychological inability to let go of his infatuation early in the interview.

*I've got to accept my life without her or accept a life in prison basically (P3)*

The potential of the VARGT as a tool to assist individuals to move progressively through the stages of change (see Prochaska & diClemente, 1983) was evidenced and could be capitalised upon in treatment with accompanying Motivational Interviewing (MI: Miller & Rollnick, 1991). Understanding and working with the manifestations of a client's stage of change is essential in psychotherapeutic intervention (McConaughy, Prochaska & Velicer, 1983), indeed the stages of change theory and the MI approach are internationally recognised for their therapeutic use.

The element rating stage of the Visually Adapted Repertory Grid Technique (VARGT) is the most kinaesthetic and conceptually comparative aspect. Participants rated significant people in context of their elicited construct continuums (repertoire of personal values in context of relationships and stalking) using visual and kinaesthetic aids. Chapter 3 provides the detail of the methodological procedures, including this stage termed *rating the elements*. The VARGT provided an elicitation vehicle and reflective space for self-discovery to occur. Participant reflections on how they had construed themselves in the past at the time of the stalking, and their own construal of what a typical stalker may be like, led to incongruent feelings. The impact of this self-realisation was palpably uncomfortable, yet powerful in demonstrating their ability to verbalise insight and move closer to an acceptance of the nature of their offending, without having to accept the label.

*See I'm putting them [stalker] the same as self-past, but then I'm in denial about being a stalker so ahhh... (P5)*

Guided discovery breeds ownership (Dattilio & Padesky, 1990). This had a transitional motivating effect, moving individuals on from the pre-contemplation stage of change in that they were beginning to accept there is a problem to be changed. Developing discrepancy is a technique used in MI which aims to allow the cognitive dissonance and feelings of incongruence to mature and be capitalised upon by the individual for self-determined positive change commitments; movement to the *contemplation stage*.



Despite the resistance of the majority of participants to be considered a stalker, they unanimously and independently acknowledged resemblances they felt they had to a stalker in relation to personality characteristics.

*What was striking me when we were doing it, was how often me in the past and stalker were appearing in the same box. That's not a total surprise but it doesn't feel good and I struggle with that label, I really do (P4)*

The patterns in how they were construing *self-past* and *stalker* were made obvious by the resultant visual representation of the constructed grid. An outcome completely developed by themselves in a visually transparent way. Their reflections and initial acceptances in relation to stalking offending were made based on their own placements representing their own construal of the elements, thus impossible to ignore or not own. This initial level of acceptance provided an important foundation step for later collaboratively reviewing the output, known as *eyeball analysis*, discussed later.

It is accepted that engagement as a fundamental mode of achieving therapeutic alliance within offending behaviour programmes, additional to therapeutic and educative modes, assists insight enhancement (Kozar & Day, 2017). Finding ways of engaging meaningfully with participants is important, raising awareness of barriers to engagement or treatment, for example shame and embarrassment, seems fundamental. The ability of the VARGT to foster a non-directive researcher-and/or practitioner engagement is essential given directive interactions in these contexts are thought to reduce therapeutic alliance due to the perception of a lack of empathy and warmth (Karver, Handelsman, Fields & Bickman, 2005; Marshall, Fernandez, Serran, Mulloy, Thornton & Mann, 2003).

### **Sharing negative self-reflections.**

Ordinarily, negative self-reflections would be difficult for clients to access and/or disclose in such a short engagement session with a professional who is part of the criminal justice system. Institutional factors have indeed been purported to hamper the establishment of some basic therapeutic alliance features (Karver et al., 2005), and given the usual focus on risk assessment and risk reduction, features such as

genuine empathy and a full understanding of the offender's life goals and success factors may be ignored (Ross et al., 2008) in favour of the risk judgement focus. Through engagement with the VARGT, the construal of self-concepts (i.e., *self-past*, *self-now* and *self-ideal*) and comparing them to others within the overall construct system, initiated disclosures of personal reflections.

When rating *self-past* (which was at the time of committing stalking offences) along construct continuums, participants autonomously shared reflections on how they were unsuccessfully navigating the world of relationships and what aspects of their personality were contributing to this. They shared experiences in relation to this and made links independently to their stalking (*self-past*) behaviours. These disclosures provided idiosyncratic aspects which provided insights into the functions of their stalking. The following extract from P1's transcripts illustrates the self-realised function of their own offending behaviours which was powerful and demonstrative of the value of guided discovery implementation.

*Bam, straight away. I was never able to trust my own judgement. Even though I've seen it with my own eyes and I couldn't deny it. I still need the golden word; it was happening or it wasn't happening (P1)*

Identifying potential protective factors through guided self-discovery was equally valuable. Like the majority of the sample, P4 reflected on how having people to talk to whom he trusted would have helped him to cope emotionally and possibly prevent the stalking behaviours. This was common in the context of participants rating *self-past* along construct continuums pertaining to concepts such as being unconnected to others.

*Wow, just at that time I think I isolated myself. I made a choice didn't I. By doing what I did to isolate myself from reasonable conventional nice people (P4)*

The VARGTs elicitation of key features for case formulation provided further support of its clinical utility providing the additional benefit of having visually accessible information for participants to determine and own.

### **Moving away from the past.**

Participants construed their *self-past* negatively, whereas *self-now* and *self-ideal* were rated along construct continuums more positively. With the accessible visual representation, participants appraised their self-concepts based on their own personal construct system. Unanimously, the sample conveyed how they did not want to be how their *self-past* was anymore; this was even true for the least insightful and interpersonally guarded participant.

*This is opening my eyes to how I was living and it's really interesting to see how I don't want to live anymore (P1)*

This discrepancy development was self-motivating and an essential part of being able to recognise problems and work towards behaviour change. By visually appraising the self-concepts in comparison to others, contextual to the self-identified personal construct continuums, participants began to independently express future relational goals, for example, to build better relationships with friends in order to enhance their personal support networks. This seemed to further enhance a motivation to improve on values-based measures (construct continuums). The sample identified clear role models amongst the elements used in the VARGT, aligning their *self-ideal* element to them, providing information on the characteristics they aspire to. According to Bandura (1994), where similarity is assumed with a role model, there will be a greater influence from this person. Furthermore, having positive role models plays an important part in a person's motivation for change and self-belief in their capability to change (Bandura, 1994). Role models essentially provide information and examples of how to navigate the social world (Bandura, 1994), although one may not have the necessary skills to action this learning.

### **Concluding participant reflections.**

The VARGT eyeball analysis is the final stage of collaborative participant engagement. Participants were invited to reflect independently on what they noticed when visually reviewing their personal construct grids with element ratings completed. Reflections identified the nature of the emergent constructs, the patterns of placements of elements, the interrelationships between certain elements against constructs, in meaningful ways to the individual. The VARGT eyeball analysis provoked spontaneous insights from participants in respect of their stalking related mindset and behaviours. Before commencing the VARGT, participants clarified that

they were not stalkers, yet had consented to take part in the research explicitly exploring the experiences of those who have committed stalking, or related offences. Often perceived as denial and/or a reluctance to align themselves at any stage with their constructed views of what a stalker is may actually be functional to guard against further shame. Ware, Blagden and Harper (2018) reported that those in denial of their offences were indeed more shame-prone. Fitting with a typical stalker profile, they concluded that deniers in their study (men convicted of sexual offences) were less likely to be antisocial and sadistic, and more compulsive, than admitters.

The originating study (chapter 4) encourages attempts to work with, and understand the meaning-making of any presenting denial, which supports previous findings in offender rehabilitation work with those having committed sexual offences (see Ware & Marshall, 2008). The research study from which this data set was extracted took a similar approach to exploring the stalking offending in that exploratory questions focussed on accessing identified life problems which led to the conviction, however periphery at first the responses seemed. This approach allows time for empathic understanding and the development of a therapeutic alliance (Ware et al., 2018). It is suggested that denial as a function can be understood independently to psychosocial deficits that underpin the offending behaviour, and with a compassionate focussed approach the impact of this as a barrier can be reduced (see Walton & Hocken, 2018; Ware et al, 2018). Given the less than clear legislation around what actually constitutes stalking, the prevalence of denial and minimisation amongst this offender group is significant. With an appreciation of the above and need to build therapeutic alliance and raising awareness of the conceptual aspects of stalking, therapeutic aims can be fulfilled.

Participants freely narrated the meaning of their own completed visual grids with reference to denial and rejection of the stalker label, yet acknowledged problematic behaviours in their past, which related to their stalking offending. Such disclosures were unanimously provided by the sample, reflecting on the pattern of aligned placements of the *self-past* and *stalker* elements. The eyeball analysis made it impossible to deny the similarities with their own construal of *stalker* given the pattern placements. This created discrepancy once more.

*I could see the resemblance, as in with the stalker, but I wouldn't class myself as a stalker. But I have got tendencies of a stalker because I would follow her to school. I would want answers and I wouldn't leave her until I got answers (P1)*

This level of acknowledgement shows a shift in the ability to admit stalking-related behaviours, which therapeutically speaking provides a basis upon which to explore criminogenic need without getting stuck in a defensive presentation if labelled a stalker. Shifts in initial resistance to align themselves in the past conceptually with the *stalker*, and be associated with the label, were prominent. Blagden et al. (2012) found that one key function of denial and minimisations was to avoid feelings associated with shame and associated fears related to rejection by important others, i.e., family and friends. This overarching feeling, linked to poor self-worth, can trigger aggressive interpersonal reactions as a defensive function (Tangney & Dearing, 2002).

The visible and exposing representation offered by the VARGT was unequivocal, the essence of which for the sample is captured within this quote: *'I don't want to label myself as a stalker and I don't like that I've got the same traits as one'* (P5). Despite this uncomfortable experience, in reviewing the completed grids, participants openly and critically appraised their past offending and demonstrated victim impact awareness.

*When I was stalking in the past I was absolutely obsessed, fixated with a woman. I was exhibiting disturbing behaviours which terrified her. I had a bad impact on her, forced her to change her lifestyle (P3)*

The VARGT acted as a guided discovery vehicle, which seemed to mitigate against the need to remain defensive and psychologically guarded. The eyeball analysis prompted participants to reflect on themselves. Preceding this, there was a cognitively loaded activity to undertake and a randomness in the rating of elements along the construct continuums. The subsequent pause for reflection constituted the eyeball analysis, where the completed grids were reviewed at length. Effectively the participants idiosyncratically interpreted their own repertory grids. This activity prompted participants to reflect how they had made cognitive changes already whilst in custody. They were reflective on how different they felt compared to when they

were offending in the community, and identified the journey towards the self-ideal as motivating. The cathartic impact of the VARGT was palpable.

*It's helped me on so many different levels. It's so good to actually see, "you know what you've changed, you really have changed. You're changing" I've changed so much that I don't want to re-change. I want to be the person I am now. Take the words and put them into action is what I really want to do. How blind I was before I started doing this exercise with yourself. My eyes feel tired just looking at the significant big change (P1)*

Positive evaluations of self-change are common within the context of a passage of time, especially where continued difficulties have been moderated by the restrictiveness of a forensic setting (Ross & Wilson, 2003). Notwithstanding this aspect of hope and motivation is valuable and could be harnessed for therapeutic benefit. Realistically, the restricted environment of prison has some risk-reducing benefits; in this context, chapter 4 presents research findings suggesting the positive deterrent effect on stalking of being imprisoned. The will to reform was strong across the sample. Some participants focussed on the particular consequences of their offending behaviours and were able to appreciate realistic challenges ahead.

*Because I've come to prison the realisation of my son not seeing me, affecting his life as a child. I'm determined to not do the things that I've been like. But there are days where I know that my personality hasn't completely changed and I'd want to act that way but I'd force myself not to (P5)*

This cost and benefit analysis style disclosure, maps onto the MI tactics known to be helpful in progressing through the stages of change.

When undertaking their own eyeball analyses of the VARGT grid, participants not only identified aspects which defined them in the past, but those which they had successfully moved away from to focus their desires to be a better person.

*That was me in the past way over there and where I am now, I'm where I want to be way over there so it shows my will to reform, I suppose to be a better person than what I have been, to turn away from my offending (P3)*

This appeared to be facilitated by using the *self-ideal* element on the grid and participants' construct appraisals and element comparisons. *Self-ideal* elements were aligned with participants' admired significant others.

*My parents, along with other friends, are very much my benchmarks for an offending-free life and a very happy one. I've got stuff I want to do, that I want to achieve (P4)*

The comparisons made were particularly motivating for participants as tangible goals were highlighted. Participants viewed their release from prison as a fresh start, and all were confident of not reoffending. This seems in line with Maruna and King's (2009) concept of moral redeemability, that suggests a belief that one's past does not determine their future, pertinently their criminality; this underpins the 'what works' and 'desistance' literature (Maruna & Mann, 2019).

### **Concluding comments on the application of the VARGT in research and clinical practice**

Whilst the data originated within a researcher-participant context, the Visually Adapted Repertory Grid Technique (VARGT) demonstrated a wealth of potential for application in clinical and forensic assessment, and treatment contexts. Its ability to maximise collaborative engagement with people who have stalked is apparent. The richness of participant-led, insightful disclosures about themselves and about their stalking offending behaviours was a surprising outcome. This VARGT ability has clear benefits for further application in research, clinical and forensic settings. This chapter illustrates the benefits of the practitioner-researcher-practitioner cycle in honing in on knowledge and practice gaps and later identifying specific utility of findings for greatest impact.

Insights provided about contributory features to, and functions of, the samples' stalking offending behaviours were profound. The VARGT encouraged a collaborative therapeutic and working alliance, provoking new insights and disclosures, providing rich foundations for further identification and exploration of core criminogenic needs of people who stalk. This technique therefore, could assist practitioners in being able to prepare offenders for treatment intervention to address

their bespoke needs, but also add to the knowledge and practice gaps internationally in respect of engaging, and providing psychological intervention, with people who commit stalking offences.

The reflections and supporting data extracts demonstrate the therapeutic value of the VARGT in assisting meaningful disclosures through guided discovery and allowing the participant and researcher, and potentially practitioner, to access a deeper understanding. The ability of the VARGT to provoke within-sample replicable patterns in self-reflective personal disclosures, for example in appraising self-concepts, admirable characteristics in identified role models, has generic potential as a research and professional engagement tool. Given stalking behaviours appear to be driven in part by an underlying type of relational attachment disorder (see MacKenzie, Mullen, Ogloff, McEwan & James, 2008), understanding their relational and social world views, their relationship goals, role models and self-concepts, will assist professionals in working responsively. This is with the ultimate goal of identifying criminogenic needs and skills/knowledge deficits to address in treatment, subsequently seeking to impact upon rehabilitative success.

The VARGT ensures transparency in the interactions and personally relevant discussions, a client-led formulation and motivation enhancement, with an underlying collaborative therapeutic alliance. The resultant guided self-discoveries appeared relatively undefended and unguarded, perhaps due to the technique's ability and the further visual exposure of personal construct systems back to participants. The VARGTs elicitation of key features for case formulation provided further support of the utility of RGTs for such clinical use, and provided the additional benefit of having visually accessible information for participants to determine and own. The collaborative nature of charting the construct continuums and final ratings provided an engagement environment experientially different from that of psychological assessment interviews, traditional RGT interviewing methods and indeed usual research semi-structured interviewing where direct eye contact and instant verbal exchange is required.

The alignment of traits of *self-past* and *stalker* elements was powerful amongst the sample. This would provide an opportunity to educate regarding the legal and conceptual elements of what constitutes stalking and allow a re-focus on the



problematic behaviours, and underlying unmet needs, as opposed to fighting the label. This has significance in being responsive to this offender group when first engaging. The VARGT final eyeball analysis has therapeutic value in bringing about this level of acceptance crucial in being able to address their needs, given they can acknowledge the underlying problematic thoughts and behaviours in a less guarded fashion.

There are realistic limitations to the reflective assertions, despite being derived from the participant sample's experiences. Research to date has failed to evidence treatment outcome and reduced recidivism success based on problem insight and motivation, despite this longstanding assumption (Linn-Walton & Maschi, 2015). The value of these factors within therapeutic interventions however seems clear for both client and clinician, and links to the development of therapeutic alliance and personal growth. Additionally, the VARGT was utilised in a research context, without any links to risk assessment functions, and with the associated non-judgemental, participant experience-focussed and empowering approaches. Whilst this interactional style should be implicit in clinical-practitioner engagements, the overall experience may be biased by associated connotations of risk judgements taking place. The practitioner would regardless be expected to work to with and understand responsivity issues, such as this understandable guardedness. Lastly, it would be imperative to undertake further research in order to firmly establish any therapeutic benefit of the using the VARGT itself. This could be most robustly ascertained via conducting randomised controlled trials, employing a number of engagement techniques alongside a 'no intervention' control group.

Despite suggestions that the quality of the therapeutic bond predicts the treatment outcome regardless of inherent tasks and goals (Ross et al., 2008), the VARGT's visual and kinaesthetic qualities were expressly cited as collaborative and useful. This was regardless of underlying self-disclosed psychopathology (i.e., Autistic Spectrum Disorder conditions). It provided collaborative focus and was experienced as less cognitively intense, i.e., experienced differently to a direct questioning, interrogative style of interviewing. Notwithstanding, the interpersonal qualities of the researcher or indeed clinician/practitioner are pivotal to any successful participant/client engagements regardless of the tasks and goals intended. For example, with those committing stalking offences, it would be pertinent to focus on

being non-judgemental, non-directive, collaborative, and wanting to understand their psychosocial functioning as opposed to challenging minimisations or the behaviours themselves.

The positive and motivating self-change reflections were significant. Such self-beliefs are purported to be attributable to the passage of time and absence of continued dysfunctional behaviours due to a restrictive environment (Ross & Wilson, 2003). This is poignant and not to be dismissed as a counterargument to self-perceived progress. Indeed, the sample identified the eventuality of imprisonment due to their stalking campaign to be the '*wakeup call*' and essentially the most impactful event in terms of deterrence within the original research study from which the data here were extracted (see chapter 4). That is not to say that imprisonment prevents continued stalking in all cases, nor that this break in an episode precedes a permanent cessation after release. This motivation and hope is not commonly observed by practitioners with this client group. Independently identifying characteristics to alter and those to aspire to, whilst recognising those linked to their own stalking behaviours is encouraging. This should not be simply downplayed nor dismissed as false hope or a manipulation of criminal justice agencies, but rather harnessed and nurtured in a collaborative and structured way. The sample unanimously demonstrated insight, wanted to discuss their experiences, happily guided by the VARGT, and were able to identify aspects they would want help with to better themselves and their relational skills.

There are numerous practical implications emerging from this chapter additional to those highlighted above. Despite the clinical and research capabilities of the repertory grid technique, there has been relatively limited application within forensic contexts (Blagden et al., 2013). It is hoped that this chapter illustrates its value further and encourages adaptations akin to the VARGT in order to improve engagement with participants/clients. Improving responsiveness within rehabilitative attempts is important to its success (Kozar & Day, 2017). The preceding chapters highlight the range of factors to be considered with people who stalk. The potential impact of the VARGT in a clinical setting, providing valuable in-roads with those who have stalked, could be capitalised on by practitioners. This would assist clients in recognising problems and self-determined aspects for change whilst remaining positive about the future. Given psychological case formulation is a robust

alternative to psychiatric diagnosis (Johnstone et al., 2018), consisting of a collaboratively constructed hypothesis for problematic behaviours, i.e., stalking, the VARGT provides a potentially valuable tool in aligning psychological knowledge with the experiential expertise of the client. The VARGT process and output satisfies a recommendation for collaborative engagement, and indeed is more participant/client led, as demonstrated with a cohort of males convicted of stalking, or related offences, in the originating research study. Johnstone et al. (2018) reports on the positive experience of service users in using a collaborative case formulation approach, which appeared to be a somewhat replicated finding with the use of the VARGT in the original research study.

## CHAPTER 6. THESIS DISCUSSION

This chapter aims to provide an overview of the thesis' outcomes combined, specifically addressing the overall thesis aims. These were to explore what drives those who commit stalking offences, and to address how practitioners can best respond to those needs. In order to address these aims, this thesis has drawn upon a mixed methods research study. This included seven adult males convicted of stalking (or related offences), largely of the Rejected but also Intimacy Seeker typology, alongside a systematic review of international literature pertaining to psychopathology features, and incorporated existing literature. This chapter ends with some reflections on possible future research and a final summary.

### **What drives those who commit stalking offences?**

Previously assumed mental illness and personality disorder prevalence amongst people who stalk has been conceptually challenged within the systematic review, and is contradicted by recent research findings (see Nijdam-Jones, Rosenfeld, Gerbrandij, Quick & Galietta, 2018). Where personality disorders have been found amongst stalker samples, the Not Otherwise Specified (NOS) subtype was most common (e.g., Harmon, Rosner & Owens, 1995; Meloy & Gothard, 1995; Meloy, Rivers, Siegel, Gothard, Naimark & Nicolini, 2000). Personality disorder NOS has been deemed a '*milder form of PD*' (Wilberg, Hummelen, Pedersen & Karterud, 2008: 467), which may explain why people who stalk are commonly otherwise law-abiding. In any event, conceptually speaking, personality disorder diagnoses do not explain what drives stalking, regardless of type or classification of stalker, they merely depict behavioural manifestations collectively defined.

The research study contained in this thesis concluded that narcissistic vulnerability was underlying in all cases, fuelling a relentless pursuit, regardless of the consequences. Findings from the analyses undertaken provide support for the five facets of the Relational Goal Pursuit (RGP) theory (Cupach & Spitzberg, 2000). The research study provides novel contributions to knowledge in this respect. It aligns with RGP theory, and explains the attachment and maintenance of intimate relationships as the pursuit of a desired goal, linked to the concept of underlying narcissistic vulnerability. The driver for people who stalk has been conceptualised

therefore as seeking validation from the victim, attempting to re-establish or attain the relationship. Given the fundamental relational goal, the pursuit of such need becomes persistent and obsessive as the focus is on the distress, as opposed to finding an appropriate solution (see Brownhalls, Duffy, Eriksson & Barlow, 2019). The research study contained in chapter 4 suggests narcissistic vulnerability may be a psychological predisposition which explains who is more likely to employ defensive strategies in relationships (described as preoccupied attachment style behaviours). Furthermore, to also explain RGP behaviours (stalking) as a defensive response when faced with actual or threatened abandonment given the strength of the higher order associations with self-worth and life happiness. Whilst RGP theory conceptualises ex-partner stalkers (*Rejected* typology), the findings within the research study were equally applicable to an *Intimacy Seeker* typology participant. This may be suggestive that RGP theory could be relative to any typology where the motive is to attain or re-establish an intimate relationship, and will require further exploration.

The research study within this thesis supports the role of attachment theory in explaining the behaviours of those who stalk, again adding novel contributions to knowledge, and explores the identification of narcissistic vulnerability as an underlying psychopathology making a person vulnerable to stalk within certain conditions. This assertion however remains contextual to the sample typologies (mainly *Rejected*, but inclusive of *Intimacy Seeker*). A review of the literature suggests that the concepts of narcissistic vulnerability, insecure (preoccupied) attachment styles, some personality disorder traits, and relational goal pursuit theory share some synonymous pathology manifestations (see chapter 4). In discussion of the research study findings, a conceptually nested diagram is presented (see chapter 4, Figure 14). In conclusion, narcissistic vulnerability as interpreted within the research study, can contribute to existing knowledge regarding theories for stalking, the strength of such pursuits and offer new ways of thinking in terms of devising treatment interventions.

The findings overall from this thesis suggest that beyond the commonality of narcissistic vulnerability, heterogeneity regarding responsivity factors for those who stalk exist. This supports the need to individually understand the person, and find ways to engage with those who commit stalking offences based on their individual

psychosocial functioning, readiness to change, personality characteristics, mental health, and intellectual and cognitive functioning ability.

### **How can practitioners best respond to the needs of people who stalk?**

The systematic review and related discussion identified that the assumed prevalence of mental disorders amongst those who stalk is most likely attributable to sample and diagnostically biased previous studies. These have largely drawn samples from psychiatric populations and archival records deemed to have over-pathologised behaviours (Nijdam-Jones et al., 2018). In terms of responding to psychopathology features, this thesis concludes the presence of narcissistic vulnerability, linked to insecure (preoccupied) attachment styles, but does not find conclusions on common mental disorder diagnoses. The systematic review, and indeed stalking related empirical studies, have relied on quantitative methods and utility of diagnostic classification, thus conclusions have referred to these, as opposed to more fundamental psychological drivers for the behaviours. The presence of narcissistic vulnerability needs careful consideration in any attempts to engage, assess, treat, or collaborate in risk management strategies, with those who commit stalking offences.

This thesis offers counter-evidence for historical assumptions of the strength of associations between stalking and major mental illness and indeed of higher intellectual levels than other offenders (see systematic review, chapter 2). The review advocates that whilst there may be some distinct differences between adult males who stalk, and the general population, psychiatric populations and general offender populations, there are also some similarities. Crucially, that each person would benefit from individual and comprehensive psychopathology and responsivity assessments in order to fully understand their stalking-related treatment and responsivity needs. Indeed, the sample used could indicate a higher prevalence of ASD amongst people who stalk than previously assumed. The research study in this thesis highlighted the disdain for negative labelling and a warming towards being understood, which fits conceptually with an individual with narcissistic vulnerability. The use of a collaborative case formulation approach therefore satisfies all the above points.

To date this is the first mixed methods study undertaken with those who have committed stalking or related offences. The findings challenge previous practitioner assumptions regarding those who stalk lacking in insight, and exposes the fundamental and psychological motivation for stalking, which underlies the justifications, changeable emotions, and associated behaviours often observed. Narcissistic vulnerability and the associated need to protect and/or restore a fragile sense of self from further damage may be pivotal for people who stalk. Not only driving their stalking fundamentally, but also reducing their ability to independently cease the behaviours given the meaning behind the pursuits, and the intensity therefore of their emotions. This feature may also be crucial to understanding professional engagement challenges and observations of minimisation and denial.

One important finding and least commonly focussed upon amongst the literature, was the evidence of a higher risk of suicide amongst stalker samples (McEwan, James, Mullen & Ogloff, 2010), compared with psychiatric and general populations. This was proposed to be due to the added stresses contextual to the stalking situation, heightening risk in an already psychological vulnerable population. This illustrates the level of distress being experienced by the person stalking, which indicates a need for compassion-based working, but also understanding how this relates to increased risk to others.

Given the findings from the research study and the researcher-practitioner reflections on therapeutic impact of the VARGT, third generation CBT approaches appear to have face validity in being able to therapeutically engage with those who commit stalking offences. Compassion-Focussed Therapy (CFT; Gilbert, 2009) teaches and espouses compassion on the premise that caring behaviour aids personal development, as purported within attachment theory. It allows for a full exploration of the issues in a safe and empowering way, developing a positive therapeutic relationship, and reducing threat system alerts. Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT; Hayes, Strosahl & Wilson, 1999) teaches psychological flexibility, helping individuals respond functionally in the presence of difficult thoughts and feelings. Both approaches aim to be responsive to shame-based responding and to build a collaborative therapeutic alliance. It follows however, that those with an underlying narcissistic vulnerability and preoccupied attachment styles

may find this alliance difficult to develop (Brennan & Shaver, 1998). Furthermore, once developed, the client may in turn feel hypersensitive to the endings stage of therapeutic intervention, requiring careful management (Farber, 2015). Attending to the attachment bond separation in therapy will be as important as trying to build therapeutic alliance.

### **Future research**

The thesis research study utilised a novel mixed methods approach to engaging with those who commit stalking offences. Further research aiming to replicate, or challenge, these findings would be welcomed. This is in view of IPA themes, as well as replicating the use of the VARGT to elicit insight. The VARGT helped participants review themselves (as three separate self-concepts) in comparison to other self-concepts and other people (i.e., *stalker* and *self-ideal*), in a non-threatening way. The VARGT enabled such sensitive engagement in the wider context of stalking and the relational goal of achieving validation through intimate relationships. It is proposed therefore, that the VARGT could be piloted with other populations where engagement challenges are apparent, yet rich insights are required to advance topics of research. This research approach could also be applied to other populations, such as females who stalk, and indeed, differing typologies to investigate the presence, or not, of narcissistic vulnerability. Furthermore, the concept of narcissistic vulnerability requires further conceptual attention and theory testing for this offender group generally.

Participants reported finding the VARGT enjoyable and a helpful way to be able to talk things through. Complex and individually significant relational aspects in their life were visually presented, which provided a collaborative and non-threatening context for them to explore their offending behaviours more objectively. It provoked reflection, insight and motivation to change. Given the growing demand for professional assistance to assess and manage stalking, and a lack of empirical evidence for the management of those who stalk (Purcell & McEwan, 2018), studies evaluating the use of the VARGT as a collaborative formulation engagement tool may be fruitful. Furthermore, evaluating the impact of subsequent therapeutic intervention using CFT or ACT could further advance the knowledge and practice gap, given the associated links made within this thesis.



## Summary

There exists a convoluted and confusing picture of the psychopathology of those who commit stalking offences given their heterogeneity. Diagnoses and labels can be harmful to clients and distracting for professionals. With victim protection being paramount, people who stalk require more than legal sanctions to be able to cease their behaviours in the majority of cases. In tandem with improving public awareness, support for Criminal Justice agencies to master the infrastructure in being consistent with the message that stalking is damaging and unacceptable is crucial. Stalking needs to be viewed as a functional behaviour for those with narcissistic vulnerability, whose relational goals are to preserve their fragile sense of self and self-worth. In fact, they enter intimate relationships, or choose an object to have a fantasy relationship with, to try to fulfil their lacking sense of self-worth. The psychological damage to the self caused therefore by the termination of a relationship, or realisation that a fantasied one will not materialise, means their threat systems become overactive, leading to anxiety and depression. This in turn leads to employing behaviours to try to prevent the fundamental psychological damage. From the perspective of the person stalking, this hierarchical and most fundamental psychological need overrides any other personal consequences, or that of others. In summary, the driving behaviours of stalking are to either reconcile and re-establish the relationship, attain a relationship to fill an inadequate sense of self, or to exact revenge, or a combination of these, to preserve and restore their sense of validation.

To advance the current impasse regarding how to respond to the needs of those who stalk in order to prevent the behaviours, this thesis draws together empirical evidence to suggest the need for a comprehensive and collaboration case formulation approaches as opposed to purely diagnostic processes being undertaken. It espouses the need to engage in ways that demands a therapeutic alliance to be developed. A more compassion and values based approach is required to fully understand, and work alongside the person who stalks. Particularly when they do so to fulfil their fundamental psychological needs for intimacy and a secure sense of self-worth. Substitute pro-social behaviours could be introduced, whilst compassionately accepting the vulnerable narcissism at play. By using the VARGT, the therapeutic alliance was quickly developed, perhaps given the lack of

risk assessment/judgement focus. Instead, a curious approach shared by both parties exposed case formulation aspects, which were reviewed and refined primarily by the participant. The VARGT demonstrated its value in a research context, and practitioner reflections on participant experiences illustrate its potential as a clinical tool as aforementioned.

This thesis offers researchers, practitioners and policymakers new insights for application to the assessment, treatment and management of those who commit stalking (or related) offences. It concludes on psychopathology literature, a mixed methods research study, and defines the use and benefits of a novel researcher-practitioner tool for engagement with those who commit stalking offences. This thesis offers suggestions throughout, for new ways of approaching our work and utilising engagement opportunities with those convicted of stalking, or related offences. This is for the benefit of people who stalk and have difficulty ceasing, associated victims, practitioners and the general public. The chapters herein are currently in preparation for publication, to widen the scope of impact in the application of findings.

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## APPENDICES

### **Appendix A: Reflective summary on being a researching practitioner**

This appendix briefly summarises reflections on being a researching practitioner based on the full learning journey contained in the Individual Learning Plan. It focusses on the developmental journey and interplay between researcher and practitioner, highlighting knowledge and understanding of the topic, and the personal skills, qualities and attributes demonstrated to fulfil the requirements of this Doctorate in Forensic Psychology.

With 18 years practitioner experience in the field of forensic psychology, and the past nine years specialising in engaging with those who commit stalking offences, this Professional Doctorate has proved invaluable for my learning and practitioner journey. The natural identification of gaps in knowledge and practitioner application informed critical considerations around which area of investigation was most fundamental in improving practitioner interventions with stalking offenders. Practitioner-led literature reviews and experiences of client work influenced the view of this offender group being difficult to engage, and challenging to intervene in terms of preventing reoffending. Empirical research focuses on psychopathology and risk factors, leaving a gap in knowledge around why people stalk and which psychological interventions are effective.

I attended all workshops and supervision opportunities, as well as inviting peer discussion in my practitioner capacity, in order to assimilate learning and reflections into developing research design ideas and systematic review plans. This iterative journey continues beyond thesis submission. The process is both frustrating at times but highly rewarding as I continue to critically evaluate existing ideas, remaining open to challenge for the benefit of the impact of the findings. I found that the practitioner-researcher-practitioner cycle led me to be specific and impact focussed in my thesis design, and I am currently preparing the chapters for publication and remain in communication with experts in the field both inside and outside of the Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) in order to disseminate learning for application.

The systematic review was more complex than envisaged. Whilst I understood the process as robust to make the conclusive findings credible and replicable, I found value in its ability to represent the most efficient way of collating sources to answer research questions. Through application of learning and utilising this method, it showed me how easy it is otherwise to misrepresent conclusions or gaps in the empirical research literature, and repeat shortcomings unnecessarily. This evaluative approach to literature reviewing has broadened my thinking around reliance on empirical evidence and ensuring critical appraisal is respectfully undertaken. Reviewing psychopathology features of stalkers in this way was intentional, to further inform research design, both in terms of engagement style in interviewing and for consideration of research questions and overall aims.

I read around and engaged in peer discussions to develop my understanding of epistemological positions and what philosophically for me constitutes legitimate knowledge. This was an important initial stage that I may have previously neglected. I understood epistemological positions to influence how you approach research questions and determine your methodology. Based on this considered learning and my own personal and practitioner beliefs, I felt that my research would need to assume a constructive alternativism (Kelly, 1955) epistemology. My view was that those who commit stalking offences would be best placed to answer questions about what drives their stalking, and how best practitioners can respond to their needs. Furthermore, that this legitimate knowledge could be provided through capturing their experiences. Despite presumed engagement barriers to navigate, I believed that Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis would allow me to access this experiential expert insight. Using IPA blended with Repertory Grids, I believed my research questions could be answered with my epistemological position aligned. I also determined that the use of Repertory Grids, underpinned by Personal Construct Theory (Kelly, 1955), would add a structured activity for the research contact and provide quantitative analysis of qualitative data.

Training workshops and supervision discussions allowed me to conceptualise the procedures better and understand its place within analysis, i.e., providing the basis for the interview process yet the final analysis coming second to IPA so as not to bias the intended double hermeneutics. I was keen to ensure participants did not

find the contact too cognitively resource intensive, and so endeavoured to make the repertory grid technique visual and kinaesthetic, therefore more engaging and collaborative. The Repertory Grids workshop was very useful to be able to present my Visually Adapted Repertory Grid Technique (VARGT) with rationale and respond to related queries and challenge. The most powerful thing to come out of the workshop however, was the experience of participating in a repertory grid exercise myself. It quickly revealed my values system concerning a topic without realising, and yet I knew the technique. It reaffirmed my desire to use this technique in my own research and allow participants to be able to see the outputs in this way, hopefully giving them something back. I was fortunate in my practitioner role to access a service user group to test out concepts regarding supplied constructs for the VARGT, and even complete a trial run of administration, seeking feedback from service users in order to improve the research contact experience and robustness.

The conferences I have attended (one which I organised with the Police service), and presented at, have given me opportunities to discuss my research aims, methodology and understanding of the international literature on stalking. The conference held jointly with the Police service in August 2018 was particularly exciting given that delegates and speakers attended from all types of agencies related to the understanding and risk management of stalking offenders. It gave me an opportunity to take questions and receive feedback, and to assimilate new learning into my developmental journey. These opportunities really helped to bring the projects to life and spur me on motivationally.

Utilising Gantt charts has kept me focussed and organised, which has assisted with work-life balance and time management. I have been mindful of funding issues and agreed deadlines pertaining to this, ensuring good use of public sector money and attempting to produce the best outcomes but within a sensible time period to produce them for application and benefit. Sometimes these confinements have assisted in being pragmatic about unexpected events. For example, the systematic review produced only mixed gender studies, and as such decisions had to be made about continuing the write up of findings with this caveat or to discontinue and write it up with this as the outcome. Given the wealth of information contained within those studies and the small number of females within the samples, it was deemed appropriate to critically appraise and review findings to add to the field. A further



example would be the recruitment strategy being unsuccessful in yielding community participants. I decided to continue to recruit from within HMPPS and complete data collection regardless of a community element, which had been targeted in order to get a balance of non-violent and perhaps less serious stalkers, and those not currently externally restricted. It transpired anyhow that the sample from within HMPPS created that layer of homogeneity of sampling whilst containing a diverse group of stalkers in respect of many features.

The reflexivity log throughout the journey was a useful space for reflection and for tracking aspects of change, either in the research administration or conceptualising during analysis. Additional areas of self-directed reading (i.e., narcissistic vulnerability) or training events (i.e., working with clients with ASD), added to the iterative journey at relevant points, determined by the sample and the research findings, giving depth of meaning for practitioner understanding and application. I have a strong enthusiasm for the subject matter and so taking time to make links and discuss concepts and ideas with other forensic psychology service providers, both in the UK and Australia, has been rewarding. It provided opportunities to discuss my research aims, early findings, and possible impact through application. This has allowed me to revise and/or become more enthused by the thesis direction and future impact potential. My practitioner role has also benefited from these networking activities, as my knowledge has increased and sound boarding options widened. Examples include having had lengthy discussions with researcher-practitioners in Australia over emerging IPA themes and service provision; and, having contact with the founder of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) in order to ascertain whether this intervention had been trialled with stalkers and indeed whether theoretically based on my emerging IPA themes it had potential to benefit this population.

My researcher-practitioner competence development has been most beneficial for contributing to the forensic psychology field regarding stalking, and applying innovative adapted research methodology. It has allowed me to immerse myself in this topic area and learn/iterate an array of research methodology and related subject matters in order to appraise and assimilate, or reject, from thesis discussions. The final reflections detailed in Domain A of the ILP illustrates the unpredictable journey of self-directed learning based on literature reviewing and data-led interest. The researching-practitioner journey has determined the course of

learning by remaining open to emerging findings, and wider iteration. I have continuously stayed networked with others inside and outside of the Nottingham Trent University and HMPPS organisations, sharing my innovative research technique and emerging findings. I have attended continued professional development and research conferences and forums, both as delegate and speaker, taking every opportunity for networking regardless of their stalking offender experience or background. Through this, I have been able to broaden my views on how practitioners could best respond to the needs of stalkers. For example, liaising with a researcher-practitioner who evaluated a problem-solving court system, designed to offer treatment interventions as opposed to short sentences, with both party agreement, to other offender groups.

I am fortunate to have a practitioner role that directly maps onto my research project. With an existing expert network from which to draw from, I was able to hone in on what would be most useful internationally, and improve HMPPS psychology services strategy in line with my developing knowledge. Being closely linked in my practitioner role to the National Research Committee for HMPPS I had a thorough understanding of research protocol for ethical approvals and knowledge of the challenges that researching within prisons can bring. Given the depth of stalking offender knowledge development, this has contributed to the robustness of the regional and national HMPPS psychology services strategies I have been writing. It is in the process of key stakeholder consultation and aims to provide a framework for the identification, assessment and treatment interventions for stalking offenders in our custody. Collaborating with national colleagues has further led to preliminary plans for piloting innovative intervention strategies with stalking offenders in HMPPS custody and a review of current practices.

Thesis writing has been a testing time given the wish to progress quickly and supply a finished product whilst having a desire to refresh knowledge and continually explore what the findings mean within the wider literature. I have had to learn to stop somewhere and commit the learning and insights to paper, acknowledging this would be a never-ending process. Recent advancement in legislation with the Stalking Protection Act, and pivotal publications regarding treatment approaches (Purcell & McEwan, 2018) and psychopathology (Nijdam-Jones, Rosenfeld, Gerbrandij, Quick & Galietta, 2018), drove me to review the thesis in its totality for points of convergence and divergence, and taking a self-critical approach to be able to improve on the output for impact purposes. I am planning a number of

publications and presentations at national multi-disciplinary conferences this year, and thereafter. Timely dissemination is key to making best use of the resource and enthusiasm that has gone into this thesis. I have prepared a plan for dissemination and have gained the necessary approvals in order to publish and verbally disseminate key findings. Engagement and impact is important. I would question why I spent time and funded money on research when it may have little impact and is not disseminated as far as possible. I was mindful throughout my literature searches and when re-formulating my research question what the impact would be for practitioners, and what benefits this would have for stalking offenders. I intended for my research to have a fundamental impact and real value for clients and professionals, which will impact on public protection. Recent collaborations within HMPPS and MOJ Intervention Services bring to fruition my own, and my colleagues' researching-practitioner achievements.

## Appendix B: Stalker motivational typologies

This appendix provides a brief overview of the varying stalker motivational typologies referred to within this thesis. These typologies are based on initial motivation categorisations developed by Mullen, Pathé, Purcell & Stuart (1999).

**Rejected:** Usually targeting ex-intimate partners, this typology of stalker demonstrates a complex mixture of desire for revenge and reconciliation. They feel a sense of loss, combined with anger, jealousy, and sadness in changeable proportions.

**Intimacy seeker:** Usually targeting strangers or acquaintances, half of this group delusional disorders and serious mental illness. Many were morbidly infatuated and some had personality disorder. The purpose of their stalking was to establish a relationship, and many would be enraged at their would-be partner's indifference to their approaches.

**Incompetent suitors:** Usually intellectually limited and/or socially incompetent, and some experienced a sense of entitlement to a partner but no capacity, or willingness to start by establishing some lesser form of social interaction. Often previously stalked others.

**Resentful:** Stalking is usually perpetrated to frighten and distress the victim. Half targeted as a vendetta and half randomly targeted, holding a sense of grievance.

**Predatory:** Usually preparing for a sexual attack, with elements of rehearsal and pleasurable antecedent fantasising. They enjoy the sense of power produced by stalking.

## Appendix C: Systematic review protocol

<p><b>Aims:</b></p> <p>To conduct a systematic review and provide a narrative synthesis of quantitative studies for the question in focus.</p>		
<p><b>Background:</b></p> <p>This review will synthesise and appraise robust international research literature, which focusses on the features of psychopathology for male stalking offenders. There is a dearth of evidence-based guidance, which can be utilised for improving professional engagement, intervention and rehabilitative attempts. This review will also identify weaknesses and potential gaps within the available international research literature and make recommendations on aspects for further research to strengthen or challenge current research claims and to advance knowledge in the area under review. Qualitative research exploring the experience of stalkers from this position is absent and this review and subsequent research project will assist in adding to international understanding of these issues to improve the success of criminal justice and professional engagement opportunities with stalking offenders.</p>		
<p><b>Question(s):</b></p> <p>What are the features of psychopathology for adult male stalking offenders? A Systematic Review.</p>		
<p><b>Systematic review search – 08/04/18:</b></p> <p>Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI: more qualitative focus) – all dates&gt;Stalk*=0 studies</p> <p>Cochrane Library (more quantitative, RCTs etc) – Stalk* Stalking=0 studies</p>		
Qualitative	<u><b>Quantitative</b></u>	Mixed Method
<b>Quantitative</b>		

<p><b>Population:</b>  Male stalkers (or males committing related offences i.e. harassment)  Aged 18 or over/ Adult  All ethnicities  All SES  Forensic or clinical setting; recognised for exhibiting problematic stalking behaviours</p>
<p><b>Intervention:</b>  (group of interest) Stalking offenders</p>
<p><b>Comparator:</b>  Stalkers and non-stalkers (including 'other offenders', 'general offenders' and general population)</p>
<p><b>Outcome:</b>  Focus on the psychopathology, not the stalking behaviours themselves.</p>
<p><b>Qualitative</b> - the focus is on the phenomena of interest rather than an intervention or difference between groups (minimum 8 papers)</p>
<p>Population:</p>
<p>Phenomenon of Interest:</p>
<p>Context:</p>
<p><b>Inclusion criteria:</b>  PICO, plus the following:  International studies available from searches in the English language  All dates of publication given dearth of research available  Human participants  All ethnicities and SES given dearth of research available</p>

Research papers with conducted analyses using recognised analysis method

**Exclusion criteria:**

Female only stalker participants given difference in typology prevalence and assumed psychopathologies

Children/young adults/juveniles/adolescents given limitations in diagnosing/assessing for psychopathology

Victim studies as unable to answer question

Cyber-stalking/Digital-stalking given the possible differences in offender methods and psychopathology not yet understood

College students as self-reporting participants given the systematic review requires studies with use of participants recognised formally for their stalking behaviour (clinical/forensic context). Any difference in 'I' would weaken the systematic review

Commentary/summary/review articles given analyses are already completed.

This systematic review requires empirical data

Book/Book chapters same as above

Assessment manuals given they provide structured/systematic review/summary of empirical data that support risk factors without providing study details

Articles related to risk factors and assessment tools same as above given summary of empirical data that support risk factors is provide but without study details

Case studies as there is no comparator group

Animal studies (i.e. deer)

Medical studies (i.e. brain stem)

**Journal Databases: 4**

Scopus - Largest database for peer-reviewed literature

PubMed (US government) - Access to primary literature; US government; large database

ProQuest (PsycINFO) - Large psychology database; ProQuest well-known

Criminal Justice Abstracts (EBSCO) - Criminal justice focus		
<p><b>Other published databases/sources:</b></p> <p>Review references of final screened articles (n= 7)</p> <p>Review of Google Scholar first 100 sorted by relevance for search term: 'male stalker psychopathology' (no additional citations after title screen)</p>		
<p><b>Grey literature sources:</b></p> <p>-PsycINFO dissertations and Theses – unpublished and not needed given date ranges of screened in documents and robustness of articles - 23 (none suitable in title screen)</p> <p>-EThOS – 14 (none suitable on title screen)</p> <p>-NTU IRep – 26 (none suitable on title screen)</p> <p>-NHS – clinical (none 08/04/18)</p> <p>-NRC – forensic (none 08/04/18)</p>		
<p><i>Reference searching? <b>Yes</b> – final screened in articles</i></p> <p><i>Contact authors? <b>No</b> – extracted up to date articles from international experts during searches</i></p> <p><i>Books? <b>No</b> – do not contain empirical data and not required given yield</i></p>		
Concept	Synonyms	Search terms (for TITLE and ABSTRACT)
Stalking (offenders)	Stalker; Harasser/harassment; Obsessional follower; stalking	Stalker  Stalking  'Obsessional follower'
<b>Psychopathology</b>	Deficit; Impairment; Syndrome; (intellectual) Difficulties; (personality) Disorder	Disorder  Deficit  Impairment  Syndrome



<b>Psychopathology</b>	Psychological Psychiatric Intellectual (difficulties) Attachment (disorder) Syndrome (autistic spectrum) Personality (disorder)	Psych* Intell* Attachment
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Search terms input:

**Line 1: Stalker OR stalking OR 'obsessional follower'** - no 'stalk\*' given brainstem research and removal of 'harass\*' given number of search results pertaining to sexual/discriminatory harassment not concept of stalking

[AND]

**Line 2: disorder OR deficit OR impairment OR syndrome** – to reflect psychopathology linked to the above population; priority ordering

[AND]

**Line 3: psych\* OR intell\* OR attachment** - stuck to psych\* to capture psychological, psychopathy and psychiatric. Mental disorder, developmental and personality disorder will be picked up by line 2. Issues to do with attachment and intelligence would not be.

## Appendix D: Original and adapted quality checklists

<p><b>Adapted Cowley checklist</b></p> <p><b>10 items</b></p> <p><b>Criterion</b></p>	<p><b>Cowley – checklist suitable for use in SRs of quantitative studies and comparison studies.</b></p> <p><b>13 items</b></p> <p><b>Criterion</b></p>
<p><b>Key criteria:</b></p>	<p><b>Key criteria:</b></p>
<p>Is the method of assignment to different sample groups appropriate for a comparative study design (from the description, what is the logic for case selection? Was purposeful sampling used?)</p>	<p>1) Method of assignment of patients to different prosthesis described</p>
<p>Are the sample groups matched appropriately for age, gender, (or effect of any differences evaluated in valid statistical analysis)?</p>	<p>2) Patient groups matched for diagnoses, age, and illness grade or indicators of activity level, sex, and/or weight, or effect of any differences evaluated in valid statistical analysis</p>
<p>Was appropriate statistical analysis undertaken?</p>	<p>3) Appropriate statistical analysis undertaken</p>

Were there appropriate and clearly defined criteria for measuring outcomes (i.e. validity of tests used to measure psychopathology – internal validity – and IRR considerations if applicable)?	4) Number of patients deceased or lost to follow-up reported or dealt with in statistical analysis
<b>Other criteria:</b>	5) Follow-up period, range and mean given
If retrospective data is used, were cases selected without knowledge of outcomes?	6) Prostheses models specified
Where retrospective data was used, were evaluators blind to the aims of the study?	7) Clearly defined criteria for measuring outcomes
In prospective studies, were evaluators blind to the aims of the study (i.e. were the researchers independent?), or were adequate steps taken to reduce unacceptable bias?	<b>OTHER CRITERIA</b>
Were results interpreted sensibly to account for the heterogeneity of the target sample?	8) If retrospective, patients selected without knowledge of outcomes
Did the authors provide a quantification of comparative data (i.e. significance levels assigned appropriately)?	9) In prospective studies, follow-up assessments blind to prosthesis type, if possible
Were bespoke design limitations	10) Results given for specific models

highlighted by the authors (i.e. selection bias of target or comparator group)?	and sizes
	11) Quantification of outcome criteria
	12) Follow-up data compared with preoperative data (mean and range)
	13) Independence of investigators (no vested interest)

**Appendix E: Included studies quality assessment ratings table**

<b>Author(s), Country</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Psychopathology/ Outcome</b>	<b>No. of key criterion met fully (max 4)</b>	<b>No. of other criteria met fully (max 6)</b>	<b>Overall rating (A, B or C)</b>
Harmon, Rosner & Owens  USA	1995	Mental illness; Erotomania	3  1 partially	2  1 N/A 2 N/K	C
MacKenzie, Mullen, Ogloff, McEwan & James  AUSTRALIA	2008	Attachment styles	3	2  2 N/A 1 N/K	B
MacKenzie, James, McEwan, Mullen & Ogloff  AUSTRALIA	2010	Intelligence (IQ)	4	3  2 N/A 1 N/K	A
McEwan, Mullen & MacKenzie  AUSTRALIA	2010	Suicide rates	3  1 partially	3  3 N/A	B
Meloy, & Gothard  USA	1995	Mental illness	3  1 partially	4  1 N/A	B

Meloy, Rivers, Siegel, Gothard, Naimark & Nicolini  USA	2000	Mental illness  (N.B. replication study)	3  1 partially	3  1 partially  1 N/A	B
Sandberg, McNeil & Binder  USA	1998	Mental illness	1  1 partially  1 N/K	2  2 N/K  1 N/A	C

**Ratings:**

**A** = (Kept as in Cowley's original checklist) *'Met all key and at least half of the others'. Results deemed 'likely to be valid and were accepted in this assessment'*

**B** = (Adapted to be able to discriminate given only one study met the above criteria) *'Majority of the key criteria are met and at least half of the other criteria are fully met'. Results were 'regarded with some reservation'.*

**C** = (Slightly adapted to allow for accurate discrimination between B and C) *'Papers clearly failed to meet more than one of the key criteria', 'or doesn't meet criteria for B'. 'The validity of the results given were considered very doubtful'.*

**N.B.** *Number of N/A reduces the maximum score for 'other criteria'.*

## **Appendix F: Research Materials**

### **PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET**

I am writing to invite you to take part in a research study. The purpose of this information sheet is to provide you with the details of the research so you can decide if you would like to take part. Please take the time to read this information sheet. Your involvement would be very valuable.

#### **Who is the researcher?**

I am a Qualified (BPS Chartered and HCPC Registered) Forensic Psychologist employed by Prison Service (HMPPS) Psychology Services. I have worked for the Prison Service in the Midlands region since July 2001 and I have a professional interest in working with those who have been convicted of stalking (or related) offences. This research study forms part of my Forensic Psychology Doctorate programme requirements. This research has received ethical approval by the National Research Committee (HMPPS) and Nottingham Trent University (NTU).

#### **Why am I being asked to take part in this research?**

I am interested in understanding more about the experiences of people convicted of stalking (or related) offences and their individual views on their circumstances and others. I am asking you specifically to take part in this study as your offending suggests that you may be able to contribute, which may help to develop how professionals address the individual needs of those with your conviction type.

#### **What will taking part in this research involve?**

Participation in this research is voluntary. If you choose to participate, you will be asked to sign a consent form and take part in an individual interview with the researcher, lastly approximately 1-2 hours (a break can be taken if required).

If you choose to participate after reading this information sheet then please contact your offender supervisor/manager (or the person who supplied this sheet). I will then ask you to attend a meeting at a time that is convenient to both of us. During this meeting, we will review the information sheet and give you the opportunity to ask any questions you may have or raise any concerns. You can then decide whether to participate. If you wish to proceed, we will discuss a consent form in detail you will be asked to sign it. You will be given a unique research identity number when you sign the consent form.

During this same meeting, an audio-recorded interview will take place where you will be asked a few questions to encourage you to discuss and share your experiences, your views about others and of your circumstances. Following this, I will take you through a brief verbal exercise to explore in more detail your views about yourself and others, to help me better understand how you relate to people.

On completion of the interview time will be allocated to discussing any concerns or support needs you require because of participating in the interview (this is called 'debriefing').

The interview and exercise will be recorded onto a password protected Dictaphone. The researcher will then transcribe (type into a document) the interview. Please note that this recording will not be made available to anyone other than the researcher. It will only be used for the purposes of transcribing the material so that the researcher can complete the research. The information will be labelled with your research identity number so that any records can be kept anonymously.

#### **Will the information I disclose be confidential?**

All information which you provide during the research study interview will be kept anonymous and no information will be used which could identify you. Your unique research identity number will be kept by you and referred to should you wish to later withdraw from the study as a participant. All recordings, following the transcription will be deleted. You are assured that the data you provide will be stored safely and securely. All data will be stored in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998. All transcribed documents will remain anonymous and will only be kept for the minimum amount of time specified by the university in relation to the qualification.

The information you provide will be treated with respect and will be used to address the research questions only. The information will be kept anonymous and confidential, with a few exceptions which are: should you disclose current acts of self-harm and/or intentions to harm others; should you make threats to the security of the establishment during the research; should you disclose unconvicted offences for the first time; should you disclose historical sexual abuse (in some instances).

#### **How will taking part in this research be useful for me?**

Taking part in this research is voluntary, and whether or not you choose to take part will have no impact on your circumstances or in the future. Withdrawal or refusal to participate will not affect your sentence or opportunities to engage in treatment. You will not receive any type of payment for participating in this study. For some people



they find it useful to discuss their experiences and consider how they would like things to be in the future. There is also a chance that you may also find this experience emotional. You can also refuse to answer specific questions during the interview that you are uncomfortable with. Should you feel uncomfortable or emotional during the interview you should inform the researcher and if the researcher feels that you are becoming upset, the interview can be stopped, and you will be provided with support.

### **What should I do if I want to withdraw from the study?**

If you chose to withdraw you can do so by contacting your offender supervisor/manager (or the person who supplied this sheet) providing your unique research identity number. This must be done within four weeks of interview [INSERT CORRECT DATE]. There may be an opportunity to meet with me and discuss this if you wish. Withdrawal after this point may mean that whilst your contributions will still be used, best efforts will be made to remove quotes that may have been used in the final research summary report. Your data and any notes, transcriptions and recordings will be destroyed.

### **What will the research be used for?**

The results of this research will form part of a thesis undertaken as part of a Professional Doctorate in Forensic Psychology with Nottingham Trent University. The findings of the research will be made available to HMPPS colleagues in a summary report and short presentations on key findings will be given to wider international experts electronically. The research findings may be published in a psychology (or related) journal. In no circumstances will an individual participant be identified. You can also receive information about the results of this research if you wish to.

### **What to do if you have questions or concerns?**

Please keep this information sheet for future reference. If you have any concerns about any part of this research, you should speak directly to the researcher who will answer your questions. If you are unhappy at any stage and wish to complain formally, you can do this through contacting the supervisor of this research (see details below).

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet. If you would like to take part please contact your offender supervisor/manager (or the person who supplied this sheet) who will convey your interest to me.

Best regards,  
Rachael Wheatley

**Contact details:**

**Researcher** Rachael Wheatley  
BPS Chartered and HCPC Registered Forensic Psychologist  
HMPPS Psychology Services – Midlands  
Forensic Psychology Doctorate programme student at Nottingham  
Trent University

**Supervisor** Dr Daria J. Kuss  
BA MA MSc PhD CPsychol CSci FHEA  
Senior Lecturer in Psychology  
Nottingham Trent University

## PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

**Name of researcher:** Rachael Wheatley (BPS Chartered and HCPC Registered Forensic Psychologist),

**Lead supervisor:** Dr Daria Kuss (Nottingham Trent University)

**Please read the statement below then sign and date the form if you consent to take part. *Note: this form will be kept separately from your data.***

I (name)..... have had the opportunity to read, and have kept a copy of, the participant information sheet and understand the purpose of this research. I have been given the chance to ask any questions I may have. I am willing to participate in the research being conducted by Rachael Wheatley, and give my full informed consent to take part in the research. I understand the data generated during the research will be held securely and confidentially and only the researcher will have access to this.

***If you have any questions about the above or the participant information sheet, please ask the researcher to clarify them before you sign.***

Please read the following points below and tick as required:	Agree (please tick)
I understand that Rachael Wheatley is a BPS Chartered and HCPC Registered Forensic Psychologist employed by HMPPS Psychology Services, and is completing this research as part of a Doctorate in Forensic Psychology at Nottingham Trent University. I understand that at all times Ms Wheatley will work within the guidelines of the British Psychological Society (BPS) and the Health & Care Professions Council (HCPC).	
I have been given a copy of the participant information sheet and have had the opportunity to read this. I understand what the research aims are and what is expected of me as a research participant. I have been given the time to ask all the questions I wanted to. Those questions have been answered fully.	

<p>I understand that the I will be asked to take part in an interview and exercise which will be audio-recorded so that this can then be later transcribed by the researcher, and that this recording will be deleted following the transcription of the interview. All hard copies of my transcript will be kept secure in a locked cabinet within HMPPS until they are no longer needed for the research and qualification. They will then be shredded.</p>	
<p>I understand that should I choose to withdraw from the research this will be addressed sensitively, and I will be required to inform the researcher of this decision. I understand that once the research has been transcribed by the researcher I will need to withdraw my consent within a specific timeframe. Should I wish to withdraw once the data has been transcribed and analysed, I am aware that my data will be used in the research, however, the researcher will not make references to me as a research participant.</p>	
<p>I understand that there are limits to the boundaries of confidentiality, and should issues of self-harm, harm to others, threats to security or if I disclose new information relating to offences I have not been convicted of, or of historical sexual abuse then this information will be shared with other professionals and acted upon.</p>	
<p>I understand that should I experience any psychological or emotional upset as a result of discussing the issues raised in the research, the researcher will ensure that she will explore options regarding support.</p>	

**I am signing as I give my informed consent to take part in this research study.**

Print name:.....Unique research identity number: .....

Signed: .....Date: .....

Witnessed by/

Researcher signature: .....

Date .....