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'No place to hide' : stalking victimisation and its psycho-social effects

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Abstract

Stalking victimisation has for a long time been ignored and minimised and it has been traditionally regarded as a rare and mostly 'celebrity-related' phenomenon. However, research shows that stalking is far more common and its impact can be serious and far-reaching. This article reveals and discusses the psycho-social effects of stalking drawing on from the in-depth accounts of 26 self-identified stalking victims who were interviewed as part of a study that explored the impact of stalking based on victims' voices and experiences. The study found that stalking victimisation is life-changing and its psycho-social effects are complex, long-term and often traumatic. The article concludes by considering the implications of these findings where I stress the need to improve criminological understanding on stalking and its unseen psychosocial harms so that stalking victims

and their cases are properly dealt with by the criminal justice system and society.

Keywords

Stalking, victims, effects, changes, awareness

Introduction

Stalking has been traditionally depicted by the media and Hollywood movies as a crime mainly perpetrated by mentally disturbed individuals and obsessed fans against celebrities due to a series of high-profile cases (e.g. Madonna, John Lennon, Monica Selles) (Gallagher, 2002; Radnedge, A., 2011; Schultz et al., 2014). However, empirical research has shown that stalking is far from a rarity and it affects a considerable number of ordinary people every year (Weller et al., 2013). In fact, according to the Crime Survey for England and Wales 4.9% of women and 2.4% of men reported being stalked in the last year (ONS, 2016).

The majority of mainly quantitative studies on the effects of stalking have shown that the persistent, unwanted and often chronic nature of stalkers' behaviours can give rise to serious and debilitating disruptions and changes on victims'¹ everyday lives ranging from changing their telephone numbers and daily routines, reducing their social life and avoiding doing their usual activities to quitting or losing their jobs, changing their appearance and/or or names and moving away sometimes numerous times (Pathé and Mullen, 1997; Tjaden and Thoennes, 1998; Sheridan et al., 2001; Purcell et al., 2002; Dressing et al., 2005; Melton, 2007; Baum et al., 2009).

It has been also found that the incessant and threatening nature of stalkers' behaviour(s) often deteriorates victims' quality of life and can cause significant mental health problems such as depression,

¹ The terms 'victims' and 'survivors' will be used interchangeably throughout the article given that some interviewees perceived themselves as survivors, others self-described as surviving victims and in some cases interviewees refused to embrace neither 'victim' or 'survivor' identities.

anxiety, suicidal ideation, post-traumatic stress disorder and feelings of fear, terror, helplessness, distress, anger and distrust that often last many years after stalkers have (ostensibly) disappeared (Pathé and Mullen, 1997; Brewster, 1998; Finch, 2001; Sheridan, 2001; Sheridan et al., 2001; Davis et al., 2002; Dressing et al., 2005; Purcell et al., 2005; Melton, 2007; Logan and Walker, 2010).

However, despite this, there is little we know and understand as criminologists and as society about the true extent of the psycho-social consequences of stalking on victims. As such, this article sheds light into the complex phenomenon of stalking victimisation by revealing the psycho-social and interpersonal harms of being stalked through the voices and experiences of 26 stalking survivors. The aim of the article is to contribute towards developing current limited criminological knowledge and understanding on this form of victimhood and as a consequence inform and improve social and

institutional responses to the victims of this hidden but yet ubiquitous form of interpersonal violence.

To this end, in the first part of the article I refer to the extant literature that examines stalking victimisation and its psycho-social effects based on victims' perspectives. I then describe the methods used for the doctoral study on which this article is based, sample characteristics and limitations. In the following section, I present and discuss the findings of the study on the social and emotional harms of stalking based on the in-depth and often insightful accounts of 26 stalking victims who were interviewed for the study. Finally, I reflect on the importance and implications of these findings paying particular attention to the need to further examine and understand this neglected area of criminological research.

Stalking victimisation and its psycho-social consequences: What do we know so far?

While there are different legal, clinical and psychological definitions of stalking (Ravensberg and Miller, 2003), it is generally accepted that stalking consists of a pattern of repeated and unwanted communications and contacts that cause fear, alarm and/or distress (Meloy and Ghothard, 1995; Pathé and Mullen, 1997; Palermo, 2013).

The majority of studies² on stalking victimisation mainly come from the USA, Australia and few other European countries (e.g. Germany, Netherlands). These studies have consistently shown that stalkers' behaviour can cause significant life disruptions and behavioural changes and bring about serious and complex psychological distress and interpersonal trauma(s) to their targets (Pathé and Mullen, 1997; Hall, 1998; Blaauw et al., 2002; Brewster, 2003; Logan et al., 2006; Melton, 2007; Cox and Speziale, 2009; Galeazzi et al., 2009; Logan et al., 2010;

² It should be noted that the studies reviewed in this article were selected based on their relevance to the scope and focus of the article.

Carsten et al., 2011; Felts et al., 2012; Fleming et al., 2013; NUS, 2016).

Specifically research has shown that victims of stalking often experience significant lifestyle changes such as avoiding places where their stalkers might be, changing their driving routines to their home, taking additional safety measures, changing their cars, reducing their social outings and stopping their job or quitting school (Pathé and Mullen, 1997; Tjaden and Thoennes, 1998; Hall, 1998; Budd and Mattinson, 2000; Purcell et al., 2002; Melton, 2007). In many studies victims reported that they quit or lost their jobs because of stalkers' constant phone calls to their workplace, threats of violence directed at their colleagues or employers and indirect job disruption (e.g. too stressed to go to work) (Pathé and Mullen, 1997; Morris et al., 2002; Dressing et al., 2005; Logan et al., 2007). In order to stop their pursuit victims have also reported changing residences, relocating and moving away to escape their stalkers (Sheridan et al.,

2001; Cox and Speziale, 2009). As such victims of stalking often experience significant financial costs related to relocation, property damage, mental health treatment, safety measures and legal proceedings (e.g. protective orders) (Brewster, 1998; Kamphuis and Emmelkamp, 2001; Logan et al., 2006).

Stalking can also have devastating effects on victims' social life and relationships (Spitzberg and Cupach, 2007). People around victims like their families, children, friends, partners and colleagues may also be threatened, stalked or physically assaulted by stalkers in the course of primary victims' pursuit (Sheridan et al., 2001; Logan and Walker, 2010). Victims often reduce their social activities and withdraw from their family and social networks because they feel embarrassed and/or in order to protect their family and friends (Spitzberg, 2002; Logan et al., 2009). As a result they may often experience social isolation, alienation and low self-worth (Brewster, 2003; Logan et al., 2009).

Furthermore, studies have shown that stalking victims often suffer from high levels of anxiety, panic attacks, hypervigilance, powerlessness, flashbacks, suicidal ideation, post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms and interpersonal sensitivity, distrust and detachment from other people (Brewster, 1998; Pathé and Mullen, 1997; Finch, 2001; Sheridan et al., 2001; Purcell et al., 2005; Baum et al., 2009; Cox and Speziale, 2009; Edwards and Gidycz, 2014; NUS, 2016). Hall (1998) found that most victims changed their personalities as a result of being stalked becoming more careful, easily frightened, more introverted and aggressive. Also, Sheridan (2001) found that most victims felt terror, confusion, disbelief, anger and annoyance while being stalked. Similarly, in Melton's (2007) study most survivors reported being constantly fearful of their former intimate partners finding out where they moved or that they moved on with their lives and talked about their difficulty to form new relationships. In fact

several studies have referred to the increased levels of psychological distress and fear that stalkers can instil in their victims (Bjerregaard, 2000; Carsten et al., 2011). It is often the fear of violence, the chronic and unpredictable nature of stalkers' invasions and the loss of control over one's life that can have negative and traumatic impact on victims' mental health and emotional well-being (Davis et al., 2002).

Overall prior research has shown that stalking victims experience significant everyday life disruptions and behavioural changes as a direct result of being stalked. It has also revealed the long-term and often serious psychological impact the persistent behaviour of stalkers can have on their victims. Still, although previous studies have looked at the impact of stalking, they have mainly examined it by using surveys and usually through an epidemiological, behavioural and psychiatric perspective. It is obvious that there is a dearth of criminological qualitative studies especially in the UK that explore the impact of stalking by using

in-depth interviews and a psycho-social approach that aims to document and understand stalking and its impact through the voices and understandings of survivors.

In this regard, this article aims to address the above gaps by shedding qualitative light into the psycho-social consequences of stalking through the in-depth accounts of 26 stalking victims who were interviewed as part of my doctoral study. The stories and often insightful comments they shared have revealed the hidden, prolonged and complex interpersonal trauma of being stalked. As such, this article could be regarded as a useful starting point from which to start developing a fuller, more contextualised and nuanced criminological understanding of stalking victimisation and its hidden psycho-social harms.

The Study

Sampling and Recruitment

This article draws on data collected from in-depth, semi-structured interviews that were carried out with 26 victims of stalking in England and Wales as part of my doctoral study exploring the impact of stalking through victims' voices and experiences.

The study gained ethical approval by Swansea University and the data were collected between December 2010 and April 2012. Given the hidden and nebulous nature of stalking, participants were sought through various recruitment avenues and request letters were sent to a range of key stakeholders. These included victim support organisations (Victim Support South Wales), domestic abuse coordinators, safety workers, women's support centres and refuges (Hafan Cymru, Women's Aid) and independent sexual and domestic violence advocates based in Wales. Request letters informed about the research and its purpose and asked if access could be provided to victims who may have been stalked. Similar requests were made to the Network for Surviving

Stalking and the National Stalking Helpline. A short notification was published on the National Stalking Helpline's website that invited individuals who have been stalked and interested in being interviewed about their experiences to contact the researcher in a secure university e-mail address. In addition, three universities in South Wales circulated an e-mail about the research to their staff and students asking potential participants to contact the researcher. As a result, I carried out 17 face-to-face and 9 phone interviews with victims who self-identified as being stalked and volunteered taking part in the study and talk about their experiences.

Sample characteristics, behaviours experienced and victim-offender relationship

The sample consisted of 24 women and 2 men aged between 19 to 58 years old. Most participants described themselves as 'British' and 'Welsh British'. Twenty-one women were stalked by a man, two men were stalked by a woman and three women were

stalked by another woman. The duration of stalking ranged from four weeks to 33 years whereas in some cases stalking was still ongoing or intermittent at the time of the study. Fifteen participants were stalked by their former partners and husbands, nine by acquaintances like their friends, colleagues and neighbours and two participants were stalked by strangers.

Most commonly experienced behaviours involved following, watching, repeated and unwanted phone calls, text messages and e-mails, property damage, surveillance, threats, leaving unwanted material, interfering with personal items, physical and/or sexual violence.

Interviewing Procedure

When respondents expressed their interest in taking part in the study, they were sent an information sheet explaining the aims of the research, the interviewing process, potential outcomes and a consent form explaining their rights. They were asked to read and

give written consent both before and in the beginning of the interviews. In phone interviews consent forms were read, signed and e-mailed to the researcher before the interview and oral consent was re-confirmed and recorded during the interview. All participants were asked to give their written and oral consent for their stories to be audio-recorded.

Participants were offered both the option of face-to-face and phone interviews. The way and location of the interview were mutually decided taking into account safety, privacy and geographical distance issues. Phone interviews were mainly used in cases where victims were still stalked at the time of the study and generally for convenience, safety and anonymity reasons.

Most interviews were carried out at university's premises, six took place in other settings like women's refuges and two participants were interviewed in their workplaces where they felt safer to talk about their experiences. Taking into account

the sensitive and often dangerous nature of stalking, all necessary measures were taken to ensure the anonymity and confidentiality of interviewees as well as the safety of both the researcher and interviewees. A debriefing form was given and/or e-mailed to all participants at the end of the interviews providing them with a list with relevant sources of support.

The interviews lasted between 30 minutes and 3 hours and involved asking victims to reflect on and discuss about their experiences and impact of being stalked. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed first manually and then by using NVIVO 9 qualitative data analysis software. The analysis was guided and informed by the aims of the study and the key recurring themes emerging from interviewees' accounts.

Limitations

The screening question for participation into the study was the question: "*Have you ever been stalked?.*" It should be stressed that the purpose of this study was

to explore and understand stalking through victims' experiences. I therefore did not use definitions and/or criteria that would possibly exclude victims whose experiences did not fit with legal requirements like fear of violence, credible threat or clinical/behavioural conceptualisations (e.g. obsessional following) that may have not captured their experiences (see Amar, 2007; Dietz and Martin, 2007). Instead I relied on the way participants perceived and interpreted their experiences of being stalked capturing this way a wide range of diverse experiences, manifestations and effects.

Nonetheless the use of a generic question and the lack of a specific legal or behavioural definition as screening criteria may have excluded participants who did not perceive or label their experiences as stalking. As such it cannot be claimed that the sample is representative of all stalking victims and covers all stalking cases and experiences. Also, given the personal and sensitive nature of the topic many

victims may have chosen not to take part and being interviewed about their experiences both because this would potentially cause them distress and/or because they were still stalked and their safety would be further jeopardised. In addition, the majority of participants are women which may reflect the fact that women are mainly targeted and stalked (Sheridan et al., 2002) but it may also be the fact that male victims may find it difficult to report being stalked and talk about their experiences as this could be seen as a kind of weakness (Campbell and Moore, 2011). However, it should be stressed that the aim of the study this article draws upon was not to attain statistical generalisability and ensure representativeness but to explore and understand the psycho-social effects of stalking through survivors' own words and lived experiences allowing their voices and stories to be heard, acknowledged and taken seriously.

Opening Pandora's Box: Stories of Loss, Fear and Trauma

All stalking survivors who were interviewed for the study offered in-depth accounts about the everyday disruptions, forced life changes and psycho-social harms they experienced as a result of being stalked. In the following three sub-sections I will report and discuss the complex effects of stalking the way these were articulated by participants through relevant extracts from their accounts. The separation of the effects here is used for analytical purposes and structural neatness. The impact of stalking should be understood within a continuum of changes, harms and losses emerging from multi-layered, often painful and thus complex realities and accounts.

Disruption of everyday life and forced changes

Stalking victims deal with constant intrusions in their everyday lives on which they have no control. As a result, they find different ways to adapt to extremely stressful circumstances and survive in a

world that rapidly changes from being 'safe' and predictable to unsafe and threatening (Logan and Walker, 2009).

Almost all victims in the sample talked about the debilitating disruptions they experienced in their everyday lives as a result of being stalked. They said that they were often forced to change their driving and walking routines to and/or from their work and they had to alter or refrain from doing their usual activities to avoid their pursuers.

For example, a victim who was pursued by a friend and colleague talked about the changes he felt he had to make in order to avoid her and maintain his privacy and emotional integrity

“I won't take the same route twice, I change my route every time (...) I changed departments so she doesn't know I'm there anymore (...) you know you have to completely change your routine just to avoid an individual because you feel so uncomfortable in their presence” (Participant 21)

Another victim who was monitored and followed by her former intimate partner described some of the changes she had to make in her everyday life to avoid him:

“He soon twigged that he couldn’t get to me in my house, so he knew my timetable, he knew I took my daughter to school at nine, so he knew if he was outside my house at say ten past nine I probably come back then from taking her to school so I had not do that to the point where I would drive around aimlessly rather than go back home. (...) I would wait to go and do my shopping till half past midnight (...) when you’ve got to get up in the morning and get your child ready for school and go to work (...) it’s not a good time to go shopping in the middle in the night”
(Participant 02)

In some cases where victims were physically intimidated and/or attacked by their stalkers they had to ask someone to escort them to their homes, workplaces and/or other activities for their protection.

The following account by a victim who was violently stalked by her former husband is indicative of some of the hardships victims often experience in their everyday lives:

“I was coming down to university every once a week and he tried to run me off the road um while we were going along the motorway (...) so I got the security in the university to meet me in the car park and take me in and out of the university (...) I’d give them a time to arrive and I wouldn’t get out of the car till they came” (Participant 10)

Other changes victims felt they had to make for their safety involved disguising when going out, putting a bar on their bedroom door or turning off the lights in their house. For instance, a victim who was stalked by her former partner and lived alone with her two young children talked about the way their safety and quality of their lives rapidly deteriorated as result of her stalker’s intimidation and intrusions:

“We stopped putting the lights on in the house so we used to live in the house in the dark because if we were in the lounge I was there with the children but when we went to bed of course you’d swap the lights and then you’d have a brick come through the window”
(Participant 19)

Seven victims reported that they changed their phone numbers several times as a result of being subjected to daily, constant, unwanted phone calls and text messages and also because of their stalkers’ tenacity in finding out their new numbers and details. In fact victims often referred to the tenacity and different ways stalkers would use to find out their victims’ new details and phone numbers

“He worked for a telecommunications company and was able to find my changed mobile and call it using an assumed voice. This happened after I’d changed it several times” (Participant 26)

“I changed phones, I can’t tell how many phones I had, I really don’t know, he must have devoted his

entire time, he wasn't working or anything, he just devoted his entire time to finding things like this out because I'd change my number, he'd get my number"

(Participant 01)

Similarly, four victims said that they had to change their cars to avoid being identified and also because of the extensive damage caused to their cars in the course of their pursuit.

For example, one victim who reported being pursued by her female colleague explained how she first realised that she was stalked when she found out that her car was damaged. Reflecting on her experience she said that she realised that damage would occur and become more frequent when she would have an argument with her pursuer at work

"I owned two cars and the first car that got damaged must have been keyed about four or five times and the damage got worse with the aggressive keying and that stopped when I changed my car and the damage

resumed when she came back into my life after a long period of time” (Participant 06)

Another victim said that her former husband would damage and interfere with her car even after she’d changed it several times:

“I came back to my car and there was a big scratch the whole length of the side and at the time there was a board with nails in it through my tyres (...) I changed my car but he found out which car was mine” (Participant 10)

Many victims reported taking additional safety measures including carrying panic alarms, installing CCTV cameras, changing locks and fitting fireproof letter boxes to their houses.

For instance, a woman stalked by her husband who has broken his restraining order three times by contacting and approaching both her and their son was given a panic alarm by the police as a means of protection

“I had panic alarms on me you know they’d give me a panic alarm that I used to wear on my top just in case he was anywhere near the house” (Participant 16)

Furthermore, eleven victims reported that they had to change homes numerous times or that they decided to move in and live with other people like their parents and friends for their safety:

“I’d moved back to my mum’s, I was too scared to stay at home” (Participant 04)

“I ended up moving twice because it got so bad (...) I mean this was the primary reason why I moved so she wouldn’t know where I was” (Participant 07)

Two victims said they had to move miles away from their families because of the lack of support by the police and the ineffectiveness of civil injunctions or restraining orders to deter their stalkers. One interviewee explained that she left overnight and did not visit her family for the next five years to avoid

meeting her stalker who would still looking for her even after she'd moved away:

“I felt that this was the only option for me was to move away so he would have to stop cos he wouldn't be able to find me (...) and without telling anybody, I disappeared overnight (...) for a long time I didn't go back home to see my father ” (Participant 19)

Other interviewees said that they were considering relocating at the time of the study as they felt this was the only way to feel safer and stop their ongoing pursuit:

“At the end of the day I might have to move away (...) because I just don't want to be bothered all the time, I can't go anywhere in ease and peace, I would like to live a nice, normal, quiet life but I am not going to be able to because this is not ending, this is an ongoing thing ” (Participant 08)

A number of interviewees also reported that while they wanted to move away, they could not leave

because of their jobs, family commitments and financial difficulties as well as their fear that stalkers would go on pursuing their families:

“(Going abroad) would be an option for me and I think well it wasn’t, it never was in my plan, in my life’s plan that I was going live abroad but then I’d be leaving my family behind (...) would he then go on to them?” (Participant 14)

These feelings of uncertainty and incapacitation and the inability or unwillingness of many victims who lived in the same area as their pursuers to relocate shed light into the challenges victims often experience with regard to their everyday life mobility and safety. Their everyday activities were often monitored by perpetrators and thus their safety and mobility were seriously compromised and reduced. Victims could not keep their location secret or avoid their pursuers. As a result, they often felt they had to curtail their social outings or stop going out altogether

in order to protect their physical and emotional well-being.

Reduction of social life and economic harms

The majority of victims reported that they had to change their social life to a less or greater extent and that they were more reluctant to go out while they were stalked out of fear they would meet their stalkers:

“I didn’t go out as much cos I was afraid that he would turn up while I was out and I thought how would I cope with that cos I wouldn’t feel safe”

(Participant 26)

Another victim explained how being stalked isolated her from her family and friends as her stalker would often follow and intimidate her by waiting outside their houses:

“I was spending less time with my family and also it was harder to go and spend time with friends as well because he knew where most of them lived and I didn’t want to put them in awkward situations, I

didn't want him following me to their houses and coming harass me at other people's homes so in a way I was isolating myself" (Participant 02)

Another interviewee who was monitored, attacked and stalked by her former husband for nine years explained that she cannot go out alone as a result of being stalked for many years:

"I mean initially obviously I used to travel with my friend all the time, I would never, ever go anywhere shopping (...) but when he you know progressively continued and got worse I just couldn't go out on my own. I mean the long-lasting effects of that now are that I still rarely go out on my own, I have to have somebody with me" (Participant 25)

Other interviewees reported that they felt they had to withdraw completely from social life in order to reduce their pursuit or avert its resumption. A victim who was stalked intermittently for more than thirty years said that she could not go out or attend social events in her community because she knew that her

stalker who lived in the same vicinity would also be there

“I’ve been retracted from village life (...) I thought I can’t be anywhere where he is and I’ll always send somebody in to see if he was there and if he was there, I wouldn’t go in” (Participant 20)

Eleven interviewees also talked about the effects of being stalked on their professional and financial circumstances. They explained that they had to take time off, reduce, change or give up their jobs and careers as a result of being stalked:

“I was also off work for a long time (...) just unable to go out really and concentrate and I felt unsafe”
(Participant 14)

“I’ve changed my house, I’ve changed my car, I’ve changed my phone, I’ve had problems with my former job (...) I mean I wouldn’t change careers if that hadn’t happened to me” (Participant 07)

In fact many interviewees referred to instances where stalkers would wait for them outside their office, call them and intimidate them at work, harass their colleagues and/or make accusations against them affecting their performance, reliability and job prospects. Two women stalked by their former husbands described how they would be followed and harassed in their workplace and the problems this created to them and often their colleagues

“I was terrified but I was trying not to let it affect my life but it was affecting work, he was coming to work so much so that the hospital I was working for were going to take out an injunction if it didn’t stop”
(Participant 10)

“He has also made trouble for me in work, making false allegations against me to try and get me dismissed” (Participant 08)

Some interviewees further reflected on the financial ramifications of being stalked by referring to the costs resulting from taking legal action against their

stalkers, changing homes, losing, reducing or quitting their jobs. For example, one interviewee explained that she would often not go to her job because she was afraid her stalker would hurt her children or that he would appear in her workplace. She insightfully remarked that her stalker deprived her of her socio-economic independence:

“I set up my own business which I’ve now lost (...) two nights a week I work now (...) I was on benefits for three or four months and then another three or four months last year which I’ve never done, I’ve never had to do that before. So that’s really independence, isn’t it?” (Participant 04)

Another interviewee explained that living in the same small town with her stalker made her feel unsafe and thus she relocated and got into debt:

“Like I say is a very small place range here so I moved (...) I got a house about ten miles away and that’s the other thing, that’s wrong because I had to move from where I was cos I was scared (...) I had to move to

another house now and I'm paying for two mortgages and I am getting into a lot of debt and you know there is no help, no compensation for the victim"
(Participant 11)

Although the socio-economic consequences of stalking have been reported by other studies (e.g. Hall, 1998; Brewster, 1998; Logan et al., 2007; Melton, 2007), the above narratives offer further contextual insights into the multiple ways stalkers' harassing behaviours can impact on crucial areas of victims' lives like their careers and professional choices. These findings also reveal the financial hardships stalking victims often experience in order to ensure their safety and the safety of their closed ones. Indeed in many cases people around primary victims (e.g. family members, children, friends, colleagues) are also targeted, intimidated and affected by stalkers being in close proximity with the latter's objects of pursuit (Mullen et al., 2009).

Interpersonal and emotional harms

Many interviewees said that their relationships with their families, children, partners, friends and even neighbours were significantly affected and often deteriorated as a result of the daily and/or chronic stress of constant intrusions, intimidation and monitoring by stalkers:

“During all of this I had a breakdown and lost a job that I loved as I couldn’t function, my neighbours became hostile because of the goings on, my family including my children, have cut all contact”

(Participant 18)

“It put a strain on my relationship with my girlfriend straightaway” (Participant 21)

Victims often explained how stalking undermined their relationship with other people because of the latter’s difficulty to understand or believe the seriousness of the pursuit and its effects:

“I kept saying to her (aunt) you know ‘This is really affecting me. He won’t leave me alone’ but you know just wasn’t so she played it right down” (Participant 17)

Another interviewee also explained how her fear over her safety and the safety of her daughter affected the quality of her parenting. Her account echoes the experiences of other victims in the sample who were mothers:

“I was trying as hard as I could to be a normal mum but she knew, do you know she was saying things to me about how awful I looked and how unhappy I was all the time and how frightened I was because she’d tell: “Let’s go to do so and do” and I’d say: “Well no, let’s do that another day” you know our lives were changing because my fear was changing my behaviour” (Participant 02)

The concerns of victims over their children’s safety were not unfounded as in many cases their closed ones would be intimidated or attacked by stalkers as

another way of coercing and intimidating their primary objects of pursuit:

“He drove my daughter in the car 100 miles an hour and threatened to drive off the cliff and it was that that frightened me more than anything, what he could be capable of doing to the girls, he followed my parents up they were out on a walk in (...) and he drove the car towards them really fast and then he just stopped” (Participant 01)

“My friend um worked in another town and he would do the same and walk up and down outside of her work (...) she had the whole of her car scratched and there were issues for her at work” (Participant 19)

Moreover, victims explained that they cannot maintain or easily form new friendships and romantic relationships because they cannot easily trust other people or because stalkers would intimidate their new partners

“He made death threats to my new partner and his daughter” (Participant 08)

“It made me tougher, in that way I won’t let myself be intruded upon that way again (...) it’s just made me more careful about other people” (Participant 03)

Other harms ³ and feelings victims reported included nightmares, panic attacks, unease, anger and hatred towards their stalkers, guilt and self-blame for being stalked, suicidal ideation ⁴, flashbacks, loneliness, mental distress, fear and terror. Almost all interviewees referred to the unique type of fear stalkers instil in their victims and explained that living in constant fear of what will happen next and under the threat of imminent danger resulted in long-lasting mental distress:

³ Ten interviewees reported being subjected to different forms of physical violence by their stalkers involving attempts to run them off the road, hitting, spitting, throwing beer or hot water at them, threatening them with a knife and in two cases stalkers attempted to strangle their victims. Two interviewees also reported being raped by their former intimate stalkers in the course of their pursuit.

⁴ Three victims divulged becoming suicidal and two of them revealed that they attempted committing suicide as a way out of their ongoing ordeal.

“I was always thinking that she was going to be there, your mind goes into overdrive, it really does and it doesn't stop and even now I still worry about if she finds out where I live and my new house, I worry about that even now” (Participant 06)

“I still think he'll kill me one day (...) I am constantly worried, it's like as if I want him to sort of get me and hurry up and stop the torture” (Participant 04)

In many cases victims explained that they felt hopeless and powerless because they could not stop stalkers' behaviour. As a result, they felt losing control over their lives:

“I would feel just a mixture of fear and just despair like when he did that in public I would just think there is no escape from this (...) it was like what he was saying was true that wherever I went, whatever I did, he would always be there, he would always find me”
(Participant 02)

“It was a complete lack of control, complete lack of control I couldn’t do anything that would placate this person” (Participant 07)

This sense of loss of control and powerlessness was particularly acute in cases where the pursuit was still ongoing or intermittent at the time of the study:

“Your life is not your own, it’s governed by the actions of somebody else and that should never be, it’s like slavery” (Participant 08)

Finally, some interviewees explained that their fear of stalkers’ invasive and controlling behaviour significantly compromised their autonomy and the quality of their lives. As one interviewee incisively commented, she had to give up her basic freedoms and human rights in order to reduce her visibility and minimise the pursuit:

“But you see in order to stop the offending what happened is that I’ve had to get rid of my freedoms, my freedom to drive a car, my freedom to accept

*phone calls from everybody, my freedom to go outside,
that's the only way the offending has been reduced"*
(Participant 12)

Concluding thoughts

While being cautious about directly comparing the findings of the current study with prior, mainly survey-based studies that have used different definitional frameworks, the findings presented here support and qualitatively extend previous literature (Pathé and Mullen, 1997; Brewster, 1998; Hall, 1998; Finch, 2001; Sheridan, 2001; Sheridan et al., 2001; Morris et al., 2002; Logan et al., 2007; Melton, 2007; Cox and Speziale, 2009) by providing nuanced understandings on the psycho-social consequences of stalking victimisation. Although the sample of this study is not representative of all stalking victims and cases, the evidence in this article offers in-depth and contextual insights into the wide range of forced life changes and often serious and long-term harms victims experience as a result of being stalked and

highlights the everyday violations and hardships they often endure in order to protect their physical and emotional safety. More research on these unknown aspects of stalking victimisation and its psycho-social harms is necessary in order to shed light into the ways stalkers can undermine their victims' autonomy and the trauma(s) that often result from the chronic and/or acute exposure to monitoring, invasions and threats.

The exploration of stalking through a psycho-social and human rights' lens would improve current, limited criminological knowledge and understanding regarding the challenges victims face in their everyday lives. There is a need to carefully look at the harms victims often experience as result of being pursued as this would deepen criminological knowledge and understanding and possibly stimulate the need for a different, broader and more critical way of criminological thinking about hidden and ignored forms of victimhood. This kind of knowledge would help perceive stalking not as a solely celebrity-related

phenomenon but as a significant social problem that needs closer examination in order to inform and improve social and criminal justice system responses to victims. It would also shift the focus away from how to distance victims from stalkers (although this can be often necessary for safety reasons) and encourage thinking about ways to help and protect victims in their everyday lives by, for example, closely monitoring stalkers, providing them with specialist mental health treatment, rigorously enforcing restraining orders and compensating victims for relocation costs and other safety measures.

The two new stalking offences that were inserted into the Protection from Harassment Act (1997) in England and Wales in 2012 are a promising step towards this direction. In particular the second offence of stalking (s.4A) which requires that: ‘a stalker causes another person to fear on at least two occasions that violence will be used against that person or cause that person to suffer serious alarm or

distress which has a substantial effect on that person's usual day-to-day activities' is important. as it recognises the significant disruptions and changes victims experience in their everyday lives.

Again, more research is necessary to assess the utility and effectiveness of this law with regard to the management of stalking cases, protection of victims and prosecution of stalkers. In addition, the national advocacy service 'Paladin' that started working in July 2013 and provides support to high risk stalking victims through Independent Stalking Advocacy Caseworkers (ISACS) seems to address the gap of this overdue and much required support for stalking victims (Fletcher and Richards, 2013). Similar victim support initiatives and psycho-social interventions should be developed at different levels and ranks of the criminal justice system and society (e.g. communities) to ensure that adequate help and support are available and accessible to all survivors of stalking.

Nonetheless, the effectiveness of all measures taken to support and protect victims of stalking mainly depends on awareness and research-informed understanding. Research studies as well as recent cases have shown that there is still a lack of understanding regarding the seriousness of stalking and its effects that often hinder victims come forward and report being stalked and receive relevant and adequate support by criminal justice system professionals and other people around them (Van der Aa and Gröenen, 2010; Korkodeilou, 2016; McVeigh, 2016).

It is therefore important to inform and educate the general public and criminal justice system practitioners about the nature of stalking and its complex effects through training and awareness campaigns that specifically address and challenge stereotypical notions about stalking behaviour and related victim-blaming attitudes.

To conclude, stalking victimisation is a complex phenomenon and more systematic research is required to better understand its multifaceted and far-reaching implications in order to improve criminal justice system and social responses to victims. We need to start thinking differently as criminologists and as a society about what counts as serious harm and reconsider the boundaries between acceptable, harmful and criminal behaviour. I hope that this article and the data it presents will provide the impetus for such critical thinking so that stalking is acknowledged as a serious form of victimisation that can give rise to long-term and complex harms.

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