

Repertory Grid Method with Offenders: Two Case Examples with Antisocial Personality Disorder*

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The repertory grid is a research tool that serves both as a method and an instrument. As a method, it provides a systematic framework for exploring subjective perspectives, fostering engagement and rapport while adapting to specific contexts. As an instrument, it is co-constructed with participants, offering a personalized depiction of their internal constructs without imposing external frameworks. Despite its promise, the repertory grid has seen limited use in forensic settings. This paper reviews existing research and presents findings from two case studies involving offenders diagnosed with antisocial personality disorder. The findings support the grid's utility in providing detailed insights into personality structure, which can aid in security risk assessments and treatment planning. The grid's collaborative nature helps produce relevant personal constructs while minimizing socially desirable responses by not explicitly revealing the research goal. Its adaptability allows for customization to the researcher's needs. However, limitations such as its complexity and the need for specialized training may hinder broader use, underscoring the need for more accessible programs or simplified educational tools.

KEYWORDS: repertory grid / personal construct psychology / offenders / antisocial personality disorder / assessment

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Introduction

Offenders frequently capture public attention (Milićević & Drndarević, 2024). Central to this fascination is the question: why would someone engage in antisocial behavior rather than adopt the role of a conforming citizen? Are the fear and shame of social exclusion and imprisonment not sufficient deterrents for such actions?

Yet, for certain offenders, even imprisonment fails to curb their antisocial tendencies. These individuals persist in manipulation, institutional misconduct, violent outbursts, and other deviant behaviors. This particularly resistant subgroup, often accumulating numerous institutional measures (Međedović, Drndarević, & Ilijić, 2024), is commonly categorized under the label of antisocial personality disorder (ASPD). Defined by criminogenic behavior or antisocial traits, individuals with ASPD are often associated with a bleak prognosis and limited treatment options (Meloy & Yakeley, 2014).

While such a classification provides predictive clarity, it can also entrench both the individual and staff within a rigid, pessimistic narrative that offers little hope for change. However, if meaningful change is to be achieved, the first step may lie in exploring the offender's personal meaning-making processes. Understanding how they construct their world could reveal the choices available to them. Perhaps then, the question of choosing between antisocial or conforming behavior may become irrelevant, as this may not be the relevant construction within which the person operates.

Exploring the personal constructs that shape offenders' experiences offers valuable insights into the psychological meanings driving their behavior. However, direct inquiry often proves unreliable, as offenders may lie, manipulate, or lack self-awareness regarding their motivations (Houston, 1998; Horley, 2008). This raises a critical question: can their meaning-making processes be uncovered without relying solely on direct questioning?

Personal construct psychology (PCP) provides both a theoretical framework and methodological tools for exploring individuals' subjective worlds (Drndarević, 2021; Kelly, 1991). PCP suggests that behavior is shaped by personal constructs—bipolar dimensions of meaning through which individuals interpret their experiences. These constructs act as psychological channels that guide behavior.

What is a Repertory Grid?

Grounded in PCP, the repertory grid method is designed to uncover and analyze the "repertory" of meanings or personal constructs that guide behavior. A unique feature of this method is its co-constructive nature, developed

collaboratively with the participant during the interview. Another distinctive aspect is its indirect approach—its goals are not immediately obvious from the procedure, which makes the grid particularly useful for assessing offending behavior (Kitson-Boyce et al., 2022). The method links significant elements (e.g., people, events, or roles) to the constructs individuals use to evaluate these elements. The resulting grid forms a matrix that maps how the individual interprets and assigns meaning to their world (see the appendix).

In practice, constructing a repertory grid involves three main steps:

- Identifying Elements: Participants generate a list of important items related to a given topic, such as significant people in their lives.
- Eliciting Constructs: Constructs are elicited by comparing and contrasting elements in small groups (e.g., "How are these two people similar but different from the third?").
- Rating Elements: Participants rate each element on a numerical scale for each construct (e.g., "To what extent is this person cruel or empathic?").

Once completed, the grid can be analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively (Fransella et al., 2004). Structural indices, such as cognitive complexity, provide an objective measure of the psychological system's characteristics. For example, low cognitive complexity, commonly found in offending populations, indicates a more rigid, black-and-white construction system (Houston, 1998). Content analysis focuses on the specific meanings and patterns within constructs, relying on the interpretative and creative skills of the theorist (Landfield & Epting, 1987).

Repertory Grid With Offenders

Although the repertory grid has been extensively and successfully applied in various domains, its use in forensic contexts remains limited (Blagden & Needs, 2022; Kitson-Boyce et al., 2022). This is surprising, given its demonstrated utility in uncovering offenders' subjective perspectives and constructs relevant to understanding and tracking psychological change.

One notable application is among sexual offenders, particularly those in denial. The repertory grid has been used to explore core constructs in offenders maintaining their innocence, showcasing its ability to foster engagement despite resistance. Denial has been found to serve a protective function, helping offenders manage shame, preserve identity, and maintain social relationships. While denial often excludes offenders from treatment programs, it does not need to be addressed directly to assist them. Instead, focusing on alternative treatment targets—such as anger, grievance, hostility, interpersonal deficits, relationship instability, and antisocial attitudes—can still contribute to reducing recidivism and fostering positive outcomes (Blagden et al., 2012; Blagden et al., 2014).

Similarly, the grid has been used to understand pedophiles' construing of their relationships with victims, providing insights that inform treatment planning (Howells, 1979).

Beyond exploring subjective worlds, the method has proven effective in detecting personality changes and guiding individualized therapeutic interventions. For instance, it has been successfully employed in high-security settings to track treatment progress in sex offenders (Shorts, 1985), as well as with offenders presenting intellectual disabilities and alcohol misuse (Mason, 2008). Innovations in the grid's design have further enhanced its utility; for example, visually enhanced grids have engaged individuals convicted of stalking, revealing unique relational and emotional constructs specific to this population (Wheatley et al., 2020).

In psychopathy research, the repertory grid has proven valuable in studying this methodologically challenging population. By using interpersonal situations rather than people as elements, one study found that both primary and secondary psychopaths failed to recognize that others might construe events differently. Significant misperceptions were observed, particularly along the dull-exciting dimension, where situations were frequently perceived as unexciting (Widom, 1976). Furthermore, primary psychopaths exhibited a lopsided use of constructs, indicating limited conceptual flexibility. Among adolescents with psychopathic traits, the grid provided insights into the degree to which they embraced psychopathic roles, generating clinically relevant hypotheses for treatment planning (Sewell & Cruise, 2004).

From this brief review, the repertory grid emerges as a promising tool for forensic contexts. It offers rich, in-depth assessments of the constructs guiding behavior, facilitates therapeutic change, and tracks psychological progress within treatment. Given the primary objectives of offender assessment—understanding behavior, evaluating treatment suitability, and assessing security risks (Houston, 1998; Horley, 2008)—the repertory grid, with its demonstrated potential to address these goals, warrants further exploration and application in forensic settings.

The Present Study

The present study aims to highlight the repertory grid as a valuable tool for understanding the subjective perspectives of offenders, presenting novel partial findings from individuals with ASPD. By exploring two distinct case examples, this study demonstrates how the grid can uncover the core constructs that shape offenders' subjective worldviews. This approach provides an understanding of personality dynamics "from within," offering insights that extend beyond traditional diagnostic frameworks. This conference paper summarizes the key

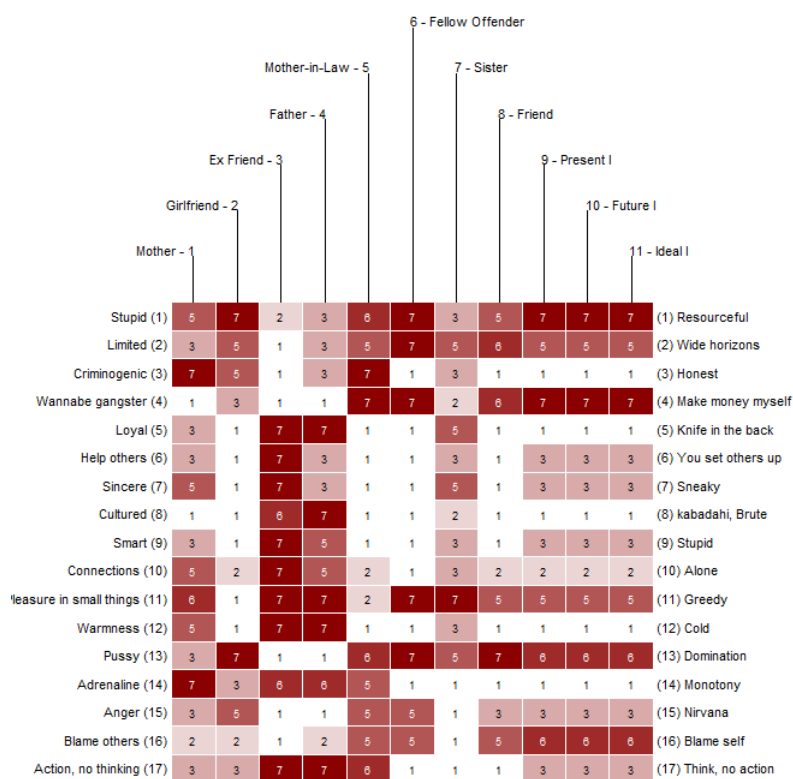
findings and methodological considerations, addressing both the benefits and limitations of the grid. Further details on the methodology and a more comprehensive description of the cases can be found in the main article (see Drndarević, in press).

Case 1: Stable antisocial core structure

A 28-year-old male offender, with a history of juvenile detention and currently serving a sentence for drug-related offenses and banditry, presented in an outgoing and euphoric state. In addition to meeting criteria for ASPD and substance use disorder, he also reported having attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder.

Figure 1

Repertory Grid of Case 1



Repertory grid analysis revealed a low cognitive complexity construct system with minimal anxiety (Figure 1). His two core constructs accounted for nearly 70% of the variance, indicating a well-defined and rigid worldview. Dominance

and criminogenic activities were his preferred core constructs, which he viewed as essential for achieving success, money, and warmth. In contrast, submissiveness and honesty—his core opposite poles—were psychologically threatening to him.

He appeared to have constructed his self in firm opposition to society, which he perceived as restrictive. Consequently, his choice of an antisocial role seemed to offer a more expansive sense of self. His construct system revealed no significant conflicts or dilemmas, allowing him to engage in criminal behavior without guilt. Furthermore, he made no distinction between his present, ideal, and future selves, suggesting not only stability and validation but also a lack of desire for change.

Given his stable antisocial structure and absence of emotional conflict, treatment prospects are limited. He sees no reason to change, as his worldview and values align with his personal goals. Risk assessment indicates a persistent threat to societal safety due to his goal-oriented criminal behavior, with violence likely being employed only as a means to protect his antisocial identity (e.g., threats to his dominance) or to validate it (e.g., as part of criminogenic activities).

Case 2: Unstable antisocial core structure

A 23-year-old male offender, serving a sentence for violent robbery, drug offenses, and banditry, presented with depressive symptoms, including lethargy, slow speech, and a mixture of sadness and anger. In addition to meeting the criteria for ASPD and depressive disorder, he disclosed a history of substance abuse (marijuana, amphetamines, cocaine, heroin), although he claimed to have been drug-free for the past year, aside from prescribed antidepressants.

Repertory grid analysis revealed significant instability and anxiety in his construct system, with two core dimensions accounting for just over 50% of the variance (Figure 2). Lacking clarity in his constructs, he shifted between role fragments of cruelty and empathy. Cruelty, serving as a coping mechanism, was rationalized by a childhood marked by abandonment by his father. In contrast, empathic constructs, shaped by supportive family relationships, conflicted with this cruelty. These implicative dilemmas led to substantial shifts within his unstable system, giving rise to feelings of guilt, anxiety, and emotional disconnection.

Childlike construing patterns, including black-and-white thinking and a heavy reliance on others' opinions, further reflected developmental stagnation and an inability to shift to a more adaptive system configuration. Substance abuse, while providing temporary relief, only exacerbated his anxiety and further destabilized his system.

Figure 2

Repertory Grid of Case 2



Despite the significant psychological challenges presented in this case, treatment prospects appear more promising due to the instability and guilt present within his construct system. Developing a superordinate construct that integrates both empathy and cruelty, alongside managing impulsive behaviors and addressing underlying anxiety, could help mitigate antisocial behavior. This process would require intensive care, extending beyond typical correctional facilities, and could benefit from leveraging family support and psychopharmacological interventions. His risk of harm—both to himself and others—remains high due to cycles of impulsive violence, guilt, and substance-induced disorganization, all of which escalate his psychological instability.

Discussion

This paper briefly reviewed the application of the repertory grid method with offender populations. Extending prior limited research, it presented findings from two case examples of offenders with ASPD, further supporting the repertory grid's value for both security and treatment assessments (Drndarević, in press). For instance, while the second case exhibited more severe psychological issues and violent tendencies, the instability and guilt in his construct system suggested a greater potential for change.

More importantly, the collaborative nature of the grid fosters rapport. By engaging the offender on a personal level, it allows treatment staff to build a bridge toward deeper understanding and stronger relationships. Staff-offender relationships are especially relevant in the context of improving quality of prison life (Mededović, Drndarević, & Milićević, 2024). Participants often share more personal information or stories, enriching the assessment process. For example, in the second case, the offender reflected on his father's early abandonment, which seemed to validate his cruelty construct, and his mother's disappointment after his incarceration, which appeared to invalidate cruelty and induce unbearable guilt.

The grid's flexibility is another significant advantage. Researchers can adapt the elements under investigation to the specific population of interest. In this study, participants selected elements representing key individuals in their lives, including their present, ideal, and future selves. However, the grid can also be tailored to explore specific constructs, such as offenders' constructions of children in cases of pedophilia (Howells, 1979), mechanisms of denial in sex offenders (Blagden et al., 2014), or even interpersonal situations (Widom, 1976).

Additionally, the method's design discourages socially desirable responses, as participants evaluate elements through their personal constructs, obscuring the research's direct purpose (Blagden et al., 2022). By uncovering the constructs through which offenders make sense of others, the grid reveals the dimensions along which they also construe themselves. This feature is particularly valuable when working with offenders, as it becomes more challenging for them to manipulate information about their personality (Widom, 1976). For example, in the first case, warmth and connection with others appeared reserved exclusively for those perceived as dominant—qualities deemed incompatible with honesty, which seems associated with being submissive, cold, and alone.

Nevertheless, the application of PCP and the repertory grid in forensic settings faces practical challenges. Many offenders participate in treatment only under legal or correctional mandates (Horley, 2008; Houston, 1998). While overt resistance may be rare, unwillingness to engage remains a significant barrier. Additionally, although the method provides rich data within a short timeframe, its implementation in resource-limited correctional environments—where staff-to-

inmate ratios are often stretched—poses substantial challenges. Effective use of the repertory grid requires familiarity with PCP principles; detaching the tool from its theoretical foundation risks inappropriate or superficial application (Blagden et al., 2022).

For the repertory grid to become a more broadly useful tool, new programs could simplify its application and accessibility. A new package for R, called Open Rep Grid, seems to be a step in the right direction (Heckmann, 2023). Moreover, streamlined training modules and simplified interpretative frameworks focused on key constructs could equip professionals with the necessary skills to apply the method effectively without requiring extensive theoretical expertise. These efforts could increase usability while preserving the tool's depth and value.

Conclusion

Current, though limited, research suggests that the repertory grid method offers a useful approach for both engaging and researching challenging populations, such as offenders. Its strength lies in its ability to avoid imposing predetermined responses, allowing participants to express more personal meanings. The collaborative nature of the PCP approach enables clinicians to tailor methods to the client's needs, fostering positive engagement by focusing on personal interpretations rather than externally imposed ones. Moreover, the grid minimizes the risk of socially desirable responses, as the goal of the procedure is not immediately apparent to the participant (Blagden et al., 2022). Its versatility further enhances its utility, as it can be adjusted to different target elements, constructs, and research or clinical objectives. The repertory grid is effective both for individual case studies and research, supported by its demonstrated reliability (Fransella et al., 2004; Horley, 1996).

Certain drawbacks limit its broader application, as it depends on the willful engagement of participants, and the complexity and time limitations of correctional settings may impose significant restrictions. However, taking into account the personal meanings of participants can prevent interventions from being perceived as meaningless or generic. From a treatment perspective, “one size fits all” makes little sense (Blagden et al., 2022). Engaging with the inherent complexity of offenders' experiences and constructs is essential to achieving a deeper understanding, better assessment, and more effective intervention. Unlike many standardized approaches, the repertory grid addresses the offender's unique context and personal meanings. It moves beyond routine methods, offering a way to tailor interventions and assessments that resonate with the individual's perspective and lived experience.

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