Researcher-practitioner reflections: the therapeutic utility of the Visually Adapted Repertory Grid Technique (VARGT) with stalkers

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MANUSCRIPT DETAILS

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ABSTRACT:

This paper outlines researcher-practitioner reflections on the use of a Visually Adapted Repertory Grid Technique (VARGT) with men convicted of stalking. It draws on and assimilates participant experiences of the VARGT as a research engagement tool. Further, it extends discussion to propose its value as a generic engagement tool for when personal insights and collaborative case formulations may otherwise be difficult to access.

The repertory grid technique, developed from Kelly's Personal Construct Theory (1955), was adapted visually for utility in a mixed methods research study with those who commit stalking offences (Wheatley, in preparation). Analytical and reflexivity processes within this original study highlighted rich and recurrent data across the sample pertaining to the positive participant experience of the VARGT, unrelated to its core research question.

This paper presents reflections and psychological discussion for experiences of using the VARGT. Key features clustered around therapeutic alliance and engagement, enlightenment, and a motivation for positive change.

CUST_RESEARCH_LIMITATIONS/IMPLICATIONS__(LIMIT_100_WORDS) :No data available.

This paper suggests the VARGT has value in participant-client engagement, particularly where sensitive topics are being investigated and participants have difficulty directly articulating their psychosocial functioning.

CUST_SOCIAL_IMPLICATIONS_(LIMIT_100_WORDS) :No data available.

This novel technique offers potential as an engagement tool for use in research and clinical settings.

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Abstract

Purpose

This paper outlines researcher-practitioner reflections on the use of a Visually Adapted Repertory Grid Technique (VARGT) with men convicted of stalking. It draws on and assimilates participant experiences of the VARGT as a research engagement tool. Further, it extends discussion to propose its value as a generic engagement tool for when personal insights and collaborative case formulations may otherwise be difficult to access.

Approach

The repertory grid technique, developed from Kelly's Personal Construct Theory (1955), was adapted for use in a mixed methods research study undertaken with those who commit stalking offences (see Wheatley, 2019, p. 77). Analytical and reflexivity processes within this original study highlighted rich and recurrent data across the sample pertaining to the positive participant experience of the VARGT, unrelated to its core research question.

Findings

This paper presents reflections and psychological discussion for experiences of using the VARGT. Key features clustered around therapeutic alliance and engagement, enlightenment, and a motivation for positive change.

Practice implications

This paper suggests the VARGT has value in participant-client engagement, particularly where sensitive topics are investigated and participants have difficulty directly articulating their psychosocial functioning.

Originality/value

This novel technique offers potential as an engagement tool for use in research and clinical settings.

Key words   Repertory grids; Adapted repertory grids; Stalking; Stalking offenders; Therapeutic alliance; Engagement; Engagement tool

Article classification   Viewpoint/Practice paper

Introduction

This paper presents researcher-practitioner reflections on the use of a Visually Adapted Repertory Grid Technique (VARGT: see Wheatley, Winder, and Kuss [in press] for replication detail). The VARGT was developed and utilised within qualitative research in forensic psychology (see Wheatley, 2019, p. 77, for original mixed methods research study). This originating study blended the empathic methodology of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) with a novel VARGT to investigate participants' construed experiences of stalking others. During IPA analytical coding within the originating study the recurrence of participant assertions regarding the VARGT's therapeutic value became apparent. These were supported by the researcher's reflexivity journal entries. These analytical codes were extracted as opposed to simply being disregarded given their valued contribution to practice gaps regarding engaging meaningfully with people who stalk. This practice-based paper presents reflections of the registered forensic psychologist researcher-practitioner and comments upon its applicability within psychological research, forensic psychology assessment, and treatment interventions, with clients. Researcher-practitioner interpretations are illustrated with selected semantic-level transcript extracts from participants' experiences of the technique. Experiences are framed within existing psychological literature pertaining to therapeutic aspects of engagement with clients.

The repertory grid is an assessment technique derived from Personal Construct Theory (PCT), both developed by Kelly (1955). The central premise of PCT is that we are constantly interpreting experiences through idiographic psychological frameworks, making sense of ourselves, others and our social world (see Horley, 2008). These frameworks subsequently shape our emotional responses to new situations and the actions we take (Horley, 2008). The repertory grid provides an overt snapshot of a person's personal construct system on a given topic, exposing otherwise psychologically defended aspects (Turpin, Dallos, Owen and Thomas, 2009). Recently they have been utilised in research contexts within forensic settings (e.g., Kitson-Boyce, Blagden, Winder, and Dillon, 2018). The repertory grid is not known for its use to purposely enhance collaborative and kinaesthetic engagement with difficult to reach client groups through visual adaptation. In a research context, the VARGT was developed with visual and kinaesthetic adaptations to the application process of the standard technique. This was to enhance researcher-practitioner and participant collaboration, and furthermore to facilitate participant-led, self-analytic review and interpretation of their own resultant visible personal construct system (see Wheatley *et al.*, [in press] for replication detail). Using a collaboratively constructed visually accessible grid, participants are asked to rate significant people (elements) along identified characteristics and values (constructs) using cards to be placed upon the

grid. This visual and kinaesthetic systematic process builds an individualised grid for the participant to review in its entirety upon its completion. It makes visual one's own personal construct system (psychological framework) for interpreting ourselves and our social world, in an interconnected fashion, on a given topic at a given time.

The value of fostering a therapeutic alliance is well established, associated with treatment effectiveness (e.g., Raue and Goldfried, 1994). Linked to attachment theory, this alliance relieves anxiety as the client is empowered to make positive changes (Ross, Polaschek, and 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 and Barends, 2006). Guided discovery allows the client to develop self-understanding with ownership (Dattilio and 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. Rogerian theory (Rogers, 1959) asserts that for therapeutic change to occur, the client would need to experience unconditional positive regard and empathic concern. Sharing many of these fundamental principles, third generation interventions such as Compassion-Focussed Therapy (CFT: Gilbert, 2009) and Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT; Hayes, Strosahl and Wilson, 1999), have grown in popularity, having broad empirical support (see Hayes, Masuda, Bissett, Luoma and Guerrero, 2004). Motivational Interviewing (MI) techniques (Miller and Rollnick, 1991) also incorporate an empathic, client-centred stance in order to evoke and develop motivation to change. Self-belief in efficacy is thought to be improved through experiences with positive and idealised social role models, especially with whom they can identify some comparables (Bandura, 1994). Indeed self-efficacy and associated affect can be improved through the identification of and vicarious learning from positive role models (Bandura, 1994).

Researcher-Practitioner Reflections

The data set originated from an ethically approved research study solely undertaken by the author, which utilised a sample of seven adult males in prison convicted of stalking offences. The men had a mean average age of 35, and none had undergone any form of therapeutic intervention to address their stalking, nor taken part previously in research. The approach taken to analyse and report on observations was thematic and reflective. Researcher-practitioner reflections herein are thus anchored by the participants' transcription data, and complemented with a discussion of relevant existing psychological literature. This non-standardised analytical approach was utilised as the men were not systematically probed during data collection for their experiences around the therapeutic

benefits of the VARGT. To provide a structure to the reflections, the subject of participant talk is organised loosely around two fundamental aspects: (a) *A tool for engagement*, which encompasses reflective interpretations of *Having a tool to build alliance*, and *Deconstructing barriers*; and (b) *Therapeutic value*, containing notions of *Enlightenment, Contemplating change,*

Self-identified problems, and *Will to reform*.

A Tool for Engagement

A popular theory for 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). The essence of this was recurrent and strong in participant interviews supported by the subsequent identification of codes. Being able to find a way to develop alliance in a therapeutic and research capacity is essential although achieving this with people affected by personality disorder, preoccupied attachment styles, or motivational difficulties is difficult (e.g., Ross *et al.*, 2008).

Participant experiences and researcher-practitioner reflections here illustrate the use of the VARGT as an empathic, participant-led engagement tool. The VARGT was unanimously positively experienced within research interviews. This was despite its complex presentation and participants' assumptions about discussing their own stalking offending during it. Indeed Participant-led visual reviews of the completed VARGT grids (a process referred to as *eyeball analysis*) enabled idiosyncratic interpretations to occur regarding personal values (constructs), the patterns of placements of people (elements), and the interrelationships between certain elements against constructs. This guided discovery was experienced as interesting and empowering.

Having a tool to build alliance

The VARGT constituted a visual and kinaesthetic tool to prompt participant-led discussion around the topics of stalking and relationships with others, be they professional or personal. Pivotally, it was experienced differently to standard offence-related interviewing, less judgemental and direct given the use of visual aids and tasks, as the following extract highlights.

> *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 because there's tools*

This interesting reflection alluded to a shame-provoking experience of being interviewed regarding stalking previously.

Participants valued the collaborative and non-direct nature of interactions with a shared goal to increase understanding without judgement. Sample codes showed the use of '*tools'* as important. The kinaesthetic aspect and visual focus of the VARGT was enjoyed, captured in the below extract.

> *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*

Deconstructing barriers

Spontaneous self-disclosure of psychological vulnerabilities contributing to one's stalking in practice can be rare. Of significant value, the VARGT seemed to be able to compassionately assist participants in accepting wrongdoing and developing motivation to address the underlying psychological problems and skills deficits. Interestingly, participants harnessed the opportunity to discuss their experiences during the VARGT, even recognising how without opportunities for safe and open exploration of offending functions, comfortable stories naturally develop. The following extract provides an example of these reflections.

> *This is the first time I've actually had a formal conversation with someone about it. It's very helpful for me to think and try to remember the feelings when I was writing the emails and what my motives really were for putting the cameras in the house. So it's important for me to focus on those feelings at the time. 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*

Providing this reflective space for participants to share their experiences guided by the VARGT had therapeutic value. This is significant when considering the short single engagement session, and with complex psychopathology related to insecure attachment styles and shame-based responding potentially present. Recalling their values, goals and associated thoughts and feelings at the time of offending guided by the VARGT provided rich insights for participants and researcher in terms of accessing the fundamental drivers of stalking behaviour.

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

The VARGT, as an exposing visual aid, helped participants access their mind-sets at the time of offending. This provided unguarded accounts of their past self and the functions of the stalking offending, perhaps the aspects which made them predisposed to this type of offending.

As part of the VARGT, significant people (elements) related to the topic of stalking and three self-concepts, *self-past* (while stalking)*, self-now*, and *self-ideal* were written on coloured cards. *Stalker* was included purposely to explore how participants construed this label and to explore issues pertaining to any offending-related denial. Element cards are placed on a visual grid by participants corresponding with how they rated them along construct continuums, for example *caring-selfish*. The *stalker* card often provoked uncomfortable feelings as participants would unwittingly align it with their *self-past* placements, which upon eyeball analysis became visually obvious. As the participants would independently define both *stalker* and *self-past* characteristics for themselves, they were later able to discuss the correlating aspects. The following extract illustrates a considered disclosure in respect of the emotional attachment to the word 'stalker', and the links with denial, as well as how defining the indicators, or characteristics, of these two elements is important.

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

If denial is shame-driven then recognising the impact of shame on offenders' ability to move forward into therapeutic engagement is important (Blagden, Winder, Gregson, and Thorne, 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, which could be related to the label of stalker. A related barrier to discussing stalking was commonly embarrassment, yet disclosing this and identifying further vulnerabilities suggested the VARGT created an underpinning safe and therapeutic context to do so. For example, the following extract

demonstrated insight gains regarding a psychological aspect driving stalking previously psychologically guarded.

> *Maybe it's that sexual jealously thing. I feel embarrassed talking about stuff like that but I'm trying my best*

This type of disclosure is valuable for self-identifying criminogenic needs and future therapeutic gains through collaboration.

Acknowledging, understanding and helping to remove barriers to meaningful engagement with individuals may allow for therapeutic alliance to build. Subsequently creating a space and opportunity for self-discovery, and for psycho-educative and process-based treatment approaches to be best received. As a tool, it seems the VARGT may be useful for these purposes.

Therapeutic value

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

Enlightenment

Repertory grids are resilient to response bias and add an otherwise hidden layer of personal meaning to interviews (Blagden *et al.*, 2014), thus with the additional visual transparency, the VARGT experience was enlightening for participants. Sample codes clustered around the sense that the VARGT was enlightening. This was due to its ability to reveal psychological and functional aspects of stalking behaviours that made sense. There was an enthusiasm for the VARGT to be made accessible to others, such was their experience.

> *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*

The experiences of VARGT participation were positive, created by the valued experience of self-led awareness with codes capturing an energy, also reflected in the researcher reflexivity log.

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 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

The ability to see the placements of the self-concept elements (*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 towards. They unanimously reflected on the correlated values (constructs) for when they were stalking and that of a *stalker*, and then to how they rated *now*, pondering the achievable journey to reach their construal of an ideal self. The accompanying visual representations provided exposing and tangible evidence for them. Additional to self-awareness development, this was a motivating and self-worth supporting exercise.

Contemplating change

As part of the VARGT, participants identified role models whom they aspired to, that they construed positively within their own personal construct systems, and wanted to become more like. Being able to identify idealised others, and their related aspirational characteristics was empowering (also see Yorke and Dallos, 2015). The completed VARGT grids provided clear idiographic context to their role models as defined within their own construct system, which enabled hope and self-efficacy.

The elements rating stage of the VARGT is the most kinaesthetic and conceptually comparative aspect (see Wheatley, Winder, and Kuss, in press). Participants rated significant people in context of their construct continuums (repertoire of personal values ideographically contextual to relationships and stalking) using visual and kinaesthetic aids. The VARGT provided an elicitation vehicle and reflective space for self-discovery to occur. Participant reflections on how they had construed themselves at the time of their stalking, and their own construal of what a typical stalker may be like, led to incongruent feelings as they appeared the same. 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…

Guided discovery breeds ownership (Dattilio and Padesky, 1990). This had a transitional motivating effect through developing discrepancy and highlighting incongruence, moving individuals on from the pre-contemplation stage of change (see Prochaska and diClemente, 1983) as they began to accept there was a problem to be changed. The following extract is brief although poignant as this participant had been engaged in an all-consuming, entrenched pattern of stalking for over a decade and had disclosed a psychological inability to let go of his infatuation.

I've got to accept my life without her or accept a life in prison basically

The potential of the VARGT as a tool to assist individuals to move progressively through the stages of change (see Prochaska and diClemente, 1983) was demonstrated, and could be capitalised upon accompanying MI (Miller and Rollnick, 1991).

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. 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, thus impossible to ignore or not own. This initial level of acceptance provided an important foundation step.

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

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 and 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 preferable as directive interactions in these contexts are thought to reduce therapeutic alliance due to the perception of a lack of empathy and warmth (e.g., Marshall, Fernandez, Serran, Mulloy, Thornton and Mann, 2003).

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*

This discrepancy development was self-motivating; 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 enhance motivation to improve on values-based measures (i.e., identified within their own construct continuums). The sample identified role models amongst the elements used in the VARGT, aligning their *self-ideal* element to them, which provided information on the characteristics they aspired to. 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). This highlighted important future focussed clinical information which could be of use in identifying and targeting skills deficits.

Self-identified problems

Ordinarily, negative self-reflections may be difficult for clients to access and disclose in a short engagement session with a professional who is part of the criminal justice system. Indeed, institutional factors are purported to hamper the establishment of some basic therapeutic alliance features (Karver, Handelsman, Fields, and Bickman, 2005). Engaging with the VARGT, construing self-concepts (i.e., *self-past*, *self-now* and *self-ideal*) and comparing them to others within the overall construct system, initiated personal disclosures. When rating *self-past* (the time of committing stalking offences) along construct continuums, participants autonomously made connections between how they were navigating the world of relationships and shared insights into the functions of their stalking behaviours. For one participant the sense was that the he had difficulties accepting his relationship had been ended.

> *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*

This self-realisation of the function of offending was powerful, demonstrating the value of the VARGT for guided discovery without the use of direct inquisitive interviewing. Identifying potential protective factors through guided self-discovery was equally valuable. Like the majority of the sample, one participant reflected specifically on how having people to talk to whom he trusted would have helped him to cope emotionally and possibly prevent the stalking behaviours. It was common in the context of rating *self-past* along construct continuums for participants to view themselves as being *unconnected to others*, within the original study.

> *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 people*

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.

Will to reform

Before commencing the VARGT participants asserted they were not stalkers. This reluctance to align themselves with their constructed views of what a stalker is (perceived as denial), may actually be functional to guard against shame and be independent of the psychosocial deficits underpinning the offending behaviour (see Ware, Blagden and Harper, 2018). Blagden, Winder, Gregson, and Thorne (2012) assert that a key function of denial is to avoid feelings associated with shame and associated fears related to rejection by important others, i.e., family and friends. With a compassionate focussed approach (such as with the VARGT) the impact of denial as a barrier to engagement could be lessened (Ware *et al.*, 2018). The VARGT eyeball analysis is the final stage where participants are invited to independently reflect on what they notice when visually reviewing their personal construct grids with element ratings completed. Participants identify the nature of the emergent constructs, the patterns of placements of elements, and the interrelationships between certain elements against constructs, in meaningful ways to the individual. The original study VARGT eyeball analyses provoked spontaneous disclosures in respect of participants' past stalking-related mindset and behaviours.

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 related to their stalking offending. Such reflections, unanimously provided, highlighted the pattern of alignments between 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. The following extract provides an example of this.

> *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*

This level of acknowledgement showed a shift in ability to acknowledge stalking-related behaviours, which therapeutically speaking provides a basis upon which to explore criminogenic need without getting stuck in a defensive presentation. Shifts in initial resistance to align themselves in the past conceptually with the *stalker* were prominent. The undisputed visible exposure of this alignment within completed VARGT grids was unequivocal. The essence of this is captured within this participant 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'*.

Despite this uncomfortable experience, participants also began to critically appraise their offending, demonstrating victim impact awareness. The following extract provides an example of this.

> *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, I forced her to change her lifestyle*

The VARGT acted as a guided discovery vehicle, which seemed to mitigate against the need to remain defensive and psychologically guarded. Subsequently, this activity also prompted participants to reflect on how different they felt compared to when they were offending, and identified the journey towards the *self-ideal* as motivating. The cathartic impact of the VARGT was palpable.

> *[The VARGT] 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.*

Positive evaluations of self-change contextual to a passage of time, especially where previous difficulties have been moderated by the restrictiveness of a forensic setting, are common (Ross and Wilson, 2003). Notwithstanding this aspect of hope and motivation created with the VARGT could be harnessed for therapeutic benefit. This will to reform was strong across the sample. The following extracts illustrate the ability of the VARGT to enable self-motivating statements, which could be nurtured. Some participants focussed on particular consequences of their offending and were able to appreciate realistic challenges ahead.

> *I've come to prison and the realisation of my son not seeing me, affecting his life as a child has*
> *hit me. 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*

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

> *That was me in the past way over there. I'm where I want to be way over there so it shows my*
> *will to reform. I want to be to be a better person than what I have been, to turn away from my*
> *offending*

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. With a multi-disciplinary and beyond the gate approach, this cognitive state could be nurtured before release to develop collaborative, meaningful and achievable community plans.

The therapeutic utility of the VARGT in research and clinical practice

Whilst the data originated within a researcher-participant context, the VARGT demonstrated 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 behaviours was a surprising outcome. This VARGT's ability has clear benefits for further application in research, clinical and forensic settings. For example, it could be used to assist practitioners in preparing people for treatment intervention to address their bespoke needs, and add to the knowledge and practice gaps internationally in respect of engaging, and providing psychological intervention, with people who stalk.

The reflections and supporting data extracts demonstrate the therapeutic value of the VARGT. That is, in encouraging meaningful disclosures through guided discovery and allowing the participant and practitioner to access a deeper understanding of the drivers for their hurtful behaviours. The ability of the VARGT to provoke within-sample replicable patterns in self-reflective personal disclosures has generic potential as a research and professional engagement tool. Given stalking behaviours appear to be driven in part by an underlying type of attachment disorder (see MacKenzie, Mullen, Ogloff, McEwan and 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 including skills and knowledge deficits to address in treatment and risk management interventions, subsequently for rehabilitative gains.

The VARGT ensures transparency in interactions, personally relevant discussions, a client-led formulation and motivation enhancement, encouraging 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 alignment of traits of *self-past* and *stalker* elements was powerful amongst the sample. If replicable 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 resisting the label. This has significance in being responsive to those who have stalked when first engaging.

Improving responsivity within rehabilitative attempts is important to its success (Kozar and Day, 2017) and the VARGT's potential ability to do this whilst developing collaborative case formulations could be capitalised on. Psychological case formulation is a robust alternative to psychiatric diagnosis

(Johnstone and Boyle, 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 elicited experiential expertise of the client. Johnstone and Boyle (2018) report on the positive experience of service users in using a collaborative case formulation approach, which appeared to be a replicated finding with the use of the VARGT in the original research study. Independent motivational self-statements, identification of characteristics to alter, those aspiring to, and recognition of those linked to their own stalking behaviours, are not common observations by practitioners engaging with stalkers, especially upon their first meeting. The sample unanimously demonstrated insight, wanted to discuss their experiences, and were able to identify aspects they would want help with to improve their interpersonal skills and address psycho-emotional vulnerabilities. This should not be simply dismissed as false hope or a manipulation of criminal justice agencies, but rather harnessed and nurtured in a collaborative and structured way.

There are limitations caveated to these reflections. It cannot be ascertained to what extent the experiences are bespoke to the VARGT as an engagement tool, the researcher-practitioner style, a combination of both, or none. To explore this a number of randomised controlled trials utilising a range of engagement interventions, including the VARGT, with those who have stalked is planned. Until such time the therapeutic value assigned to the VARGT through these reflections is anecdotal and contextual to the sample and research purpose. In terms of therapeutic impact, it is also pertinent to consider that research to date has failed to evidence treatment outcome and reduced recidivism success based on the presence of problem insight and motivation, despite longstanding assumptions (Linn-Walton and Maschi, 2015). The value of these factors within therapeutic interventions however seems clear for both client and clinician, particularly linked to the development of therapeutic alliance and personal growth.

Despite the clinical and research capabilities of the repertory grid technique, there has been relatively limited application within forensic contexts (Blagden *et al.*, 2012). It is hoped that this paper illustrates its value further and encourages adaptations akin to the VARGT in order to improve engagement with participants in research and clients in clinical work. This paper presents participant and researcher-practitioner reflections on the use of the VARGT with men convicted of stalking offences, known to have difficulties discussing the functions of their stalking and underlying needs. It shows its potential as a rich, yielding engagement tool where only small windows of opportunity are created for contact given criminal justice sanctioning.

Specific implications for practice:

- The VARGT is a quick and relatively easy to administer visual and kinaesthetic engagement tool.
- It provides a vehicle to collaboratively accessing personal construct systems, which could be used for case formulation and research purposes around a specified topic.
- Given its transparency and participant-led processes to explore topic areas, it can be insight provoking with outcomes made explicit thus more easily owned.
- It shows potential to maximise engagement in research and clinical intervention activities where knowledge and insight is lacking regarding underlying functions of behaviours.
- The VARGT appears to empower and motivate people, less impacted by shame-based defensive responding.

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