

**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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10 **Researcher-practitioner reflections: the therapeutic utility of the Visually Adapted Repertory Grid**  
11 **Technique (VARGT) with stalkers**  
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Journal of Forensic Practice

**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

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3 grid. This visual and kinaesthetic systematic process builds an individualised grid for the participant to  
4 review in its entirety upon its completion. It makes visual one's own personal construct system  
5 (psychological framework) for interpreting ourselves and our social world, in an interconnected  
6 fashion, on a given topic at a given time.  
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11 The value of fostering a therapeutic alliance is well established, associated with treatment  
12 effectiveness (e.g., Raue and Goldfried, 1994). Linked to attachment theory, this alliance relieves  
13 anxiety as the client is empowered to make positive changes (Ross, Polaschek, and Ward, 2008). The  
14 concept of collaboration defined as active participation by both client and therapist is a key  
15 component of a therapeutic relationship, and essence of the therapeutic alliance (Hatcher and  
16 Barends, 2006). Guided discovery allows the client to develop self-understanding with ownership  
17 (Dattilio and Padesky, 1990), which has a motivating effect. Knowledge developed through this  
18 process as opposed to being told (a basic tenet of Piaget's cognitive model [1972]) is purported to  
19 hold more value for clients. Rogerian theory (Rogers, 1959) asserts that for therapeutic change to  
20 occur, the client would need to experience unconditional positive regard and empathic concern.  
21 Sharing many of these fundamental principles, third generation interventions such as Compassion-  
22 Focussed Therapy (CFT; Gilbert, 2009) and Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT; Hayes,  
23 Strosahl and Wilson, 1999), have grown in popularity, having broad empirical support (see Hayes,  
24 Masuda, Bissett, Luoma and Guerrero, 2004). Motivational Interviewing (MI) techniques (Miller and  
25 Rollnick, 1991) also incorporate an empathic, client-centred stance in order to evoke and develop  
26 motivation to change. Self-belief in efficacy is thought to be improved through experiences with  
27 positive and idealised social role models, especially with whom they can identify some comparables  
28 (Bandura, 1994). Indeed self-efficacy and associated affect can be improved through the identification  
29 of and vicarious learning from positive role models (Bandura, 1994).  
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### 46 **Researcher-Practitioner Reflections**

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48 The data set originated from an ethically approved research study solely undertaken by the author,  
49 which utilised a sample of seven adult males in prison convicted of stalking offences. The men had a  
50 mean average age of 35, and none had undergone any form of therapeutic intervention to address  
51 their stalking, nor taken part previously in research. The approach taken to analyse and report on  
52 observations was thematic and reflective. Researcher-practitioner reflections herein are thus  
53 anchored by the participants' transcription data, and complemented with a discussion of relevant  
54 existing psychological literature. This non-standardised analytical approach was utilised as the men  
55 were not systematically probed during data collection for their experiences around the therapeutic  
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3 benefits of the VARGT. To provide a structure to the reflections, the subject of participant talk is  
4 organised loosely around two fundamental aspects: (a) *A tool for engagement*, which encompasses  
5 reflective interpretations of *Having a tool to build alliance*, and *Deconstructing barriers*; and (b)  
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8 *Therapeutic value*, containing notions of *Enlightenment*, *Contemplating change*,  
9  
10 *Self-identified problems*, and *Will to reform*.

### 11 12 13 14 15 **A Tool for Engagement**

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17 A popular theory for explaining how working alliance develops was provided by Bordin (1979), who  
18 asserted that three key factors, if present, positively affect treatment outcome: goals, tasks, and a  
19 bond. Providing a therapeutic task focus and employing a tangible working alliance within client  
20 interactions is purported to aid a genuine sense of collaboration and investment (Bordin, 1979). The  
21 essence of this was recurrent and strong in participant interviews supported by the subsequent  
22 identification of codes. Being able to find a way to develop alliance in a therapeutic and research  
23 capacity is essential although achieving this with people affected by personality disorder, preoccupied  
24 attachment styles, or motivational difficulties is difficult (e.g., Ross *et al.*, 2008).

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

#### 39 40 41 42 43 44 45 46 *Having a tool to build alliance*

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

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57 *It's very different to interviews with probation, I mean they're making judgments, and it feels*  
58 *like more of a police interview, and pretty cringey actually having to talk about it in such detail.*  
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60 *This is more like therapy because there's tools*

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5 This interesting reflection alluded to a shame-provoking experience of being interviewed regarding  
6 stalking previously.  
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10 Participants valued the collaborative and non-direct nature of interactions with a shared goal to  
11 increase understanding without judgement. Sample codes showed the use of 'tools' as important. The  
12 kinaesthetic aspect and visual focus of the VARGT was enjoyed, captured in the below extract.  
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16 *Having it on the floor for movement, the kinaesthetic element to it and the physicality of*  
17 *putting things down, believe me it's a lot more engaging and interesting. You're more likely to*  
18 *get people working with you, collaborating with you*  
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### 23 *Deconstructing barriers*

24 Spontaneous self-disclosure of psychological vulnerabilities contributing to one's stalking in practice  
25 can be rare. Of significant value, the VARGT seemed to be able to compassionately assist participants  
26 in accepting wrongdoing and developing motivation to address the underlying psychological problems  
27 and skills deficits. Interestingly, participants harnessed the opportunity to discuss their experiences  
28 during the VARGT, even recognising how without opportunities for safe and open exploration of  
29 offending functions, comfortable stories naturally develop. The following extract provides an example  
30 of these reflections.  
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37 *This is the first time I've actually had a formal conversation with someone about it. It's very*  
38 *helpful for me to think and try to remember the feelings when I was writing the emails and*  
39 *what my motives really were for putting the cameras in the house. So it's important for me to*  
40 *focus on those feelings at the time. What I really remember was a sense of complete fear and*  
41 *panic and hopelessness about what's going to happen, what I'm going to lose you know, so*  
42 *that's struck me*  
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49 Providing this reflective space for participants to share their experiences guided by the VARGT had  
50 therapeutic value. This is significant when considering the short single engagement session, and with  
51 complex psychopathology related to insecure attachment styles and shame-based responding  
52 potentially present. Recalling their values, goals and associated thoughts and feelings at the time of  
53 offending guided by the VARGT provided rich insights for participants and researcher in terms of  
54 accessing the fundamental drivers of stalking behaviour.  
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3 *It is interesting the looking part of this process. I have to look back at the circumstances of my*  
4 *offending and think about what my mind-set was and how I actually felt at the time of my*  
5 *offending*  
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10 The VARGT, as an exposing visual aid, helped participants access their mind-sets at the time of  
11 offending. This provided unguarded accounts of their past self and the functions of the stalking  
12 offending, perhaps the aspects which made them predisposed to this type of offending.  
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16 As part of the VARGT, significant people (elements) related to the topic of stalking and three self-  
17 concepts, *self-past* (while stalking), *self-now*, and *self-ideal* were written on coloured cards. *Stalker*  
18 was included purposely to explore how participants construed this label and to explore issues  
19 pertaining to any offending-related denial. Element cards are placed on a visual grid by participants  
20 corresponding with how they rated them along construct continuums, for example *caring-selfish*. The  
21 *stalker* card often provoked uncomfortable feelings as participants would unwittingly align it with their  
22 *self-past* placements, which upon eyeball analysis became visually obvious. As the participants would  
23 independently define both *stalker* and *self-past* characteristics for themselves, they were later able to  
24 discuss the correlating aspects. The following extract illustrates a considered disclosure in respect of  
25 the emotional attachment to the word 'stalker', and the links with denial, as well as how defining the  
26 indicators, or characteristics, of these two elements is important.  
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37 *The card with stalker on, I won't forget that in a hurry because it's a very ugly word and a very*  
38 *ugly thing that goes with it. I think it's good not to be in denial about things, so there's a real*  
39 *impact for me. It's a very emotive term, but it's very useful as well. If someone is in denial, to*  
40 *see that is really important. Obviously getting people to define for themselves the terms, define*  
41 *these indicators, is very important*  
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47 If denial is shame-driven then recognising the impact of shame on offenders' ability to move forward  
48 into therapeutic engagement is important (Blagden, Winder, Gregson, and Thorne, 2014). This  
49 recognition and responsive interactional tactics could improve the quality of any engagement  
50 opportunities with those who commit stalking offences, as opposed to focusing on denial, which could  
51 be related to the label of stalker. A related barrier to discussing stalking was commonly  
52 embarrassment, yet disclosing this and identifying further vulnerabilities suggested the VARGT  
53 created an underpinning safe and therapeutic context to do so. For example, the following extract  
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3 demonstrated insight gains regarding a psychological aspect driving stalking previously psychologically  
4 guarded.  
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8 *Maybe it's that sexual jealousy thing. I feel embarrassed talking about stuff like that but I'm*  
9 *trying my best*  
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13 This type of disclosure is valuable for self-identifying criminogenic needs and future therapeutic gains  
14 through collaboration.  
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18 Acknowledging, understanding and helping to remove barriers to meaningful engagement with  
19 individuals may allow for therapeutic alliance to build. Subsequently creating a space and opportunity  
20 for self-discovery, and for psycho-educative and process-based treatment approaches to be best  
21 received. As a tool, it seems the VARGT may be useful for these purposes.  
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### 27 **Therapeutic value**

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

37 Repertory grids are resilient to response bias and add an otherwise hidden layer of personal meaning  
38 to interviews (Blagden *et al.*, 2014), thus with the additional visual transparency, the VARGT  
39 experience was enlightening for participants. Sample codes clustered around the sense that the  
40 VARGT was enlightening. This was due to its ability to reveal psychological and functional aspects of  
41 stalking behaviours that made sense. There was an enthusiasm for the VARGT to be made accessible  
42 to others, such was their experience.  
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50 *I would really look at this on a bigger mass production. Because at end of day, hand on heart,*  
51 *I honestly thought you couldn't actually do this to me and open my eyes. But how foolish I*  
52 *actually was. I would say you need to get it out there, you really do*  
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57 The experiences of VARGT participation were positive, created by the valued experience of self-led  
58 awareness with codes capturing an energy, also reflected in the researcher reflexivity log.  
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3 *I wanted to see the actual change for myself and I really couldn't see it in words alone but by*  
4 *doing this chart, my days, my eyes are so open that I can already see that I've got a long path*  
5 *in front of me, and my future. All I've got to say to you now is thank you because at the end of*  
6 *the day you have literally just gone "bump" with my eyes and made them open up*  
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11 The ability to see the placements of the self-concept elements (*past, now and ideal*), in comparison to  
12 people they did not like or the role models they aspired to be was further motivating. The reflections  
13 allowed participants to feel good about characteristic aspects of themselves that they felt they had  
14 made changes towards. They unanimously reflected on the correlated values (constructs) for when  
15 they were stalking and that of a *stalker*, and then to how they rated *now*, pondering the achievable  
16 journey to reach their construal of an ideal self. The accompanying visual representations provided  
17 exposing and tangible evidence for them. Additional to self-awareness development, this was a  
18 motivating and self-worth supporting exercise.  
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### 26 *Contemplating change*

27 As part of the VARGT, participants identified role models whom they aspired to, that they construed  
28 positively within their own personal construct systems, and wanted to become more like. Being able  
29 to identify idealised others, and their related aspirational characteristics was empowering (also see  
30 Yorke and Dallos, 2015). The completed VARGT grids provided clear idiographic context to their role  
31 models as defined within their own construct system, which enabled hope and self-efficacy.  
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38 The elements rating stage of the VARGT is the most kinaesthetic and conceptually comparative aspect  
39 (see Wheatley, Winder, and Kuss, in press). Participants rated significant people in context of their  
40 construct continuums (repertoire of personal values ideographically contextual to relationships and  
41 stalking) using visual and kinaesthetic aids. The VARGT provided an elicitation vehicle and reflective  
42 space for self-discovery to occur. Participant reflections on how they had construed themselves at the  
43 time of their stalking, and their own construal of what a typical stalker may be like, led to incongruent  
44 feelings as they appeared the same. The impact of this self-realisation was palpably uncomfortable,  
45 yet powerful in demonstrating their ability to verbalise insight and move closer to an acceptance of  
46 the nature of their offending, without having to accept the label.  
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53 *See I'm putting them [stalker] the same as self-past, but then I'm in denial about being a stalker*  
54 *so ahhh...*  
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3 Guided discovery breeds ownership (Dattilio and Padesky, 1990). This had a transitional motivating  
4 effect through developing discrepancy and highlighting incongruence, moving individuals on from the  
5 pre-contemplation stage of change (see Prochaska and diClemente, 1983) as they began to accept  
6 there was a problem to be changed. The following extract is brief although poignant as this participant  
7 had been engaged in an all-consuming, entrenched pattern of stalking for over a decade and had  
8 disclosed a psychological inability to let go of his infatuation.  
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14 *I've got to accept my life without her or accept a life in prison basically*  
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17 The potential of the VARGT as a tool to assist individuals to move progressively through the stages of  
18 change (see Prochaska and diClemente, 1983) was demonstrated, and could be capitalised upon  
19 accompanying MI (Miller and Rollnick, 1991).  
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24 Despite the resistance of the majority of participants to be considered a 'stalker', they unanimously  
25 and independently acknowledged resemblances they felt they had to a stalker in relation to  
26 personality characteristics. The patterns in how they were construing *self-past* and *stalker* were made  
27 obvious by the resultant visual representation of the constructed grid. An outcome completely  
28 developed by themselves in a visually transparent way, thus impossible to ignore or not own. This  
29 initial level of acceptance provided an important foundation step.  
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36 *What was striking me when we were doing it, was how often me in the past and stalker were*  
37 *appearing in the same box. That's not a total surprise but it doesn't feel good and I struggle*  
38 *with that label*  
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42 It is accepted that engagement as a fundamental mode of achieving therapeutic alliance within  
43 offending behaviour programmes, additional to therapeutic and educative modes, assists insight  
44 enhancement (Kozar and Day, 2017). Finding ways of engaging meaningfully with participants is  
45 important, raising awareness of barriers to engagement or treatment, for example shame and  
46 embarrassment, seems fundamental. The ability of the VARGT to foster a non-directive researcher-  
47 and/or practitioner engagement is preferable as directive interactions in these contexts are thought  
48 to reduce therapeutic alliance due to the perception of a lack of empathy and warmth (e.g., Marshall,  
49 Fernandez, Serran, Mulloy, Thornton and Mann, 2003).  
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58 Participants construed their *self-past* negatively, whereas *self-now* and *self-ideal* were rated along  
59 construct continuums more positively. With the accessible visual representation, participants  
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3 appraised their self-concepts based on their own personal construct system. Unanimously, the sample  
4 conveyed how they did not want to be how their *self-past* was anymore; this was even true for the  
5 least insightful and interpersonally guarded participant.  
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10 *This is opening my eyes to how I was living and it's really interesting to see how I don't want*  
11 *to live anymore*  
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14  
15 This discrepancy development was self-motivating; an essential part of being able to recognise  
16 problems and work towards behaviour change. By visually appraising the self-concepts in comparison  
17 to others, contextual to the self-identified personal construct continuums, participants began to  
18 independently express future relational goals. For example, to build better relationships with friends  
19 in order to enhance their personal support networks. This seemed to enhance motivation to improve  
20 on values-based measures (i.e., identified within their own construct continuums). The sample  
21 identified role models amongst the elements used in the VARGT, aligning their *self-ideal* element to  
22 them, which provided information on the characteristics they aspired to. Having positive role models  
23 plays an important part in a person's motivation for change and self-belief in their capability to change  
24 (Bandura, 1994). Role models essentially provide information and examples of how to navigate the  
25 social world (Bandura, 1994). This highlighted important future focussed clinical information which  
26 could be of use in identifying and targeting skills deficits.  
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### 37 *Self-identified problems*

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39 Ordinarily, negative self-reflections may be difficult for clients to access and disclose in a short  
40 engagement session with a professional who is part of the criminal justice system. Indeed, institutional  
41 factors are purported to hamper the establishment of some basic therapeutic alliance features  
42 (Karver, Handelsman, Fields, and Bickman, 2005). Engaging with the VARGT, construing self-concepts  
43 (i.e., *self-past*, *self-now* and *self-ideal*) and comparing them to others within the overall construct  
44 system, initiated personal disclosures. When rating *self-past* (the time of committing stalking offences)  
45 along construct continuums, participants autonomously made connections between how they were  
46 navigating the world of relationships and shared insights into the functions of their stalking  
47 behaviours. For one participant the sense was that the he had difficulties accepting his relationship  
48 had been ended.  
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3 *Bam, straight away. I was never able to trust my own judgement. Even though I've seen it with*  
4 *my own eyes and I couldn't deny it. I still need the golden word; it was happening or it wasn't*  
5 *happening*  
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9 This self-realisation of the function of offending was powerful, demonstrating the value of the VARGT  
10 for guided discovery without the use of direct inquisitive interviewing. Identifying potential protective  
11 factors through guided self-discovery was equally valuable. Like the majority of the sample, one  
12 participant reflected specifically on how having people to talk to whom he trusted would have helped  
13 him to cope emotionally and possibly prevent the stalking behaviours. It was common in the context  
14 of rating *self-past* along construct continuums for participants to view themselves as being  
15 *unconnected to others*, within the original study.  
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21 *Wow, just at that time I think I isolated myself. I made a choice didn't I. By doing what I did to*  
22 *isolate myself from reasonable people*  
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26 The VARGTs elicitation of key features for case formulation provided further support of its clinical  
27 utility providing the additional benefit of having visually accessible information for participants to  
28 determine and own.  
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### 32 *Will to reform*

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35 Before commencing the VARGT participants asserted they were not stalkers. This reluctance to align  
36 themselves with their constructed views of what a stalker is (perceived as denial), may actually be  
37 functional to guard against shame and be independent of the psychosocial deficits underpinning the  
38 offending behaviour (see Ware, Blagden and Harper, 2018). Blagden, Winder, Gregson, and Thorne  
39 (2012) assert that a key function of denial is to avoid feelings associated with shame and associated  
40 fears related to rejection by important others, i.e., family and friends. With a compassionate focussed  
41 approach (such as with the VARGT) the impact of denial as a barrier to engagement could be lessened  
42 (Ware *et al.*, 2018). The VARGT eyeball analysis is the final stage where participants are invited to  
43 independently reflect on what they notice when visually reviewing their personal construct grids with  
44 element ratings completed. Participants identify the nature of the emergent constructs, the patterns  
45 of placements of elements, and the interrelationships between certain elements against constructs,  
46 in meaningful ways to the individual. The original study VARGT eyeball analyses provoked  
47 spontaneous disclosures in respect of participants' past stalking-related mindset and behaviours.  
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3 Participants freely narrated the meaning of their own completed visual grids with reference to denial  
4 and rejection of the stalker label, yet acknowledged problematic behaviours in their past related to  
5 their stalking offending. Such reflections, unanimously provided, highlighted the pattern of alignments  
6 between the *self-past* and *stalker* elements. The eyeball analysis made it impossible to deny the  
7 similarities with their own construal of *stalker* given the pattern placements. The following extract  
8 provides an example of this.  
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15 *I could see the resemblance, as in with the stalker, but I wouldn't class myself as a stalker. But*  
16 *I have got tendencies of a stalker because I would follow her to school. I would want answers*  
17 *and I wouldn't leave her until I got answers*  
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21 This level of acknowledgement showed a shift in ability to acknowledge stalking-related behaviours,  
22 which therapeutically speaking provides a basis upon which to explore criminogenic need without  
23 getting stuck in a defensive presentation. Shifts in initial resistance to align themselves in the past  
24 conceptually with the *stalker* were prominent. The undisputed visible exposure of this alignment  
25 within completed VARGT grids was unequivocal. The essence of this is captured within this participant  
26 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'.  
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33 Despite this uncomfortable experience, participants also began to critically appraise their offending,  
34 demonstrating victim impact awareness. The following extract provides an example of this.  
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38 *When I was stalking in the past I was absolutely obsessed; fixated with a woman. I was*  
39 *exhibiting disturbing behaviours, which terrified her. I had a bad impact on her, I forced her to*  
40 *change her lifestyle*  
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45 The VARGT acted as a guided discovery vehicle, which seemed to mitigate against the need to remain  
46 defensive and psychologically guarded. Subsequently, this activity also prompted participants to  
47 reflect on how different they felt compared to when they were offending, and identified the journey  
48 towards the *self-ideal* as motivating. The cathartic impact of the VARGT was palpable.  
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53 *[The VARGT] helped me on so many different levels. It's so good to actually see, "you know*  
54 *what you've changed, you really have changed. You're changing" I've changed so much that I*  
55 *don't want to re-change. I want to be the person I am now. Take the words and put them into*  
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3 *action is what I really want to do. How blind I was before I started doing this exercise with*  
4 *yourself.*  
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8 Positive evaluations of self-change contextual to a passage of time, especially where previous  
9 difficulties have been moderated by the restrictiveness of a forensic setting, are common (Ross and  
10 Wilson, 2003). Notwithstanding this aspect of hope and motivation created with the VARGT could be  
11 harnessed for therapeutic benefit. This will to reform was strong across the sample. The following  
12 extracts illustrate the ability of the VARGT to enable self-motivating statements, which could be  
13 nurtured. Some participants focussed on particular consequences of their offending and were able to  
14 appreciate realistic challenges ahead.  
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22 *I've come to prison and the realisation of my son not seeing me, affecting his life as a child has*  
23 *hit me. I'm determined to not do the things that I've been like. But there are days where I know*  
24 *that my personality hasn't completely changed and I'd want to act that way but I'd force*  
25 *myself not to*  
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31 When undertaking their own eyeball analyses of the VARGT grid, some participants not only identified  
32 aspects which defined them in the past, but those which they had successfully moved away from to  
33 focus their desires on being a better person.  
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37 *That was me in the past way over there. I'm where I want to be way over there so it shows my*  
38 *will to reform. I want to be to be a better person than what I have been, to turn away from my*  
39 *offending*  
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44 Participants viewed their release from prison as a fresh start, and all were confident of not  
45 reoffending. This seems in line with Maruna and King's (2009) concept of moral redeemability that  
46 suggests a belief that one's past does not determine their future, pertinently their criminality. With a  
47 multi-disciplinary and beyond the gate approach, this cognitive state could be nurtured before release  
48 to develop collaborative, meaningful and achievable community plans.  
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### 56 **The therapeutic utility of the VARGT in research and clinical practice**

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58 Whilst the data originated within a researcher-participant context, the VARGT demonstrated potential  
59 for application in clinical and forensic assessment, and treatment contexts. Its ability to maximise  
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3 collaborative engagement with people who have stalked is apparent. The richness of participant-led,  
4 insightful disclosures about themselves and about their stalking behaviours was a surprising outcome.  
5 This VARGT's ability has clear benefits for further application in research, clinical and forensic settings.  
6 For example, it could be used to assist practitioners in preparing people for treatment intervention to  
7 address their bespoke needs, and add to the knowledge and practice gaps internationally in respect  
8 of engaging, and providing psychological intervention, with people who stalk.  
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17 The reflections and supporting data extracts demonstrate the therapeutic value of the VARGT. That  
18 is, in encouraging meaningful disclosures through guided discovery and allowing the participant and  
19 practitioner to access a deeper understanding of the drivers for their hurtful behaviours. The ability  
20 of the VARGT to provoke within-sample replicable patterns in self-reflective personal disclosures has  
21 generic potential as a research and professional engagement tool. Given stalking behaviours appear  
22 to be driven in part by an underlying type of attachment disorder (see MacKenzie, Mullen, Ogloff,  
23 McEwan and James, 2008), understanding their relational and social world views, their relationship  
24 goals, role models and self-concepts, will assist professionals in working responsively. This is with the  
25 ultimate goal of identifying criminogenic needs including skills and knowledge deficits to address in  
26 treatment and risk management interventions, subsequently for rehabilitative gains.  
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35 The VARGT ensures transparency in interactions, personally relevant discussions, a client-led  
36 formulation and motivation enhancement, encouraging an underlying collaborative therapeutic  
37 alliance. The resultant guided self-discoveries appeared relatively undefended and unguarded,  
38 perhaps due to the technique's ability and the further visual exposure of personal construct systems  
39 back to participants. The VARGTs elicitation of key features for case formulation provided further  
40 support of the utility of RGTs for such clinical use, and provided the additional benefit of having visually  
41 accessible information for participants to determine and own. The alignment of traits of *self-past* and  
42 *stalker* elements was powerful amongst the sample. If replicable this would provide an opportunity to  
43 educate regarding the legal and conceptual elements of what constitutes stalking and allow a re-focus  
44 on the problematic behaviours, and underlying unmet needs, as opposed to resisting the label. This  
45 has significance in being responsive to those who have stalked when first engaging.  
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55 Improving responsivity within rehabilitative attempts is important to its success (Kozar and Day, 2017)  
56 and the VARGT's potential ability to do this whilst developing collaborative case formulations could  
57 be capitalised on. Psychological case formulation is a robust alternative to psychiatric diagnosis  
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3 (Johnstone and Boyle, 2018), consisting of a collaboratively constructed hypothesis for problematic  
4 behaviours, i.e., stalking. The VARGT provides a potentially valuable tool in aligning psychological  
5 knowledge with the elicited experiential expertise of the client. Johnstone and Boyle (2018) report on  
6 the positive experience of service users in using a collaborative case formulation approach, which  
7 appeared to be a replicated finding with the use of the VARGT in the original research study.  
8 Independent motivational self-statements, identification of characteristics to alter, those aspiring to,  
9 and recognition of those linked to their own stalking behaviours, are not common observations by  
10 practitioners engaging with stalkers, especially upon their first meeting. The sample unanimously  
11 demonstrated insight, wanted to discuss their experiences, and were able to identify aspects they  
12 would want help with to improve their interpersonal skills and address psycho-emotional  
13 vulnerabilities. This should not be simply dismissed as false hope or a manipulation of criminal justice  
14 agencies, but rather harnessed and nurtured in a collaborative and structured way.  
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27 There are limitations caveated to these reflections. It cannot be ascertained to what extent the  
28 experiences are bespoke to the VARGT as an engagement tool, the researcher-practitioner style, a  
29 combination of both, or none. To explore this a number of randomised controlled trials utilising a  
30 range of engagement interventions, including the VARGT, with those who have stalked is planned.  
31 Until such time the therapeutic value assigned to the VARGT through these reflections is anecdotal  
32 and contextual to the sample and research purpose. In terms of therapeutic impact, it is also pertinent  
33 to consider that research to date has failed to evidence treatment outcome and reduced recidivism  
34 success based on the presence of problem insight and motivation, despite longstanding assumptions  
35 (Linn-Walton and Maschi, 2015). The value of these factors within therapeutic interventions however  
36 seems clear for both client and clinician, particularly linked to the development of therapeutic alliance  
37 and personal growth.  
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49 Despite the clinical and research capabilities of the repertory grid technique, there has been relatively  
50 limited application within forensic contexts (Blagden *et al.*, 2012). It is hoped that this paper illustrates  
51 its value further and encourages adaptations akin to the VARGT in order to improve engagement with  
52 participants in research and clients in clinical work. This paper presents participant and researcher-  
53 practitioner reflections on the use of the VARGT with men convicted of stalking offences, known to  
54 have difficulties discussing the functions of their stalking and underlying needs. It shows its potential  
55 as a rich, yielding engagement tool where only small windows of opportunity are created for contact  
56 given criminal justice sanctioning.  
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### 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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