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Proposal of criteria for appraising Goal Attainment Scales used as outcome measures in rehabilitation research

Agata Krasny-Pacini, Jonathan Evans, Mckay Moore Sohlberg, Mathilde Chevignard

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Title page

Running head of no more than 40 character spaces: GAS in rehabilitation research

Title: Proposal of criteria for appraising Goal Attainment Scales used as outcome measures in rehabilitation research

Author(s) full name(s) written as First Name then Last Name, and highest academic degree(s):

Agata Krasny-Pacini^{1,5,6}, MD

Jonathan Evans², PhD

McKay Moore Sohlberg³, PhD

Mathilde Chevignard^{4,5}, PhD

The name(s) of the institution(s), section(s), division(s), and department(s) where the study was performed and the institutional affiliation(s) of the author(s) at the time of the study:

1. Institut Universitaire de Réadaptation Clemenceau-Strasbourg, 45 bd Clemenceau, 67082 Strasbourg, France Paediatric Department and Hautepierre Strasbourg University Hospital, Strasbourg. France
2. Department of Psychological Medicine, Mental Health and Wellbeing, Gartnavel Royal Hospital, 1055 Great Western Rd, Glasgow G12 0XH , Scotland, UK
3. Communication Disorders & Sciences University of Oregon Eugene Oregon 97403 United States

4. Rehabilitation Department for Children with Acquired Brain Injury, Hôpitaux de Saint Maurice, 14, rue du Val d'Osne, 94410 Saint Maurice
5. Sorbonne Universités, UPMC Paris 06, UMR 7371, UMR_S 1146, LIB, F-75005, Paris, France
6. Service de Chirurgie Orthopédique Infantile, hôpital de Hautepierre, CHU de Strasbourg, avenue Molière, 67098 Strasbourg cedex

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Name, address, business telephone number, and e-mail address of corresponding author:

Dr. Agata Krasny-Pacini (corresponding author)

Institut Universitaire de Réadaptation Clemenceau-Strasbourg

45 bd Clemenceau

67082 Strasbourg, France

Telephone: 0033388211642/47


0033 671-28-41-52 (mobile)

Fax : 0033 388211643/1605

E-mail: agatakrasny@yahoo.com

agata.krasny@ugecam-alsace.fr

The author from whom reprints can be obtained: A. Krasny-Pacini

 If reprints are not available, this is stated on the title page.

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1 *Proposed criteria for appraising*
2 *Goal Attainment Scales used as*
3 *outcome measures in rehabilitation*
4 *research*

5 Abstract

6 Goal Attainment Scaling (GAS) is a method for writing personalized evaluation scales in
7 order to quantify progress toward defined rehabilitation goals. In published literature, GAS
8 methodology is used with different levels of rigor, ranging from precisely written GAS scales,
9 that ensure minimal bias, explicitly describing five levels of goal attainment; to subjective
10 rating of goal attainment by adjectives such as “worse/better than expected”, which are
11 transformed into a T-score, wrongly giving the reader the impression of a truly standardized,
12 interval scale. A drawback of GAS methodology is that it is highly dependent on the ability of
13 the GAS setting team/person to generate valid, reliable and meaningful scales, therefore
14 reliability and validity of GAS scales are idiosyncratic to each study. The aims of this article
15 were to: (1) increase awareness of potential sources of bias in GAS processes; (2) propose
16 Goal Attainment Scaling quality appraisal criteria, allowing judgment of the quality of GAS
17 methodology in individual rehabilitation studies; and (3) propose directions to improve GAS

18 implementation in order to increase its reliability and validity as a research measurement
19 tool. Our proposed quality appraisal criteria are based on critical appraisal of GAS literature,
20 and published GAS validity studies that have demonstrated that precision, validity and
21 reliability can be obtained when using GAS as an outcome measure in clinical trials. We
22 recommend that authors using GAS report accurately how GAS methodology was used
23 based on these criteria.

24 Keywords

25 goal attainment scaling; outcome measures; goal setting; methodology; scale validity;
26 scale reliability; standards; quality appraisal; guidelines

27 List of abbreviations

28 GAS: Goal Attainment Scaling

29 ICF: International Classification of Functioning

30 IRR: Inter-rater reliability

31 PMR: Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation

32 RoM: Range of motion

33 RCT: Randomized Controlled Trial

34 SMART criteria: Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, Time-specific

35

36 **Introduction**

37 Goal Attainment Scaling (GAS) ¹ is a method for writing personalized evaluation scales in
38 order to quantify progress towards defined goals (see practical guidelines^{2,3,4,5} and literature
39 reviews on GAS ^{6,7,8,9,10}). Goal Attainment Scaling produces an individualized, criterion-
40 referenced measure of a client's goal achievement. Scores can be aggregated to quantify the
41 extent to which a group of clients who are receiving the same type of intervention achieve
42 their personalized rehabilitation goals. One GAS scale is written for each identified
43 rehabilitation goal, with an emphasis on the client's participation in goal selection when
44 possible. Success of the intervention is then quantified on an ordinal scale, typically ranging
45 from -2 (or -3) to +2.

46 GAS has therefore two intertwined components: (1) GAS methodology is a person-
47 centered approach in rehabilitation that emphasizes collaborative goal setting with the
48 establishment of goals and levels of progress that are meaningful to the client; (2) GAS is an
49 outcome measure that can be used both in clinical work and research to assess the
50 effectiveness of an intervention based on personally relevant goals. This paper focuses on
51 the use of GAS as an outcome measure specifically for rehabilitation efficacy research. The
52 reader is referred elsewhere to reviews of the literature on the clinical aspects of
53 collaborative goal setting ^{10,9,11,12}.

54 Writing personalized scales through GAS methodology is useful in measuring
55 rehabilitation outcomes, and use of GAS methodology is expanding in research settings,
56 especially in areas where standard scales do not adequately capture a study participant's
57 progress or when a standardized assessment does not exist to measure the construct. GAS
58 methodology offers benefit in the provision of individualized, dependent variables, a critical
59 characteristic for measuring rehabilitation effects. GAS allows use of the same 5-point scale

60 method for all clients and therefore aggregation of results independent of goal type. Further,
61 the goal of rehabilitation is to improve clients' activity and participation in natural contexts,
62 but very few measures are designed to ecologically assess performance. By contrast, GAS
63 allows the transformation of goals related to the International Classification of functioning
64 (ICF) activity domains into participation goals in defined contexts where the activities occur
65 ^{13,14}. Feasibility of GAS has been shown across a variety of rehabilitation fields ^{15,16, 17,18,19}. GAS
66 scales are sensitive to change when testing an intervention in rehabilitation ^{20,21,15,16,22,23}. GAS
67 characteristics in terms of safety, utility and responsiveness are therefore encouraging.

68 However, in published literature, GAS methodology is used with different levels of rigor,
69 ranging from precisely written GAS scales that ensure minimal bias, explicitly describing five
70 levels of goal attainment; to subjective rating of goal attainment by adjectives such as
71 "worse/better than expected", which are transformed into a T-score, wrongly giving the
72 reader the impression of a truly standardized, interval scale. Although the less rigorous form
73 of GAS methodology can be convenient, useful, fast and practical to use in clinical practice,
74 there is growing concern for its use as an outcome measure in clinical trials ^{24,25} and mixed
75 findings as to the reliability ^{24,26} and validity of GAS as an outcome measure ²⁵.

76 The aims of this paper are to (1) increase awareness of potential sources of bias in GAS
77 processes; (2) propose Goal Attainment Scaling quality appraisal criteria, allowing judgment
78 of the quality of GAS methodology in individual rehabilitation studies; and (3) propose
79 directions to improve GAS implementation in order to increase its reliability and validity as a
80 research measurement tool. This paper is *not* addressing use of GAS in clinical setting
81 outwith research.

82 **Methods**

83 A literature search using PubMed data base was conducted to ensure that our critical
84 appraisal of the research was inclusive. The keywords “goal attainment scaling” and
85 “rehabilitation OR therapy” were utilized to identify articles published between 1990 and 2014.
86 The search returned 179 articles. Twelve articles were excluded because an abstract was not
87 available or because the article was not written in English. A title and abstract review was
88 conducted to identify those articles that evaluated GAS methodology as an outcome measure.
89 Included papers were: (1) Literature reviews on GAS; (2) GAS clinical guidelines; (3) Papers
90 relating to GAS validity and reliability; (4) Papers relating to training in GAS. We purposefully
91 included papers referring to fields outside Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation (PMR), that
92 face the same challenges in evaluating treatment efficacy as rehabilitation does (especially
93 cognitive interventions from the field of psychiatry and developmental disorders). Papers
94 were excluded if they assessed only GAS feasibility or sensitivity to change/responsiveness,
95 without references to its validity and reliability as an outcome measure. This yielded 36
96 relevant full text papers that were reviewed in order to identify bias in GAS and generate the
97 quality appraisal criteria.

98 **Potential sources of bias in GAS processes and published recommendations for**
99 **constructing goal attainment scales.**

100 Usual criticisms of how GAS methodology has been used include: (1) unknown clinimetric
101 qualities of GAS scales used in a given study due to their idiosyncratic nature²⁵; (2) subjective
102 scoring, especially if not all levels of the scale are formulated or if descriptions are not
103 precise enough; (3) risk of choosing goals that are not clinically relevant or too easy/too
104 difficult to attain²⁷ and therefore do not represent a meaningful or realistic change in
105 function; (4) ordinal (rather than interval) nature of GAS scales²⁸ and the lack of equidistance

106 between GAS levels which cannot be controlled for²⁴; (5) the use of a T-score that uses
107 subjective values, especially a subjective weighting of GAS scores and a ρ coefficient
108 assumed to be 0.3 which has not been confirmed in the literature^{9,28,6}.

109
110 A major drawback of GAS methodology is that it is highly dependent on the ability of the
111 GAS setting team/person to generate valid, reliable and meaningful scales. It has even been
112 proposed that GAS is more a measure of how adequately a therapist can foresee outcome
113 than an outcome measure itself^{6,29,30,31,32}. A group of clients may show progress on their GAS
114 scale due to a measurement error, on a GAS scale that is not reliable because of poor inter-
115 rater reliability, too easy goals, unequal distances between GAS levels or use of subjective
116 criteria for goal attainment. This issue has been raised by Ruble et al.²⁷: "If GAS scores are
117 higher in the experimental conditions [...]one could argue that the targeted outcomes as
118 scaled using GAS were less difficult and easier for [clients] in the experimental group to
119 achieve compared to the control group; that skills were written in more measurable terms
120 and thus easier to be observed and coded in the experimental groups; or that the intervals
121 between each scaled description were unequal and favored the experimental group." (p3).

122 Because these potential biases can threaten reliability of results obtained through GAS,
123 Kiresuk et al.^{1,33} recommended the review of GAS scales by an independent third party, and
124 even suggested that clients should be evaluated on two different sets of GAS scales,
125 developed by two independent research groups¹ (i.e. treatment success should be
126 independent of how the goals were formulated)^{1,34} to minimize bias. Although few
127 publications address this demanding recommendation^{35,36} it seems crucial that authors using
128 GAS as a research outcome measure provide the reader with information on how the scales
129 were generated and verified (and/or compared between groups on items that may impact

130 on GAS scoring as suggested by Ruble et al.²⁷), in order to provide information on reliability
131 and validity. Some authors have found encouraging values of GAS reliability and validity
132 ^{25,15,37,22,35} (see recent systematic review by Vu et al.⁸). However the validity and reliability of
133 GAS set by one team (especially an experienced one) does not presume that other GAS
134 scales set by other teams, in other rehabilitation contexts, are valid and reliable²⁷. GAS
135 clinimetric qualities depend mainly on how experienced the team is in GAS writing. Grant et
136 al. reported the problems encountered when GAS are used by inexperienced teams, without
137 an independent experienced judge checking the scales¹².

138
139 A series of criteria for writing GAS has been proposed^{38,1,2,35}: (1) each GAS level must be
140 described accurately enough to allow a person who was not involved in the GAS-writing
141 process to easily classify the client at one of the GAS levels described¹, with no “blank
142 levels”³⁹ (levels not precisely described, which content is inferred from adjacent levels); (2)
143 each scale must represent a single dimension of change¹²; (3) the levels must be measurable
144 and thus defined in terms of observable behaviors^{6,9,40}; (4) the scales must correspond to
145 goals that are important/meaningful to the client; (5) all the levels must be realistic and
146 attainable (in particular, the +2 level must not correspond to an unexpected or miraculous
147 goal attainment level)¹; (6) the time scale within which goals must be attained and scales
148 must be scored should be defined in advance; (7) the inter-level differences in difficulty must
149 all be the same^{41,42}, i.e. it must be as difficult to progress from -2 to -1, as from -1 to 0 or
150 from 0 to +1, etc... and there should be no overlapping and no gap between the levels³⁹. Part
151 of these criteria are reflected in the “SMART” acronym³⁸ i.e. a goal should be Specific,
152 Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Time-determined. Although all authors acknowledge
153 the need for GAS to be “SMART”, few report precautions taken to ensure GAS scales are

154 *actually* “SMART”, and virtually none assesses GAS quality when using it as an outcome
155 measure.

156 Some authors proposed additional recommendations for GAS when it is used in research:
157 (1) including a training program^{43,25,15,44}; (2) establishing all goals prior to randomization^{45,46}
158 or blinding the goal-setter to the patient’s treatment/control status⁴⁷; (3) testing of
159 interrater reliability for initial and post intervention GAS rating^{43,46}; (4) GAS scoring by a
160 blind examiner⁴⁶ who is independent from the team that set the goals^{48,49,46,42} and
161 independent from the therapist providing intervention^{43,44}; (5) the use of “control goals”
162 that are not targeted by the intervention⁶; (6) evaluation of the patients on two different
163 GAS scales developed by independent therapists (i.e. treatment success must be
164 independent of how the goals were formulated)^{1,35,36}; (7) goal-setting by a group (rather
165 than a single therapist or the patient alone), in order to avoid overly simple or
166 unrealistic goals³⁴. To our knowledge, the impact of those recommendations on GAS
167 validity and reliability has not yet been studied and few studies follow these guidelines.
168 Their utility and applicability will be discussed in the discussion section of this paper.

169 **Proposed criteria for appraising Goal Attainment Scales**

170 Because GAS is a relevant and responsive outcome measure in rehabilitation research,
171 but used with great variability that weakens the confidence in the results of trials that use
172 this methodology, there is an urgent need for standards relating to GAS use in rehabilitation
173 efficacy research. Our aim was therefore to propose GAS quality appraisal criteria, that
174 would allow judgment of the quality of GAS methodology in individual rehabilitation studies,
175 that could be used as guidelines to reduce bias, and strengthen GAS validity and reliability.

176

177 Based on our review of the literature, items for the quality appraisal were included if
178 they met one of the following: (1) historically or traditionally recognized quality criteria (such
179 as the “SMART” criteria and Kiresuk et al.’s^{1,33} rules for writing GAS scales); (2) criteria used
180 by teams who obtained and published a good level of inter-rater reliability of their GAS data;
181 (3) criteria used in rehabilitation trials to compare GAS quality across experimental groups;
182 (4) items judged consensually by all authors of this paper as potential key candidates for
183 increasing GAS validity and reliability (even in the absence of literature showing their impact
184 on GAS clinimetric quality). Disagreements between authors on included items are
185 developed in the discussion section.

186 In selecting criteria, the publications of two teams were particularly useful. In Steenbeek
187 et al.’s methodology^{35,48,23}, eight GAS characteristics can be identified to ensure the
188 construction of reliable scales: (1) all five levels of the GAS are precisely described; (2) GAS
189 scales use objective and observable measures based on performance; (3) context of
190 measurement is precisely described and factors that might influence performance are
191 controlled for; (4) initial level is systematically verified after scale is set; (5) an independent,
192 blind assessor scores GAS after intervention; (6) GAS data analysis respects the ordinal
193 nature of GAS, using only raw scores and non-parametric statistics; (7) inter-rater reliability
194 of GAS used in each study is reported; (8) teams are specifically trained to write reliable GAS
195 scales (refer to Steenbeek et al.⁴¹ for an example of training).

196 Ruble et al. describe criteria for using GAS as a main outcome measure in a randomized
197 controlled trial (RCT)²⁷. They suggest the following three key questions to ensure
198 comparability of GAS in different experimental groups: “(a) are the goal and the associated
199 benchmarks relative to each goal described in measurable terms that are comparable
200 between groups (measurability criteria); (b) is the distance between each of the benchmarks

201 for each scale of equal intervals and comparable between groups (equidistance criteria); and
202 (c) is the level of difficulty between the baseline or starting levels of performance and the
203 targeted outcome goal comparable between groups (difficulty criteria)?”²⁷. In a recent
204 controlled trial⁵⁰, all GAS scales were compared across the two experimental groups on
205 these criteria using a three-point Likert scale, showing the feasibility of comparing GAS scales
206 across groups in RCTs.

207 We propose 17 GAS quality criteria and these are presented in Table 1. They are broadly
208 grouped into criteria that relate to the content validity of scales (4 items), the reliability of
209 scale construction (4 items), reliability of scale rating (5 items), and an additional four items
210 relating to training, examiner bias, statistical analysis and provision of a sample scale. If GAS
211 is used in a controlled trial, we propose that GAS scales should not only be checked, but also
212 compared between groups, similarly to the methodology proposed by Ruble et al.²⁷ for
213 relevant items. For large trials, we propose that at least 20% of GAS scales be
214 checked/compared.

215 INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

216 GAS validity

217 GAS should be used when standardized assessment does not exist to measure the
218 construct. Content validity of GAS scales is commonly thought to be high if the goal has been
219 collaboratively set with the client wherever possible and this is the first criterion. Goals
220 should be relevant and reflect clinically meaningful change, and this needs to be
221 independently verified. To document the functional relevance of goals, the ICF domain that
222 the goals reflect should be documented. Specificity is core to SMART goal-setting but with
223 several definitions. Our specificity criteria relates to whether goals set specifically relate to

224 the intervention being tested - in research it is important to be able to articulate how a
225 particular intervention will lead to achieving the desired goal.

226 GAS reliability

227 There are two types of reliability that are particularly important in GAS:

228 (1) Reliability in the way the scale was constructed (i.e. even with an excellent inter-rater
229 reliability, the scale may not be reliable because of non equidistant levels, erroneous starting
230 pre-intervention levels, too easy goals/GAS levels, and an unspecified time frame for goals'
231 attainment influencing the relative difficulty of attaining a specific goal at the generic post-
232 intervention assessment time point). The first four reliability criteria reflect these issues.

233 (2) Reliability in scoring a given GAS scale. Measuring inter-rater reliability (IRR) provides a
234 check on measurement accuracy. The following four items are thought to impact IRR: GAS
235 scales where each level is not precisely described, that use subjective criteria for goal
236 attainment with poor measurability or multidimensional scales, and which do not control for
237 context of measurement, are likely to show lower IRR. Future research is needed to evaluate
238 if respecting those criteria allows better IRR. An adequately measured and reported IRR
239 could release authors from checking all GAS for those items (as training in GAS on those
240 items is likely to generate scales with greater IRR). Because measuring their IRR is time
241 consuming and requires an additional staff member, for large trials, we propose that at least
242 20% of GAS scales be tested for IRR (similar to the 20% of measurement criteria of N-of-1
243 trial standards⁵¹ and Ruble's study²⁷).

244 Additional items

245 The final four criteria are included to further reduce potential for bias and increase
246 confidence in GAS in research reports. They relate to: training of staff writing GAS scales;

247 independence of the person(s) evaluating goal achievement from those who set the goals;
248 use of appropriate statistical analysis methods; and provision of examples of GAS scales in
249 research reports.

250 **Discussion**

251
252 The proposed criteria are indisputably challenging to meet. Most research using GAS
253 does not meet all criteria. However it seems important to set out the highest possible
254 criteria for all forms of research, even though few studies can meet all criteria. The proposals
255 here are intended for research, where outcome measures must be valid and reliable to
256 prevent erroneous conclusions about the effectiveness of an intervention. They do not
257 discredit less rigorous but more user-friendly, more practical and less time-consuming uses
258 of GAS in clinical practice.

259 **Controversial criteria**

260 Should GAS use be restricted to collaboratively set goals? In the literature, goals are
261 often set in collaboration between client/family and therapist^{52 53 54 55 56}, but may also be
262 chosen by the therapist alone^{57 58}, or by the client/ family alone^{57 59}. Initially, the GAS
263 methodology was invented to assess any goal-directed enterprise, including the functioning
264 of a Crisis Intervention Center³⁴ or a hospital-based pharmacy project³⁴. Initially goals could
265 therefore be chosen by any professional, with or without participation of the client. In the
266 last twenty years, as rehabilitation moved towards a more person-centered approach⁶⁰, GAS
267 has become increasingly used as a method for collaborative goal setting, as well as an
268 outcome measure. Literature on brain injury⁶¹ developed guides and methods of

269 collaborative goal setting^{32 62 9 10}, and linked use of GAS as an outcome measure with active
270 client participation in goal setting. However GAS may be valuable in PMR domains where
271 client participation in goal selection is not possible (e.g. patients with minimally conscious
272 state, clients with severe intellectual and behavioral impairment...) or is not essential (e.g.
273 early interventions after stroke to prevent contractures and shoulder pain; motor
274 development in infants with attainment of developmental stages that may not be relevant
275 for the family immediately but that are believed to be crucial for future development and
276 future more functional goals...). GAS may also be used to assess effectiveness of an
277 intervention at a health provider level (e.g. goal of reducing pressure ulcer incidence/need
278 for surgery after a group therapeutic education in a spinal cord injury unit). Because
279 collaborative goal-setting is time-consuming for therapists and cognitively demanding for
280 clients (especially those with brain injury), therapists may use collaborative goal setting for
281 some goals, while choosing themselves goals of other domains that are indisputably useful
282 for this client and the focus of the intervention being tested. Therefore we propose here a
283 less restrictive requirement (in the collaborative goal setting item), allowing therapist-
284 chosen goals. In all cases, authors should report if goals were not collaboratively set and
285 provide reasons of their choice.

286 Most often, GAS scales are set for goal-focused rehabilitation where the goal is directly
287 trained and GAS represents the degree of progress towards a goal. However it has also been
288 proposed that GAS could be a measure of generalization⁶³: i.e. after training relating to a
289 cognitive function (e.g. executive functions, memory), the use of GAS scales can help assess
290 if training lead to gains in daily life (e.g. GAS relating to activities relying on executive
291 functions such as preparing a schoolbag, GAS relating to memory such as taking medicines
292 on time), without specifically addressing these goals. A valuable approach is to use both a set

293 of trained goals (and corresponding GAS) and a set of untrained goals (and corresponding
294 GAS) and then to focus the intervention on training the former while using the latter as an
295 untrained ecological generalization measure. Further it is has been proposed that “control”
296 goals⁶ (and related GAS scales) that are *not* expected to show progression are used, in order
297 to demonstrate the specificity of an intervention (i.e. the client does not just progress on all
298 goals because of general cognitive stimulation or goal-driven motivation, but progresses on
299 the specific goal that is trained or that relates to the trained function needed to achieve an
300 untrained generalization goal).

301 Authors should report the types of goals chosen in their study, using the ICF. GAS types
302 vary considerably between studies, and do not always measure a meaningful goal, but may
303 remain in the body structure and function (gait pattern⁶⁴, range of motion²⁹). A clear
304 demonstration of functional benefit to the client in terms of activity and participation is
305 increasingly required in order to show an intervention is effective, and GAS should relate to
306 activity and participation domains as much as possible. When using GAS for body structures,
307 there is a risk that GAS be used as a way of getting round the need for standardized
308 measures. A methodological error often seen with GAS is to convert existing (or even
309 standardized) scales into GAS scales. This is done for two practical reasons: (1) to help
310 measure a particularly complex goal (e.g. if cognitive restructuring [...] is an important
311 treatment component, it may be advantageous to include a standardized pain beliefs scale
312 as a goal area⁴⁷, p62); (2) to transform a meaningless number into a relevant and meaningful
313 goal; (3) in order to obtain the same outcome measure for all clients. For example for
314 botulinum toxin treatment, the goal of one client may be to decrease pain, measured on a
315 visual analogue scale, then transformed into a GAS scale depending on the pain level
316 considered as meeting the goal of a treatment; the goal for another client may be to

317 decrease equinus (measured in degrees) in a gait analysis laboratory and the range of
318 motion is transformed into a GAS scale presenting a range of ankle positions as the goal.
319 However such a conversion is done at the expense of losing the linearity of the original
320 measure and although very useful in clinical practice, it is scientifically acceptable only if data
321 is analyzed as truly ordinal (therefore not using T-scores, nor means nor any arithmetical
322 operation)^{65 66 28 67}.

323 Can GAS levels be equidistant and GAS data be interval in form? This is possible if a
324 calibration by Rasch Analysis on an "item bank" is carried out as proposed by Tennant et
325 al.²⁴, but at the expense of losing GAS adaptability to any goal¹². Otherwise, GAS levels are
326 very unlikely to be interval despite all precautions, corrections and comparisons used to
327 minimize level inequality bias. Therefore ordinal interpretation of GAS, using rank tests (see
328 Steenbeek et al for an example⁴⁸) and excluding all arithmetic procedures^{66,68,24} on GAS
329 scores seems the most reasonable option for GAS data analysis. It is indisputably difficult to
330 set 5 equidistance GAS levels but simple rules can be postulated to facilitate choice of levels
331 (both for goal setters and the external judge who checks GAS levels and compares
332 equidistance between two groups): (1) avoid setting "half levels" (e.g. -0.5 as proposed by
333 Turner Stokes⁶⁹); (2) have all clients start from the same initial score and therefore have all
334 clients assessed on the same number of levels of goal attainment (see⁵ for a discussion on
335 advantages of scoring initial level at -2 or at -1).

336 What type of staff training should be required in order to use GAS in a research protocol?
337 Kiresuk, Smith and Cardillo had proposed that a minimum of one-year experience is required
338 to develop relevant and realistic scales³⁹. Basic knowledge of GAS, and experience in
339 collaborative goal setting is not sufficient, as shown by Grant et al^{62,12}. Reading a practical
340 guide^{2,3,5,4} may be sufficient for GAS clinical use but not for studies aiming at producing valid

341 and reliable GAS. A number of authors^{70,41} propose practical training that is largely based on
342 formulating and correcting GAS scales, based on clients' real goals. We recommend that
343 such a practical training be used. This should also raise awareness on GAS quality criteria the
344 study will be judged on, and make GAS scoring easier after the intervention. The quality
345 appraisal here proposed could be the focus of such training.

346 Challenges in GAS methodology

347 GAS was intended to be a person-centered measure. Is there a risk of losing its person-
348 centered nature when trying to meet measurement criteria for controlled efficacy trials? The
349 risk of insisting upon an observable and measurable goal is to exclude family and client
350 appreciation of goal attainment. Appreciation of goal attainment by clients may be
351 subjective and is affected by a series of factors (self-awareness, denial, memory, high
352 involvement in goal pursuit) that can bias the perceived attainment of a goal; however goal
353 identification and measuring its attainment should be person-centered. The challenge for
354 clinicians and researchers is therefore to understand and analyze the client's (and/or his /her
355 families) goal and transform it into an observable, objective, performance-based measure
356 that can then be used to discuss goal attainment with the client. For example a general goal
357 of "improving my memory" expressed by a client can be transformed into a GAS scale that
358 measures memory functioning in real life situations agreed with the client (e.g. number of
359 medicines taken on time without prompting; number of failed-to-deliver messages in one
360 week...). Scoring GAS based on simple interview should be avoided when possible and
361 creativity used to link subjective goals in difficult domains to more objective goal attainment
362 indicators. For example for a GAS scale on anger management or use of social skills, rather
363 than asking the client to recall how often she/he felt he could cope with his anger or

364 effectively use social/language skills, an effort should be made to choose indirect indicators
365 of goal attainment such as a review of controlled versus overt anger at the end of a day by
366 the client or proxy rating of social/language skill (how many times he/she
367 initiated/contributed to conversation or was understood) after regular naturally occurring
368 events (outing with friends, family dinner). It is probably the most challenging part of GAS
369 methodology but it has been demonstrated that it is feasible to have GAS that are both
370 person-centered in the choice of goal and objective in the formulation of GAS scales (see
371 Steenbeek et al. for an example³⁵).

372 N-of-1 trial literature faces the same challenges and offers growing ingenious methods
373 for assessment of domains not directly accessible to classical performance-based objective
374 measure. These methods include use of smartphone reminders to self-assess goal
375 attainment at regular periods to decrease memory bias (see⁷¹ for an example), use of
376 naturally occurring situations monitored in real life by family/proxy to decrease self-
377 awareness bias (see⁷² for an example), use of objective behavioral measures that are
378 thought to reflect the underlying psychological (e.g.: happiness⁷³) or cognitive (e.g.:
379 functioning at school^{74,75}) target goals. Future research should extend “goal menus” such as
380 those proposed by Turner-Stokes et al.⁷⁶ to more challenging domains (such as goals relating
381 to social and psychological functions, as well as goals focusing on performance in ecological
382 setting), using also N-of 1 trial literature. When goal attainment indicators are ecological and
383 monitored by the client or proxies, calculating an IRR is impossible (or difficult) and GAS
384 should be checked for items: precise description of all GAS levels, measurability,
385 unidimensionality and context of measurement to increase reliability in scoring. A
386 reasonable compromise between scientific rigor and person-centered approach could be to
387 have for each client at least one ecological client-centered GAS (with the risk of being less

388 reliable) and at least one performance-based GAS (with the risk of being less ecological). In
389 all cases, Kiresuk recommended to “anchor scale points with behavioral or other evidence
390 that will be meaningful to the client and readily scored by the rater”³³ (p 31).

391 Limitations

392 The present article has a number of limitations. Choice of included criteria was not based
393 on a consensual agreement of all major teams using GAS in research but of four teams, from
394 three different countries. The aim of this paper was to raise awareness about the variability
395 of GAS use in published research and the need to build, in future, a consensus on the use of
396 GAS in efficacy research in rehabilitation. Although it may be viewed as a limitation, we
397 purposefully did not validate externally an appraisal score, so that the present guide acts
398 only as a starter for discussion and not a validated tool imposed on other teams that were
399 not included in the writing of the paper.

400

401 Conclusion

402 Goal Attainment Scaling has the potential to be sensitive to change following treatment
403 and applicable across divergent domains of rehabilitation, making it a useful rehabilitation
404 efficacy research outcome measure. However, GAS is used in studies with variable rigor that
405 impacts its validity and reliability, and therefore reduces the confidence one can have in the
406 results of a trial using GAS as an outcome measure. Clinimetric qualities of GAS are highly
407 dependent on the way GAS scales are written and therefore clinicians, researchers and
408 reviewers cannot rely on published studies of metrological qualities of GAS obtained in
409 different research studies. Researchers should be aware of the risk of bias related to the use
410 of imprecisely written GAS scales in research and make all possible efforts to minimize this

411 bias by constructing high quality GAS scales for their clients, following recommendations
412 described here and previously published examples^{27,48}. There is a need to develop in the
413 future a GAS quality appraisal score, similarly to standards used in other rehabilitation
414 controversial fields such as N-of-1 trials⁵¹. In this paper, we propose 17 criteria for appraising
415 GAS quality in trials using GAS as an outcome measure. We recommend that authors using
416 GAS report accurately how GAS methodology was used based on these criteria. The
417 reliability of these criteria needs to be established, but in the meantime we invite comment
418 and discussion of these proposals as we move towards a consensus on standards for use of
419 GAS in rehabilitation research.

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| Quality appraisal items | Item description | Examples of reported criteria, extracted from rehabilitation effectiveness studies and/or published methods that satisfy criteria. | Potential for bias arising from failure to report criteria and/or utility of reporting the criterion. |
|----------------------------------|---|--|--|
| Content Validity | | | |
| Collaborative goal setting | The client/family is included in goal selection, when possible and appropriate. If goals are therapist-chosen, they rely on a comprehensive assessment (and when possible, a client/family interview), identifying key target domains for intervention. | <p><i>"GAS was used to assess functional and participation changes from both a parent and therapist perspective"¹</i></p> <p><i>"Using a semi-structured interview [...] 3 performance goals were identified at baseline by parents and child with the research physical therapist. The same 3 goals were then structured for GAS through semi-structured interview and by collaboration between research therapist, parent and child."²</i></p> | Collaborative goal setting allows evaluation of intervention efficacy for personally meaningful goals, rather than generic goals and is a core component of GAS methodology. Involvement of the client in goal setting is considered to increase the likelihood that the intervention has direct impact on client's daily life. |
| Relevance/importance | GAS scales have been verified by an external judge to check for the relevance of chosen goals and to check if GAS levels represent clinically meaningful change. | <p>In a study of infants with motor delays, Palisano³ used a 5 point scale to assess: (1) <i>importance of goals for motor development ranging from "unimportant or inappropriate" to "important for development and for function"</i>; (2) <i>extent each level represents an important progress based on number of paired levels that represent important change ("none" to "all four paired levels")</i>.</p> <p>Cardillo⁴ proposed a 5 point scale ranging from <i>"1: No relevance" to "5: Total relevance"</i>.</p> | If the target goal is unimportant to the client, irrelevant for function or does not correspond to a clinically meaningful change, progress on the GAS scale has no clinical relevance. At the extreme, an intervention could be proven to be effective, by writing clinically and personally irrelevant goals but showing statistically significant progress on the corresponding GAS scale. |
| ICF classification of goal types | <p>GAS themes correspond to functional domains.</p> <p>Authors report the ICF domain the GAS relate to.</p> | <p>In a study of botulinum toxin effectiveness, Turner-Stokes⁵ et al. report exhaustively the types of goals for treatment, categorizing them into ICF domains (<i>Body function: 46 GAS, including 12 GAS on passive movement/range; Activities and Participation: 119 GAS, divided into: Upper limb activities: 30 GAS; Mobility: 11 GAS; Self care: 57 GAS; Domestic and Community: 21 GAS</i>).</p> <p>Phillips et al.⁶ report precise examples of target goals in different ICF domain (e.g.: <i>"driving for 40 minutes without feet going floppy"</i>; <i>"standing in supermarket queue for 3 minutes without support"</i>).</p> | <p>If GAS scales assess change in body structures (e.g. RoM, spasticity), the reader may wrongly conclude that the intervention had an impact on meaningful activity and participation, because most readers associate GAS with functional daily life goals.</p> <p>It is therefore crucial that authors report the proportion of goals in each ICF domain, especially if some of goals do not correspond to functional domains.</p> |
| Specificity | <p>GAS scales have been verified by an external judge to check for specificity to the aim of the intervention.</p> <p>If GAS is used as a generalization measure to untrained goals, GAS should be specific to the function the</p> | <p>In an intervention for executive dysfunction in children⁷, a specific goal of intervention was to manage a cooking recipe unaided, which was trained on different recipes; a generalization goal was to be able to prepare school bag which was not trained (but stepwise processing taught was expected to generalize to this untrained goal). Although important to the children, goals such as "have more friends", were not included as they were not specific to the aim of</p> | Goals that are relevant to the client, but unrelated to the specific intervention, are unlikely to show progress and may erroneously lead to the conclusion that the intervention is not effective (this is especially a risk in replication studies). |

| | | | |
|--|---|--|--|
| | intervention is aiming to improve. | intervention, but they might have been used as “control” goals, not expected to be attained. | |
| Reliability | | | |
| Reliability of scale construction | | | |
| Equidistance of levels | GAS scales have been verified by an external judge to check if difficulty from one level to the next is roughly equal. | Equidistance of GAS levels was assessed and compared statistically between two experimental groups using a 3 point scale by Ruble et al. ^{8 9} : “1: None or only one of the descriptions are equilibrated appropriately in reference to the goal; 2: Two of the descriptions are equilibrated appropriately in reference to the goal; 3: All of the descriptions relative to the goal are equilibrated and scaled appropriately”. | If GAS scores are higher in the experimental conditions, one could argue that the intervals between each scaled description are unequal and favor the experimental group. This problem is particularly serious if parametric statistics and T-scores are used. |
| Pre-intervention performance | Pre-intervention performance has been verified and corresponds to initial level described in the scale. Pre-intervention score is comparable across groups (same number of clients starting from -2 and -1). | “At first baseline, GAS were created based on parent’s, teacher’s and school assistant’s concerns. After two months (second baseline), the paper versions of the scales were scored by parents, teachers and school assistants who were not aware that the intervention had not started yet. Their answers allowed readjustment of the scales, through the following rules: Scales that scored 0 were reformulated in order to have the pre-intervention level (measured at second baseline) corresponding to -1 by fixing more challenging 0, +1 and +2 scores. Scales scoring -2 or -1 were not reformulated. Scales scoring +1 or +2 pre-intervention were removed as the goal seemed attained without intervention or unreliably scored due to potential enthusiasm effect and motivation driving perceived change independently from intervention that had not started ” ⁷ . | GAS scales are constructed uniquely for each client, according to his/her initial level in relation to the target goal. If pre-intervention level is not verified, the whole scale may be unreliably constructed (erroneous starting point of the scale generating inappropriate next levels). |
| Attainability/difficulty | GAS scales have been verified by an external judge to check for their difficulty/attainability. | Ruble et al. compared GAS scales for difficulty in a trial of cognitive intervention: “1: Skill is very close to what the child is already described as able to perform (very easy); 2: The child is able to perform the skill in limited ways compared to what is written in the objective (limited people, prompts, or places [...]); 3: The child is unable to perform skill with anyone, anywhere, or with any prompts compared to what is written in the objective (difficult)”. ^{8 9} In a study of infants with motor delays, Palisano ³ asked experts to decide which of the 5 GAS level the child was most likely to achieve after 3 months, aiming at a maximum of 0 and a minimum of extreme -2 and +2 scores, if GAS levels were decided correctly. Cardillo ⁴ reported that realism of the expected level of outcome | An experimental group may falsely present higher GAS scores post intervention because GAS scales were formulated with easier levels of goal attainment. |

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| | | “for each goal, for this patient, at this time, in this mental health service” was assessed by a scale ranging from 1: much too difficult to 5: much too easy. He also reviews other methods that use 3 or 5 point scales using “pessimistic/realistic/optimistic” terms. Such scales could be easily used in PMR to compare attainability/difficulty of goals between two groups. | |
| Time-specificity | Authors specify if/how longer-term goals were adapted to the specific time frame of the research study. In the case of multiple assessment, authors specify which assessment was taken as the target moment for goal achievement. | In the RCT of Lowe et al ¹ , children were evaluated at 13 different time points. It is not reported which assessment point was taken as the reference to choose the 0 level (level that will most probably be attained after intervention) – criterion unmet. | Goal difficulty across experimental groups may have been unequal, at a given assessment point, due to differences in time-frames for goal completion. |
| Reliability of scale rating | | | |
| Inter-rater reliability (IRR) | Inter-rater reliability of GAS scales is reported. | In a study of Steenbeek et al. in cerebral palsy, inter-rater reliability was reported based on two judges using video-taped performance of each goal ¹⁰ . | Reliability of GAS set by one team (especially an experienced one) does not presume that other GAS scales set by other teams, in other rehabilitation contexts, are reliable. Therefore IRR should be reported for the specific GAS scales generated in each study. |
| Criteria affecting IRR | | | |
| Precise description of all levels | Five GAS levels have been precisely described pre-intervention for each scale. | “Goal: Reducing weekly shopping expenditure Total weekly food/household shopping expenditure = +2: less than \$42.99 +1: \$46.99– \$43.00 0: \$54.00– \$47.00 -1: \$63.00– \$54.01 -2: greater than \$63.00” ¹¹ | When all levels of the scales have not been precisely decided and described prior to intervention, authors often use adjectives such as “worse than expected”, “much better than expected”, to score goal attainment. This is a subjective appreciation that may be useful clinically but is too imprecise to objectively determine intervention efficacy. |
| Measurability | GAS scales have been verified by an external judge to check for measurability. Subjective and general goals are transformed into more objective and measurable goal attainment indicators. | -good measurability: observable and objective performance with specified task (e.g.: A child’s goal to fall less is assessed through “an obstacle course including jumping and quick changes of walking direction. The therapist encourages [the child] to complete the course within 3min. Instruction “Walk the obstacle course fast and don’t fall”; GAS levels: -1: falls 3 times, 0 : falls 2 times [...]” ¹²). -unclear measurability: subjective criteria, or scored based on interviews rather than direct observation of performance (e.g.: “I am able to express opinions and feelings two times or more per week [...]”, with no self-assessment method specified ¹³). See Ruble et al. for an example of assessment of measurability of | A goal that is not measurable will yield subjective scores, biased by clients’ or therapists’ feelings/ state of mind at the moment of scoring rather than a reliable measure of goal attainment. |

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| | | social and cognitive goals ^{8 9} . | |
| Unidimensionality | GAS scales have been verified by an external judge to check for unidimensionality. | -Example of a <u>non-unidimensional</u> scale: “-1: I use 0–1 coping skills consistently and feel depressed and angry more than 40% of the time.; 0: I use 2–3 coping skills consistently and feel depressed and angry 25–40% of the time [...]” ¹³ -Example of a <u>truly unidimensional</u> scale: “... -1: Manages to eat a bowl of mashed potatoes unaided but takes more than 15 minutes; 0: Eats a bowl of mashed potatoes in 11 to 15 minutes...” ¹⁴ | Non-unidimensional goals are impossible to score as progress on one dimension may not be accompanied by progress on another dimension and generate situations where GAS cannot be scored (see Grant ¹⁵ for an example). Bi (Multi) dimensional GAS’s should be split into two (or more) unidimensional GAS prior to intervention start. |
| Context of measurement | Context of performance measurement is clearly defined (prompts, cueing, support, amount of help/guidance, location...) and is controlled for during GAS rating. OR Changes in context are carefully manipulated across the GAS levels, with one change per level at a time ¹⁶ . | e.g.: setting/prompting/guidance: “in order to create an irregular surface, a ladder is placed horizontally at a height of 15cm, the girl is asked to walk barefoot without orthosis, as quickly as possible, through the rungs over a distance of 8 meters. Only if she falls a therapist will help her holding one of her hands.” ¹⁷ e.g.: “GAS level -1: Prepares school bag but requires constant verbal guidance from the parents or teacher; GAS level 0: Manages to prepare the school bag using a check-list of necessary steps and under supervision; GAS level+1: Manages to prepare school bag alone, using a check-list of necessary steps; GAS level +2: No supervision required, child only occasionally forgets items.” ^{14 7} | Context of measurement influences performance on a given target goal (environment, fatigue, help provided...). These factors must be controlled in order to increase GAS scoring reproducibility. |
| Other criteria | | | |
| Training | Researchers setting the GAS with the client and verifying GAS have received training in writing GAS, have practiced GAS writing, are aware of potential sources of bias in GAS, and are experienced in the goal domain/population. | Although training in GAS writing is reported as being important ¹⁸ , and successful training methods have been published ¹⁷ , most studies do not report on therapists’ training. Some studies report to which practical GAS guide ^{16 19} they refer to, but without mention of training ^{20 21} . Those mentioning training do not explain the type of training (e.g.: “Experienced pediatric occupational therapists were trained in and completed the GAS collaboratively with the families, thus enhancing the reliability of the GAS” ²²). | Given the numerous and complex potential sources of bias in GAS processes, a team that is not experienced in using GAS methodology is unlikely to produce valid and reliable GAS. Further, a team without specific experience in the goal domain or the specific population with whom the intervention is tested, will have difficulty in predicting what can be attained in a given time-frame, even if experienced in GAS methodology in another domain (risk unrealistic goals, unequal difficulty across clients, irrelevant goals to the specific population...). |
| Examiner bias | The person scoring the GAS at the end of the intervention is independent from the team who set the GAS (and independent from the team that provided the intervention although the latter is not a GAS specific criterion). | e.g.: “Goals were chosen and set before the patient was allocated to a group [...] goal attainment was scored by an independent assessor at post-treatment and at follow-up.” ²⁰ . e.g.: “The therapist-GAS was scored from video by blind evaluators. The parent-GAS was scored by two blinded occupational therapists.” ¹ . | If the same person sets the GAS and scores them, he/she is likely to be biased towards scoring a maximum of 0 (“attained as expected”). He/she may rely on memory of initial performance and subjective impression of improvement to score ambiguous progress. The independence of assessor should also be |

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| | | | respected when goals are client/family chosen when GAS is an outcome measure in research, (in contrast with clinical practice, where GAS scoring by the client may be relevant and appropriate). |
| Statistical analysis | Ordinal nature of GAS scales is preserved using non parametric statistics (rank tests, medians, boxplots). | <i>e.g.:</i> "It was decided not to use the popular T score in order to preserve the ordinal nature of the data [...] group effects were demonstrated by testing the difference between all medians, [...] using a two-tailed Wilcoxon signed ranks test" ¹⁰ . | The performance of arithmetic operations such as T-scores on ordinal data is scientifically not valid ²³ and should be discouraged, as it yields erroneous interpretation of data. In GAS, the problem is multiplied by characteristics of the T-score formulae (unknown true value of ρ , T-score variation according to the number of goals per client even at equal degree of attainment, highly subjective weighting of goals which, although clinically meaningful, introduces further potential arithmetic incoherence in the final T-score). |
| Example of GAS | One (or more) example of a typical GAS full scale, extracted from the trial, is provided. A list of chosen goals is reported. | Some authors provide an example of full GAS scale in the paper ^{10 11 24} in the methods or results section. Examples of goal types can be given (1) by providing examples of goal in the paper ^{25 26 27 2 28} ; (2) by reporting all chosen goals in appendix ^{25 11} ; (3) by reporting goal type and frequency of each type without providing an exhaustive goal list ^{22 29 10} . | Providing examples allows the reader a quick judgment/idea of goal type, precision of goal and levels description, measurability, unidimensionality of GAS. The lack of GAS examples contributes to make GAS seem like an abstract outcome measure: unlike standardized scales, the reader cannot build a representation of the target goals of the intervention. Therefore, reporting all goals in an appendix and providing example(s) of full GAS scales (representative of different domains measured) should be encouraged to increase interpretability. |

TABLE 1: Goal Attainment Scaling (GAS) methodology quality appraisal for rehabilitation efficacy studies

Criteria are grouped in accordance to the clinimetrics they mostly impact, although some items may impact both reliability and validity.

If GAS is used in a controlled trial, GAS scales should not only be checked but also compared between groups, similarly to the methodology proposed by Ruble et al.⁹ For large trials, we propose (as for IRR) that at least 20% of GAS scales be checked.

ICF: International Classification of Functioning; IRR: inter-rater reliability; RoM: Range of motion

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