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Complaints of group-stalking ('gang-stalking'): an exploratory study of their nature and impact on complainants

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Stalking primarily concerns the actions of individuals. However, some victims report stalking by organised groups, this being known as 'group-' or 'gang-stalking'. This phenomenon has not been subject to systematic study. An anonymous questionnaire was completed online by self-defined victims of stalking. One thousand and forty respondents met research definitions for stalking, of which 128 (12.3%) reported group-stalking. One hundred and twenty-eight individually stalked cases were randomly selected as a comparison group. All cases of reported group-stalking were found likely to be delusional, compared with 3.9% of individually stalked cases. There were highly significant differences between the two groups on most parameters examined. The group-stalked scored more highly on depressive symptoms, post-traumatic symptomatology and adverse impact on social and occupational functioning. Group-stalking appears to be delusional in basis, but complainants suffer marked psychological and practical sequelae. This is important in assessment of risk in stalking cases, early referral to psychiatric services and allocation of police resources.

Keywords: stalking; group-stalking; gang-stalking; victims; delusions; post-traumatic disorders

Introduction

Over the last 30 years, stalking has emerged as a social reality in the western world (Lowney & Best, 1995; Mullen, Pathé, & Purcell, 2009, pp. 11–21). Conservative estimates suggest that it affects 8% of women and 2% of men at some point in their lives (Basile, Swahn, Chen, & Saltzman, 2006; Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998), whilst many prevalence studies, from a range of western countries, have found a life-time rate approaching twice this, with a point prevalence of around 2% (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2005; Breiding et al., 2014; Budd & Mattinson, 2000; Dressing, Kuehner, & Gass, 2005; Narud, Friestad, & Dahl, 2014; Stieger, Burger, & Schild, 2008; van der Aa & Kunst, 2009; Walby & Allen, 2004). A consistent finding in studies of the effects of stalking on victims

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is that there are high rates of both contemporaneous psychological distress and enduring psychiatric morbidity, in particular post-traumatic symptomatology and depression (Dressing et al., 2005; Kamphuis, Emmelkamp, & Bartak, 2003; Kuehner, Gass, & Dressing, 2007; Mullen et al., 2009, pp. 53–57; Pathé & Mullen, 1997; Purcell, Pathé, Baksheev, MacKinnon, & Mullen, 2012).

Stalking primarily concerns the actions of single individuals. However, some victims state that they are being targeted by groups of people, a phenomenon known as ‘group-’ or ‘gang-stalking’. The simplest definition of ‘group-stalking’ is that it is stalking that ‘involves the use of multiple individuals to stalk, harass or threaten the victim’ (Paulet, Rota, & Swan, 2009, p. 640). However, the definition can be substantially refined. Firstly, a group comprises an absolute minimum of three persons (US Department of Justice, 2005). Secondly, group-stalking is an organised, shared endeavour with a group purpose. This is differentiated from the situation where an individual stalker recruits others to assist their stalking campaign, a phenomenon known as ‘stalking by proxy’, in which, ‘for the most part, the involvement of others in unwitting’ (Mullen et al., 2009, p. 157). In addition, the stalking being the work of a group acting in concert, it is generally not possible for the victim to identify one lead person involved in carrying out the activities. Likewise, it is a characteristic that the victim is generally unable to provide any evidence as to who is behind the group-stalking, although he/she may come to attribute it to a particular agency (e.g. an ex-partner).

Group-stalking also differs from group-bullying, sometimes known as ‘mobbing’ (Duffy & Sperry, 2012), which generally occurs within a closed community, such as a workplace. Whereas group-stalking is a furtive activity, involving covert methods, group-bullying is overt and aims at dominance through intimidation, humiliation, denigration and exclusion (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2010). Group-stalking is also to be differentiated from group attack through social media, currently known as ‘flaming’ or ‘flame-trolling’ (Moor, Heuvelman, & Verleur, 2010), where individuals, usually unknown to each other, insult and threaten an individual they have taken against (Bishop, 2014), disinhibited by their assumptions of anonymity (Suler, 2004).

The prevalence of group-stalking has received little attention. In a large study from the US Department of Justice (Baum, Catalano, & Rand, 2009), 13.1% of those who reported being stalked in the last 12 months referred to three or more perpetrators being involved. The study did not differentiate between being stalked by several people in one episode or by separate people in separate episodes. However, we have not been able to find any record in the literature of cases where victims have been subject to two or more separate stalking campaigns by unrelated individuals in one 12-month period; therefore, the figures in the above study appear likely to reflect the activities of multiple persons in one episode. The Department of Justice study also failed to differentiate between cases of stalking by proxy and cases where the stalking

was a group-initiated activity. However, in 6.8% of cases, the victim was 'unable to identify a single offender' or 'could not identify an offender who was singly responsible'. (Catalano, 2012). Given that cases where the stalker was a 'stranger' or 'unknown' are recorded separately, it would appear that the figure of 6.8% is likely to comprise those that are reporting group-stalking, rather than stalking by proxy. Given the 12-month prevalence for stalking in the study of 1.5%, the potential numbers complaining of group-stalking appear considerable.

Little is known about the nature of the phenomenon of group- or gang-stalking. We searched PubMed and PsychInfo for the period January 1990–March 2015 for articles on group- and gang-stalking. The search yielded no publications. Open Internet searches on the same topic produced dozens of sites containing opinions, personal experiences and other case material, but none involving scientific method or peer review. It has been suggested that 'elaborate plots in which extensive networks of accomplices are recruited to monitor that person's every move' are indicative of paranoid delusional systems (Mullen et al., 2009, p. 212) and therefore of false claims of stalking. A literature search on the latter yielded two chapters (Mohandie, Hatcher, & Raymond, 1998; Mullen et al., 2009, pp. 209–225) and three studies (Pathé, Mullen, & Purcell, 1999; expanded by Mullen et al., 2009, pp. 210–212; Petherick & Jenkins, 2014; Sheridan & Blaauw, 2004) specifically concerning false reports of stalking, all involving small numbers ($N = 18, 10$ and 140 , respectively). Pathé et al. (1999), as expanded by Mullen et al., 2009; identified 18 false victims of stalking from their clinical practice. Half their sample was found to be delusional. Sheridan and Blaauw (2004) analysed questionnaires completed by 357 respondents who presented themselves to be stalking victims at anti-stalking charities in the Netherlands and the UK. After eight uncertain cases were excluded, the false reporting rate was judged to be 11.5%, with the majority of false victims suffering delusions (70%). Petherick and Jenkins (2014) found half their sample of ten false cases to be delusional. The presence of delusions was based on clinical diagnosis in the studies by Pathé et al. (1999), Mullen et al. (2009) and Petherick and Jenkins (2014). In the study by Sheridan and Blaauw (2004), delusions were taken to be present when independently rated as being so by two independent psychologists who examined 'victim' self-reports. Each of these studies contained group-stalking cases, but these were not examined separately.

Studies of stalking, in common with other behavioural abnormalities based on victim report, are difficult to conduct with methodological rigour. The now extensive literature on stalking divides between victim studies, based on surveys and questionnaires, and those on stalkers, based almost exclusively on convenience samples of those arrested or referred to forensic psychiatry services. The issue of sample bias is problematic, and it is the accretion of reports of similar findings from studies on different samples which leads to confidence in their overall conclusions. The first study of any new topic in this area, such

as group-stalking, must therefore be considered exploratory in nature. Nevertheless, we considered it important that such a study of victim reports of group-stalking be undertaken. Such cases represent a significant minority of reports of stalking, yet there is no information available as to how subjective experiences of group-stalking may differ from those of stalking by individuals. There have been suggestions that many group-stalking reports may be delusional and therefore false in nature. Yet, this has not been empirically tested and there is no guidance for those who encounter such cases, such as law enforcement agencies and mental health professionals, as to how they might be approached. In particular, it is important that limited police and criminal justice resources should not be consumed in investigating cases which have no merit, and, on the other hand, that reports of group-stalking should not be dismissed by professionals based on untested assumptions. There is also no reason to assume that victims of delusional stalking do not suffer the same psychological sequelae as victims in cases where the stalking is real.

This study was designed to explore these issues. Its aims were the following: to ascertain the proportion of reported stalking cases in an online survey which concerned complaints of group-stalking; to determine what proportion of both group and individual-stalking cases appeared to be delusional in basis; to compare the details of stalking episodes and behaviours in group and individual-stalking cases; to examine differences in the reported effects on mental state in group and individual-stalking cases; to compare the incidence of post-traumatic symptomatology in the two groups; and to establish whether there were any significant differences between the two groups in the victims' behaviours in response to the stalking.

Method

Sample

An anonymous questionnaire was completed online by 1113 self-defined victims of stalking. After excluding juveniles and cases that failed to meet the operational definition of stalking, the total sample numbered 1040. Two clinicians, one of whom was independent of the study, separately examined each case to differentiate the group-stalked from the individually-stalked. Agreement was present in 1038 cases (99.8%) and absent in two cases; these were excluded, as it was judged that insufficient information was available to reach a definitive conclusion. This gave a set of 128 cases of group-stalking (12.3% of the whole sample). The remaining cases in the main sample involved reported stalking by individuals: a comparison sample of 128 such cases was selected using a random number generator. Copies of the questionnaire are available from the authors.

Given that the design of the study was a comparison of the characteristics of those reporting group-stalking with those reporting stalking by individuals,

no matching of the samples on any parameters was undertaken, as this would risk detracting from the identification of group characteristics.

Data completion

The questionnaire was in English, and those completing it by definition English-speaking. Completeness of data for most items was 98% or greater, with no items below 90%. The completed questionnaires included in all cases free-text descriptions of the stalking and the behaviours to which the individuals had been subject, as well as responses to set questions.

Definition of stalking

Stalking was defined as the repeated unwanted intrusion of one person into the life of another in a way that causes anxiety, fear or distress. Intrusions encompassed a range of behaviours involving communications, physical intrusion and impersonation. The stalking behaviours listed in the questionnaire were based on those identified and set out in a typology by Spitzberg (2002) in a meta-analysis of 103 studies of stalking. Although legal definitions of stalking in many jurisdictions allow prosecution for as few as two incidents of defined behaviour, we adopted a conservative research definition (Mullen, Pathé, Purcell, & Stuart, 1999), in which there must have been a minimum of ten separate intrusive incidents, with the conduct spanning at least four weeks, in order for the behaviour to qualify as stalking. Cases with complainants aged under eighteen were excluded, given the differences between adult and juvenile stalking (Purcell, Moller, Flower, & Mullen, 2009).

Definition of 'group-stalking'

Group-stalking was defined for the purposes of the study as episodes in which at least three perpetrators were said to be involved, the case not being one of 'stalking by proxy'.

Data items

The questionnaire was hosted by a website offering advice and support for victims of stalking. It was presented as a survey to learn of victims' experiences of stalking, the aim being to identify ways in which services and support for victims could be improved. The questionnaire contained sections on the following: demographics; details of the stalking; the individual's response to the stalking; their emotional responses and effects on mental state; consequent changes in their behaviour; their contacts with statutory and voluntary services and the effectiveness of these. The questionnaire contained both questions requiring a response to be selected from a given list, followed by a space for

free text in which answers could be expanded; and open questions requiring a response in free text. At the end of the questionnaire, additional free-text space was included, which respondents were encouraged to use to expand further on their case. A modified version of the Civilian Mississippi Scale (CMS) was incorporated to record trauma-related symptomatology, this being a valid and reliable self-report measure of PTSD (Norris & Perilla, 1995). This comprised 29 statements about the person's feelings and emotional state, to each of which the subject was invited to choose which of five responses on a Likert scale best described their situation (not at all true: slightly true: somewhat true: very true: extremely true).

A subset of 92 questionnaire items was pre-selected for this study, their composition being evident from the results below. The forms of question were as above, and included the CMS for PTSD. The free-text descriptions of stalking behaviours and free-text case summaries were also included in the material examined.

Definition of delusions

The definition of a delusion was taken from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th edition, [DSM-V] (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013, p. 819):

A false belief based on incorrect inference about external reality that is firmly held despite what almost everyone else believes and despite what constitutes incontrovertible and obvious proof or evidence to the contrary. The belief is not ordinarily accepted by other members of the person's culture or subculture (e.g. it is not an article of religious faith).

'Incontrovertible and obvious proof or evidence to the contrary' in DSM-V encompasses the concept of 'defying credibility', which for the purposes of this study was taken as including the impossible, the barely possible and the bizarre, the latter defined according to DSM-V (APA, 2013, p. 87). A delusion was differentiated from an overvalued idea by the intensity with which it was maintained, specifically the person's expression of their belief not encompassing the 'possibility that the belief may not be true' (APA, 2013, p. 826). The existence of self-published webpages concerned with particular beliefs was not taken as evidence of the belief belonging to a culture or sub-culture (Bell, Maiden, Munoz-Solomando, & Reddy, 2006). Delusions unrelated to the stalking were not included, since delusional individuals may become victims of stalking (Blaauw, Winkel, Arensman, Sheridan, & Freeve, 2002; Davis, Coker, & Sanderson, 2002).

Free-text responses were studied independently by two senior clinicians, one of whom was independent of the study, and judgements made as to whether a 'high likelihood' existed that the beliefs expressed were delusional.

Agreement was present in 245 cases (95.7%). In the eleven cases where there was no agreement or the issue was deemed difficult to judge, a case review was conducted involving a third clinician in order to decide upon allocation.

Statistical analysis

Analyses were conducted using SPSS, version 21, (IBM Corp, 2012). To examine differences between groups on categorical variables, Pearson's chi-square (χ^2) analyses were used, and odds ratios (OR) were calculated, with 95% confidence intervals. Effect sizes were also calculated, as they can enable interpretation of the data beyond, and independently of, the information provided by p values (Cohen, 1992). The measure of effect size used for 2×2 analyses was phi (ϕ) (Siegel & Castellan, 1988). Independent t tests were used to compare the means of samples of interval data, incorporating Levene's test for homogeneity of variance. The Mann–Whitney U test was used to compare ordinal data.

Multiple testing

Group-stalking is an unresearched area. This study constitutes an exploration of possible associations, rather than hypothesis-testing. As such, multiple testing was used. Standard methods to correct for multiple testing are 'highly conservative' (Altman, 1991, p. 211), risking Type II errors in modest samples, particularly where interrelated families of questions are used, as here. Accordingly, no corrections to significance values were made to compensate for multiple testing. The authors suggest that the few p values in the results which are larger than 0.005 should be treated with caution.

Results

Presence of delusional beliefs

There was a highly significant difference in the proportion of the group-stalked considered to be deluded, when compared to the individually stalked: 128 (100%); 5 (3.9%), $\chi^2 = 236.752$, $p < 0.001$, $\phi = 0.962$, OR = 25.64 (10.87–58.82). From an examination of free-text responses, all 128 group-stalked cases fell into one or more of three categories: cases where the resources or elaborate organisation required to carry them out made the alleged activities highly improbable (e.g. hostile operatives being inserted in victim's workplace and their children's schools; 24-h electronic surveillance involving teams of men in black vans; surveillance by cameras placed throughout the city; staff of shops and libraries being amongst the group stalkers; everyone in the street being 'plants' acting out roles towards the victim; 'more than a thousand' people being involved; traffic lights being manipulated always to go red on approach; repeated sexual assault during sleep;

horns on the street hooting to bring attention to particular sentences on the radio; collaboration between diverse agencies, such as the Automobile Association, a building society, a website and neighbours), cases in which the activities described were impossible (e.g. minds of friends and family being externally controlled; use of 'voice to skull' messages; witchcraft focussed through gold objects; insertion of alien thoughts; organised electronic mind interference; remote removal of bank notes through electronic attraction; invasion of an individual's dreams at night), and cases where the beliefs were not only impossible, but bizarre (e.g. docile family dog replaced by exact double with foul temper; remote enlargement of bodily organs).

Characteristics of victims (see Table 1)

The majority of victims were women. The group-stalked cases were significantly older than the cases of individual-stalking when they completed the questionnaire. However, in continuing cases (the majority), there was no significant difference in the age at which the stalking had started. There were no significant differences in the proportions that were white or that had current partners.

Duration of reported stalking

Group-stalking cases were significantly more likely than individual-stalking cases still to be continuing. Amongst those cases which had stopped, the group-stalking cases had lasted significantly longer than the individual-stalking cases. Amongst continuing cases, the group-stalking cases had likewise lasted significantly longer.

Identity of alleged stalkers

Significantly more of the group-stalked than the individually-stalked had no idea who their stalker(s) might be. Significantly fewer believed that an ex-partner was involved.

Characteristics of stalking

Questions covered 16 stalking methods. Group-stalked cases were significantly less likely than individually stalked cases to have received unwanted communications in the form of letters or printed material, e-mails, or SMS (text messages). Group-stalking cases were significantly more likely than individually-stalked cases to believe that they had been subject to various forms of covert behaviours: being followed, being secretly photographed, being spied upon, and having lies spread about them. Group-stalked cases were also significantly more likely than individually-stalked cases to report direct forms

Table 1. A comparison of victim, stalker and stalking characteristics of reported group-stalking compared with reported stalking by individuals.

	Group-stalking vs. non-group-stalking <i>N</i> (%) χ^2 , <i>p</i> ϕ , OR (95% CI)
<i>Characteristics of victim</i>	
Female	94 (75.8%), 99 (77.3%) NS
Age at completion of questionnaire (years)	Mean 45.6 (SD12.5): 38.5 (10.9), $t=4.793$, <i>df</i> 248 $p < 0.001$
Age at which stalking started (cases where stalking was continuing)	Mean 38.3 (SD12.1): 35.7 (11.7) NS
White	106 (86.2%), 114 (89.8%) NS
Currently partnered	38 (30.6%), 50 (40.0%) NS
<i>Duration of stalking</i>	
Stalking still continuing	99 (88.4%):88 (71.0%) 10.861, <0.001 3.11 (1.55–6.25)
Length of stalking in months (cases where it was continuing)	Mean (SD) 95.2 (106): 31.4 (37.7) $t=5.597$, 125.3 <i>df</i> , $p < 0.001$
Length of stalking in months (cases where it had stopped)	Mean (SD) 54.5 (49.2): 17.8 (17.2) $t=2.632$, 13.1 <i>df</i> , $p < 0.021$
<i>Identity of alleged stalker (s)</i>	
No idea who stalker(s) might be	34 (27.2%), 12 (9.4%) 13.507, <0.001 0.231 3.61 (1.78–7.35)
Believes an ex-partner involved	16 (15.4%), 44 (37.0%) 13.154, <0.001 0.243 3.23 (1.68–6.17)
<i>Characteristics of stalking</i>	
<i>Unwanted communications</i>	
Unsolicited letters	39 (31.7%), 60 (46.9%) 6.042, <0.014 -0.155 0.53 (0.32–0.88)
Unsolicited e-mails	29 (23.6%), 64 (50.0%) 18.776, <0.001 -0.274 0.31 (0.18–0.53)
Unsolicited SMS (text messages)	25 (20.3%), 60 (46.9%) 19.742, <0.001 -0.274 0.29 (0.17–0.51)

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued).

Unsolicited telephone calls	64 (52.0%), 82 (64.1%) NS
Left unwanted items	43 (35.0%), 49 (38.3%) NS
<i>Covert behaviours</i>	
Followed	91 (74.0%), 26 (20.3%) 72.607, <0.001 0.538 11.16 (6.19–20.12)
Secretly photographed	55 (44.7%), 33 (25.8%) 9.877, <0.002 0.198 2.33 (1.37–3.96)
Spied on	93 (75.6%), 68 (53.1%) 13.788, <0.001 0.234 2.74 (1.60–4.69)
Lies spread about victim	83 (67.5%), 63 (49.2%) 8.596, <0.003 0.185 2.14 (1.28–3.57)
<i>Direct interference with homes or property</i>	
Home broken into	47 (38.2%), 19 (14.8%) 17.673, <0.001 0.265 3.55 (1.93–6.52)
Home vandalised	39 (31.7%), 15 (11.7%) 14.842, <0.001 0.243 3.50 (1.81–6.76)
Car vandalised	46 (37.4%), 20 (15.6%) 15.344, <0.001 0.247 3.23 (1.78–5.88)
Other property vandalised	38 (30.9%), 20 (15.6%) 8.231, <0.004 0.181 2.41 (1.31–4.45)
Victim's pet abused	31 (25.2%), 15 (11.7%) 7.620, <0.006 0.174 2.54 (1.30–4.99)
Physically assaulted	19 (15.4%), 25 (19.5%) NS
Other stalking method(s)	49 (39.8%), 21 (16.4%) 17.124, <0.001 0.261 3.37 (1.87–6.09)

of interference with their homes and property: having their home broken into, their home vandalised, their car vandalised, other property vandalised, or their pet interfered with. Group-stalked victims were also more likely to allege methods of stalking not included in the list adopted in the study.

Effect on victims' mental state (see Table 2)

The group-stalked were significantly more likely than the individually-stalked to complain of being very scared, of feeling that they were going mad, of feeling depressed, and of symptoms associated with depression: suicidal thoughts; weight change; sleep disturbance; weakness; and tiredness. The group-stalking cases were significantly more likely to report increased distrust and increased aggressiveness towards others than individually-stalked cases. There were no significant differences concerning anxiety, panic attacks, anger, or suicide attempts. The group-stalked did not feel subjectively more paranoid. They were significantly more likely than individually stalked cases to think the stalking had changed their priorities in life, but less likely to believe that it had changed their personality.

Adapted Civilian Mississippi PTSD scale (CMS)

The mean total score on the adapted CMS for those reporting stalking by individuals was 66.02 (SD17.89) out of a possible 135. For those reporting group-stalking, it was 79.36 (SD19.30). There were significant differences between the two groups both in terms of total score and on 27 of the 29 individual items (see Table 3). Some of the questions in the CMS are positive statements and some negative statements; the differences between the two groups were such that those reporting group-stalking suffered significantly greater degrees of symptomatology.

Differences within the two groups were examined according to whether or not the stalking had stopped. In the individually-stalked, the total score was 69.05 (SD19.22) in the cases where the stalking was still continuing and 59.95 (SD13.64) where it had stopped: $t -2.736$, $df 88.198$, $p < 0.008$. There were significant differences between continuing and ceased cases on 13 questionnaire items (nos. 1, 9, 11, 12, 17, 19, 21, 22, 24, 26, 27, 28 and 29, in Table 3). In the group-stalked, the mean score in continuing cases was 79.80 (SD18.25) and in the few ceased cases ($N = 12$), it was 81.18 (SD19.62); no significant differences were observed on any item.

Effect on victims' behaviour (see Table 4)

The group-stalked were significantly more likely than the individually-stalked to score positively on all fourteen parameters examined; fearful of going out; stayed in more; performance at work affected; had to change job; had to move home;

Table 2. Comparison of effects on mental state between reported group-stalking and reported stalking by individuals.

	Group-stalking vs. Non-group-stalking <i>N</i> (%) χ^2 , <i>p</i> ϕ OR (95% CI)
<i>Effect on victim's mental state</i>	
Very scared	57 (47.9%), 43 (33.6%) 5.238, <0.022 0.146 1.82 (1.09–3.04)
Thought they were going mad	63 (51.2%), 40 (31.3%) 10.338, <0.001 0.203 2.31 (1.38–3.86)
Feeling depressed	85 (71.4%), 56 (43.8%) 19.285, <0.001 0.279 3.21 (1.89–5.46)
<i>Suicidal thoughts</i>	44 (37.0%), 21 (16.4%) 13.455, <0.001 0.233 2.99 (1.64–5.44)
<i>Weight change</i>	75 (63.6%), 47 (36.7%) 17.694, <0.001 0.269 3.01 (1.79–5.05)
<i>Sleep disturbance</i>	102 (85.7%), 89 (69.5%) 9.212, <0.002 0.193 2.63 (1.39–4.97)
<i>Weakness</i>	56 (47.9%), 30 (23.4%) 16.009, <0.001 0.256 3.0 (1.73–5.18)
<i>Tiredness</i>	81 (68.1%), 67 (52.3%) 6.348, <0.012 1.94 (1.16–3.26)
Increased distrust	101 (84.9%), 85 (66.4%) 11.309, <0.001 0.16 2.84, 1.53–5.28
Increased aggressiveness	51 (42.5%), 32 (25.0%) 8.518, <0.004 0.214 2.22 (1.30–3.80)
Anxiety	92 (76.7%), 102 (79.7%) NS

(Continued)

Table 2. (Continued).

Panic attacks	62 (52.5%), 56 (43.8%) NS
Anger	100 (83.3%), 97 (75.8%) NS
Suicide attempts	14 (12.0%), 7 (5.5%) NS
Made them feel subjectively more paranoid	64 (53.8%), 58 (45.3%) NS
Changed their priorities in life	83 (72.8%), 59 (47.2%) 16.213, <0.001 0.26 3.00 (1.74–5.15)
Changed their personality	23 (20.2%);46 (36.5%) 7.794, <0.005 0.18 2.28 (1.27–4.08)

had to give up social activities; forced to see less of friends/family; lost friends/family; had to change/get rid of car; changed routine; carried a weapon; relationship broke up; affected victim’s family; and affected victim’s neighbours.

Reactions of others

The group-stalked were significantly more likely than the individually-stalked to endorse the following statements: ‘others said I was overreacting/being paranoid’; ‘didn’t want to go to police for fear of being ignored’; ‘family/friends did not take me seriously’; ‘police did not take me seriously’. They were significantly less likely to report that the reported behaviours had been recorded as a crime by police.

Other coping strategies

The group-stalked were significantly more likely to report using prescription medication and to report receiving more medical treatment than the individually stalked. There was no significant difference in the reported use of recreational drugs.

Discussion

This is the first study of victim-reported group- or gang-stalking of which the authors are aware. Group-stalking constituted 12.3% of the cases in our main sample. This compares with the figure in the US Department of Justice study of 6.8% for those stalked by three or more people who were ‘unable to identify a

Table 3. Adapted Civilian Mississippi PTSD Scale Likert scores: a comparison of group-stalked and individually-stalked cases.

	<i>U, Z, p(two-tailed)</i>
Total score	2.557.5, -4.805, <0.001
(1) Before the unwanted attention, I had more close friends than I do now.	3914.0, -6.437, <0.001
(2) If something happens that reminds me of the unwanted attention, I become very distressed and upset	5549.0, -3.287, 0.001
(3) I feel guilt over the things that I did around the time of the unwanted attention	7093.5, -0.021, ns
(4) Since the unwanted attention, I feel if someone pushes me too far, I am likely to become angry	5438.0, -3.090, 0.002
(5) I have nightmares about the unwanted attention	5108.0, -3.953, <0.001
(6) When I think of some of the things I did when the unwanted attention was happening, I wish I were dead	5646.5, -3.105, 0.002
(7) Since the unwanted attention, it seems as though I have no feelings	4822.0, -4.975, <0.001
(8) Being in certain situations makes me feel like I'm back at the time when I was receiving the unwanted attention	4345.0, -4.011, <0.001
(9) Since the unwanted attention, it seems as if I do not laugh or cry at the same things other people do	3884.5, -5.840, <0.001
(10) Since the unwanted attention, unexpected noises make me jump	5504.0, -3.085, 0.002
(11) I have used alcohol or other drugs to help me sleep or to forget about the unwanted attention	5849.5, -2.438, 0.015
(12) Since the unwanted attention, I have been afraid to sleep at night	5169.0, -3.820, <0.001
(13) I try to stay away from anything that will remind me of the things that happened during the unwanted attention	4713.5, -4.165, <0.001
(14) I have difficulty remembering some things that happened during the unwanted attention	5646.5, -2.895, 0.004
(15) If something happens that reminds me of the unwanted attention, I get anxious and panicky	5401.5, -3.464, 0.001
(16) Things I see or hear often remind me of the unwanted attention	5122.5, -3.622, <0.001
(17) I often think about the unwanted attention when I don't mean to	5001.0, -3.765, <0.001
(18) I am able to get emotionally close to others	5514.0, -2.966, 0.003
(19) Lately, I have felt like killing myself	5762.5, -3.290, 0.001
(20) I fall asleep, stay asleep and awaken only when my alarm goes off	6295, -1.500, ns
(21) My dreams at night are so real that I awake in a cold sweat and force myself to stay awake	4136.5, -7.225, <0.001

(Continued)

Table 3. (Continued).

	<i>U, Z, p(two-tailed)</i>
(22) I feel like I cannot go on	4139.5, -6.300, <0.001
(23) I am still enjoying many things I used to enjoy	4485.5, -5.023, <0.001
(24) I have trouble concentrating on tasks	5086.0, -3.693, <0.001
(25) I enjoy the company of others	4708.5, -4.363, <0.001
(26) I fall asleep easily at night	5552.0, -2.807, 0.005
(27) No one understands how I feel, not even my family	3922.0, -6.046, <0.001
(28) Lately, I lose my cool and explode over minor everyday things	5868.5, -2.449, 0.014
(29) I feel alert or on guard much of the time	5037.5, -4.114, <0.001

Table 4. Effects on victim's behaviour and attitudes of others: a comparison of group-stalked and individually-stalked cases.

	Group-stalking vs. Non-group-stalking <i>N</i> (%) χ^2, p ϕ OR (95% CI)
<i>Effect on victim's behaviour</i>	
Made them fear going out	36 (30.8%), 21 (16.4%) 7.063, <0.008 0.17 2.27 (1.23-4.17)
Stayed in more	88 (76.5%), 73 (57.5%) 9.827, 0.002 0.202 2.41 (1.38-4.21)
Performance at work affected	65 (56.0%), 51 (40.2%) 6.126, <0.013 0.159 1.90 (1.14-3.16)
Had to change job	57 (48.3%), 33 (26.0%) 13.113, <0.001 0.231 2.66 (1.56-4.55)

(Continued)

Table 4. (Continued).

Had to move home	48 (41.4%), 34 (26.8%) 5.786, <0.016 0.154 1.93 (1.13–3.31)
Had to give up social activities	79 (67.5%), 45 (35.4%) 25.088, <0.001 0.321 3.79 (2.23–6.44)
Forced to see less of friends and family	71 (60.2%), 32 (25.2%) 30.703, <0.001 0.354 4.49 (2.60–7.73)
Lost friends or family	66 (56.4%), 31 (24.4%) 26.038, <0.001 0.327 4.01 (2.32–6.91)
Had to change/get rid of car	25 (21.6%), 11 (8.7%) 7.982, <0.005 0.181 2.90 (1.35–6.20)
Changed routine	93 (51.7%), 87 (48.3%) 6.071, <0.014 0.159 2.14 (1.16–3.94)
Carried a weapon	27 (24.1%), 16 (13.2%) 4.578, <0.032 0.14 2.09 (1.06–4.12)
Relationship broke up	30 (25.9%), 15 (11.8%) 7.932, <0.005 0.181 2.6 (1.32–5.14)
Affected victim's family	57 (47.9%), 35 (27.3%) 11.148, <0.001 0.212 2.44 (1.44–4.15)
Affected victim's neighbours	41 (34.5%), 21 (16.4%) 10.684, <0.001 0.208 2.68 (1.47–4.89)
<i>Reactions of others</i>	
Others said they were overreacting/being paranoid	91 (74.0%), 47 (36.7%) 35.191, <0.001 0.374 4.90 (2.86–8.41)
Did not want to go to police for fear of being ignored	71 (57.7%), 45 (35.2%) 12.852, <0.001 0.226 2.52 (1.51–4.19)

(Continued)

Table 4. (Continued).

Family/friends did not take me seriously	74 (60.2%), 30 (23.4%) 34.863, <0.001 0.373 4.93 (2.86–8.51)
The police did not take me seriously	57 (46.3%), 39 (30.5%) 6.691, <0.010 0.163 1.97 (1.18–3.31)
Recorded as a crime	26 (22.4%), 52 (41.3%) 9.831, <0.002 -0.202 0.41 (0.23–0.72)
<i>Other coping strategies</i>	
Use of prescription medication	51 (46.4%), 21 (16.9%) 23.698, <0.001 0.318 4.24 (2.33–7.73)
Medical treatment	68 (64.2%), 40 (31.5%) 24.776, <0.001 0.326 3.89 (2.26–6.72)
Use of recreational drugs	12 (10.8%), 12 (9.6%) NS

single offender' or 'could not identify an offender who was singularly responsible' (Baum et al., 2009). That study used a restrictive definition of stalking, in which it is specified that the behaviour 'would cause a reasonable person to feel fear'. Most definitions of stalking specify a lower criterion of anxiety, apprehension or distress, rather than fear. Studies using this definition produce significantly higher prevalence figures (see above). The Baum et al. (2009) study also examined cases where the behavioural part of the definition of stalking was met, but not the fear requirement. When these cases were added to those defined as stalking, the figure for those reporting an inability to identify a single offender or an offender who was singularly responsible was 12.5% (Catalano, 2012), which is similar to the 12.3% identified as group-stalking cases in this study.

The principal finding in our study is that all the cases of group-stalking studied were highly likely to have been delusional in nature, compared to 3.9% of cases reporting stalking by individuals. If, as the above figures suggest, around 1 in 8 complaints of stalking are of group-stalking and therefore probably delusionally based, this represents a considerable number of individuals within the general population, given the prevalence of stalking revealed in previous studies. Beliefs that one is being followed, surveilled or interfered

with are common in those with paranoid illnesses. The manner in which these subjective phenomena are interpreted by those who experience them is coloured by the social and political preoccupations of the age (Jaspers, 1959/1997, p. 733). As such, it is unsurprising that the social construct of stalking should be incorporated into interpretations of paranoid symptomatology. However, the extent of the phenomenon is probably something of which many psychiatrists are unaware, and on this evidence, its presence should be sought for and recognised as being of significance when encountered.

Furthermore, if at least 1 in 8 reports of stalking are false (i.e. group cases without including other false victim subtypes), this must be of practical importance to the police and to psychiatrists when advising on immediate risk and protection needs in self-professed victims, to the differential allocation of police resources, and to the need for provision of early mental health intervention. Two brief screening tools, which have been subject to validation studies, are available to assist the police and other frontline workers to whom stalking victims present, in identifying those at higher risk of coming to harm (McEwan, Strand, MacKenzie, & James, 2015; Sheridan & Roberts, 2011). Of these, the former (the Stalking Assessment Screen – Revised) contains a caveat, drawn from clinical experience, that caution should be exercised in cases that report stalking by groups of people. This study represents the beginnings of an empirical basis for this assertion.

The finding that self-reported group-stalking is essentially a delusional phenomenon might be challenged as tautological. However, the questionnaires contained sufficient detail, in particular in free-text descriptions, for the authors confidently to allocate cases; and, in addition to the group-stalking cases, some individual-stalking cases were also judged delusional. Judgements as to whether delusions were present or not, in terms of DSM-V definitions, were made by experienced senior clinicians, reflecting standard clinical practice. The diagnosis of delusions ‘seems to be reliable, both with clinical interview and with standardised scales’ (Bell, Halligan, & Ellis, 2006, p. 78), although there do not appear to have been any studies on diagnosis from self-report material. The fact that, in this study, every group-stalking case was judged to be delusional is a reflection of the stark clarity of the issue, once subjected to systematic scrutiny. Judgements as to the presence of delusions are influenced by the base-rate of the behaviour described (Brown, 2008; Kamphuis & Finn, 2002). Many stalking behaviours described were simply impossible. The remainder were such as to admit only of two possibilities: either the stalking was delusional, or the individuals were victims of elaborate and extremely expensive behaviour organised, for no apparent reason, by those with huge personal wealth or by government agencies. It might be suggested that some cases could have concerned overvalued ideas, rather than delusions, influenced by the Internet (e.g. Anti-Gangstalking Network, n.d; Fight Gang Stalking, n.d) and societal sub-groups where belief in conspiracy theories is widespread. By an overvalued idea is meant ‘an acceptable, comprehensible idea pursued

beyond the bounds of reason' (McKenna, 1984), this being differentiated from a delusion in DSM-V by the criterion that the belief does not encompass the 'possibility that the belief might not be true' (APA, 2013, p. 286). We found no evidence in terms of fixity of belief that the cases in question should be considered as exhibiting overvalued ideas rather than delusions; and, in terms of ideas held by societal sub-groups, those complaining of group-stalking presented as targeted individuals, not as members of targeted groups or sub-groups. The fundamental finding remains that the reported group-stalking was not a real phenomenon, except in the minds of those complaining of it.

Given that the study group was self-selected, it might be argued that those with psychotic disorders were more likely to complete the questionnaire. Yet, the fact that only 3.9% of those complaining of stalking by individuals appeared to be deluded militates against this. There are sensitivities amongst victim groups at any study suggesting that claims of stalking may be false. However, the reverse way of presenting the results of this study is that they suggest that 96.1% of complaints of stalking by individuals are not the product of deluded minds.

As regards the characteristics of the alleged stalking, those who stated they were victims of group-stalking presented with significantly fewer complaints of behaviours which might produce objective evidence that stalking was taking place, such as written communications, e-mails and text messages. By contrast, they were significantly more likely to complain of covert behaviours which would be much more difficult to verify, such as being followed or spied upon.

Group-stalking belongs within the general category of false claims of stalking. Previous studies of false claims of stalking have involved small numbers (Pathé et al., 1999; Petherick & Jenkins, 2014; Sheridan & Blaauw, 2004) and reported group-stalking cases were not examined separately. Other than delusional victimisation, false claims include false victimisation, role reversal, factitious disorders and malingers, with delusional victimisation constituting the largest group (Mullen et al., 2009, pp. 2012–2018). The group-stalking cases in this study shared similarities with false stalking cases in the earlier reports, in that they were reported to have continued significantly longer, were less likely to be associated with activities that produced hard evidence of stalking and were associated with higher rates of reported suicidal ideation.

This study used a scale constructed for PTSD. The constellation of symptoms in PTSD well reflects those experienced by many stalking victims, although the DSM definition of PTSD (APA, 2013, p. 274) is restrictive in defining the phenomenon as being a consequence of exposure to one or more discrete traumatic events. This fails to acknowledge the effect of prolonged trauma and repeated victimisation, as occurs in stalking (Mullen et al., 2009, p. 54), which is captured rather by the concept of 'complex trauma syndrome', originally formulated by Herman (1992). In any event, the use of the CMS in this study proved successful in capturing relevant post-traumatic symptomatology.

Those who perceive themselves as being stalked by groups had a clear need for psychiatric support, quite apart from any need for treatment for their delusional states. In this study, they scored significantly more highly than those stalked by individuals, both in terms of depressive and post-traumatic symptoms. The differences concerned 39 of the 46 variables examined. It may well be that it is the pervasive nature of the psychotic experience that engenders greater psychological sequelae, although the damage caused by any form of stalking is confirmed as substantial by this study, in line with previous reports. The position of the perceived victim of group-stalking is probably exacerbated by the fact that they are less likely to be taken seriously by friends and family or the police, with others more likely to think them paranoid. The group-stalking cases also went on for longer, so involving protracted periods of exposure to the traumatic experiences in question. Previous studies have examined factors predisposing to post-traumatic symptomatology in stalking victims (Dressing et al., 2005; Kamphuis et al., 2003). This study suggests that psychotic illness is a further relevant factor which has not previously been considered.

This study shares similar methodological limitations to other studies of stalking, as has been discussed above. Self-selection may have skewed reported symptoms towards the more severe end of the spectrum (Bethlehem, 2010). And the study design did not permit consideration of the extent to which psychopathology might have been accounted for by earlier factors unrelated to stalking (Kamphuis & Emmelkamp, 2001; Purcell, Pathé, & Mullen, 2005). This is unlikely, however, to have affected the issue of differences in delusional basis, nor the comparative elements of the findings.

This study would appear to be the first on the topic of group- or gang-stalking. As such, its results are of particular note, at least until further studies appear. Our findings can assist psychiatrists and those involved in the criminal justice system in dealing correctly with such cases, whilst cautioning against dismissing people reporting group-stalking, given the associated effects on mental state and social functioning. The study is, however, exploratory in nature, and replications of its findings are necessary before they can be considered to be clearly established. We suggest that there may be extant databases held by other research groups, to which the above study methodology could be applied, and that the findings of this study support the case for the inclusion of questions regarding group-stalking in methodologically more rigorous, representative random population surveys, such as the British Crime Survey, to which questions on stalking have previously twice been attached (Budd & Mattinson, 2000; Walby & Allen, 2004).

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