Stalking: How perceptions differ from reality and why these differences matter

Adrian J. Scott

Department of Psychology, Goldsmiths, University of London; School of Arts and

Humanities, Edith Cowan University

Abstract

Stalking is a particular type of interpersonal aggression that is difficult to define because it incorporates a range of unwanted behaviours over a protracted period of time that often appear routine and harmless when considered on an incident-by-incident basis. Defining stalking is further complicated because people's perceptions are integral to determining whether a particular course of conduct constitutes stalking, whether victims identify their own experiences as stalking, and whether support networks and law officials identify other people's experiences as stalking. This chapter outlines the difficulties associated with defining and legislating against stalking, and reviews literature examining the influence of various personal and situational characteristics on perceptions of stalking. It then considers how perceptions differ from reality and why these differences matter.

Introduction

Stalking is a particular type of interpersonal aggression that was first legislated against in California in 1990 following the unrelated murders of five women who had been stalked, including actress Rebecca Schaeffer who was stalked and murdered by an obsessed fan (National Institute of Justice, 1993). Subsequently, all 50 states in the United States and various countries around the world introduced stalking legislation (e.g., all Australian states and territories, and 21 of the 28 member states of the European Union; Carter, 2016; Dennison & Thomson, 2005; van der Aa, 2018). In the United Kingdom, the Protection from Harassment (PfH) (Northern Ireland) Order 1997, the Criminal Justice and Licensing (CJL) (Scotland) Act 2010, and the Protection of Freedoms (PoF) Act 2012 in England and Wales provide protection for victims of stalking.

Stalking is difficult to define because it is a pattern-based crime that incorporates a range of unwanted behaviours over a protracted period of time that often appear routine and harmless when considered on an incident-by-incident basis (e.g., unwanted telephone calls, messages and emails; Pathé, Mackenzie, & Mullen, 2004; Sheridan & Davies, 2001). One of the main issues associated with the introduction of stalking legislation was how to differentiate 'reasonable' pursuit behaviour (e.g., a stranger approaching a person to start a new relationship and an ex-partner calling a person in an attempt to rekindle a prior relationship) from 'unreasonable' stalking behaviour (Mullen, Pathé, & Purcell, 2001; Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007). Defining stalking is further complicated because victims' perceptions are 'central to the construction of stalking', and as such "...it is not just the intentions and behavior [sic] of the perpetrator that create a stalking event but how these actions are experienced and articulated by the victim" (Mullen, Pathé, Purcell, & Stuart, 1999, p. 1245). It is important, therefore, to get the right balance between (i) over-breadth, where reasonable behaviour is pathologised and there is a high number of false accusations of

stalking, and (ii) over-restriction, where stalking behaviour is not recognised and a large proportion of stalking victims fail to self-identify as such (Ogilvie, 2000a; Phillips, Quirk, Rosenfeld, & O'Connor, 2004).

National survey estimates in Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States suggest that between four and five percent of women and between two and three percent of men are stalked annually (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017; Office for National Statistics, 2017; Smith et al., 2017). Common stalking behaviours include unwanted telephone calls, messages, emails, surveillance, following and direct contact (Buhi, Clayton, & Hepler Surrency, 2009; Melton, 2012; Rosay, Wood, Rivera, Postle, & TePas, 2010). More serious stalking behaviours include threats, vandalism and physical assault (Alison & Alison, 2006; Amar, 2007; Rosay et al., 2010). Stalking victims can experience a range of social, psychological, physical and financial harms as a direct consequence of their victimisation (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007). For example, they often invest in additional security measures, socialise less and stop going to certain places through fear of encountering their stalker (Pathé & Mullen, 1997; Sheridan, Blaauw, & Davies, 2003; Spitzberg, 2002). Continued victimisation may also cause low self-esteem, a sense of helplessness, insomnia, and in some cases diagnosable psychiatric disorders (Blaauw, Winkel, Arensman, Sheridan, & Freeve, 2002; Spitzberg, 2002). However, it is often unclear whether psychiatric disorders preceded or were caused by the experience of being stalked (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007).

It is apparent that stalking is a widespread phenomenon that results in a range of negative consequences, many of them severe. This chapter outlines the difficulties associated with defining and legislating against stalking. It then reviews literature examining the influence of various personal and situational characteristics (e.g., perceiver gender, prior relationship and perpetrator-victim gender) on perceptions of stalking, and considers how perceptions differ from reality. Finally, it discusses why these differences matter from the

perspectives of victims, their support networks (e.g., family and friends), and law officials (e.g., police officers).

Defining and legislating against stalking

Currently, there is no universally accepted definition of stalking that clearly separates it from other types of interpersonal aggression (Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary, 2017; Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 2012). However, it is generally used to refer to persistent harassment in which one person repeatedly attempts to impose unwanted communication and/or contact on another (Mullen et al., 1999; Mullen et al., 2001). Attempts have been made to distinguish stalking from harassing intrusions and intense harassment, and the introduction of the PoF Act 2012 in England and Wales highlights the perceived need to have separate stalking and harassment legislation. According to Mullen et al. (2001), harassing intrusions are unacceptable non-fear-provoking interpersonal conflicts that usually last a few days, and intense harassment is unacceptable fear-provoking interpersonal conflicts that usually last several days or weeks. Stalking, by comparison, involves multiple intrusions and a range of often fear-provoking behaviours that have significant consequences and may last weeks, months or even years. As such, stalking is considered to be a more serious type of harassment that occurs for a longer period of time and may cause victims mental or physical harm (McEwan, Mullen, & MacKenzie, 2007; Owens, 2016).

Two basic models have been applied to the development of stalking legislation internationally, with some legislation using the *list model* and other legislation using the *general prohibition model* (Infield & Platford, 2005; Lamplugh & Infield, 2003). The list model is more commonly applied and lists specific stalking behaviour (Lamplugh & Infield, 2003). The general prohibition model, by comparison, leaves the determination of stalking behaviour to the common-sense judgements of those administering legal procedures (e.g.,

jurors and magistrates; Infield & Platford, 2005). Both of these models have been criticised for failing to define stalking "...in a way which satisfies the law's requirements for precision, coherence and consistency" (Lamplugh & Infield, 2003, p. 865). Although the list model details specific prohibited behaviour, it lacks the flexibility to deal with new forms of stalking (e.g., via new forms of technology), and may encourage stalkers to seek non-prohibited harassing intrusions. Conversely, the general prohibition model is more flexible and adaptive but may be too general and vague as a result (Infield & Platford, 2005; Lamplugh & Infield, 2003).

It is not surprising, given the difficulties associated with defining stalking, that there is no definitive anti-stalking law and that stalking is legislated against in a variety of ways both within and between countries (Sheridan, Blaauw et al., 2003). For example, although most anti-stalking laws in Australia and the United States include three key elements (i.e., conduct, intent and victim response) the actual stalking legislation differs across all states and territories (Owens, 2016; Stalking Risk Profile, 2011; Tran, 2003). In brief, the conduct element satisfies the *actus reus* component of the crime (i.e., the guilty act) and differs according to whether it is defined using list and/or general prohibition models (McEwan et al., 2007). The intent element, by comparison, satisfies the *mens rea* component of the crime (i.e., the guilty mind) and differs according to whether it is defined using subjective (i.e., the perpetrator intended to cause the victim fear or harm) and/or objective tests of intent (i.e., a 'reasonable person' ought to have known that his or her behaviour would cause the victim fear or harm; Dennison & Thomson, 2005; Ogilvie, 2000b). Subjective interpretations of intent are widely debated because perpetrators may not intend to cause fear or harm, or may not have the capacity (e.g., due to mental illness) to understand the unlawful nature of their behaviour (McEwan et al., 2007). Furthermore, there may be limited or no evidence of intent even when perpetrators do intend to cause victims fear or harm (Dennison & Thomson,

2005). Consequently, many anti-stalking laws incorporate a victim response element to help establish whether a particular 'course of conduct' (i.e., pattern of behaviour) constitutes stalking (McEwan et al., 2007).

In the United Kingdom, the Protection from Harassment (PfH) Act 1997 was introduced to provide protection for victims of (harassment and) stalking. Unlike anti-stalking laws in Australia and the United States, the PfH Act does not use the term stalking, nor does it have an intent element. Instead, it uses a general prohibition model and an objective test to determine whether a course of conduct constitutes (i) a low-level offence of harassment or (ii) a higher-level offence of putting people in fear of violence. Although the PfH Act 1997 includes provisions for Northern Ireland and Scotland, stalking was charged under different legislation (e.g., breach of the peace) in Scotland until 2010 when the CJL (Scotland) Act 2010 was introduced (Murray, 2016). The CJL (Scotland) Act combines list and general prohibition models as well as subjective and objective tests of intent to determine whether a course of conduct constitutes an offence of stalking. Specific stalking behaviour is listed together with a 'catch all' item that relates to any other stalking behaviour. With regard to intent, the perpetrator must have intended to cause the victim fear or alarm, or ought to have known that his or her behaviour would cause the victim fear or alarm. In England and Wales, the PoF Act 2012 was introduced to amend the PfH Act 1997 and create two additional offences of stalking. It uses a list model and an objective test to determine whether a course of conduct constitutes (i) a low-level offence of stalking or (ii) a higher-level offence of stalking involving fear of violence or serious alarm or distress. In Northern Ireland, stalking continues to be charged under the PfH (Northern Ireland) Order 1997, which is similar to the PfH Act 1997, although there are calls for legislative reform (Killean et al., 2016).

How perceptions differ from reality

A body of research has examined the influence of various personal and situational characteristics on perceptions of stalking to identify the characteristics that differentiate 'reasonable' pursuit behaviour from 'unreasonable' stalking behaviour. This research typically adopts a similar methodology in which stalking scenarios (i.e., scenarios that depict a particular course of conduct that may or may not constitute stalking) are used to manipulate the situational characteristics of interest. Personal characteristics include prior stalking victimisation and perceiver gender, while situational characteristics include perpetrator intent, perpetrator persistence, prior relationship, and perpetrator-victim gender. In brief, research suggests prior stalking victimisation has little or no impact on perceptions of stalking. Although Lambert, Smith, Geistman, Cluse-Tolar, and Jiang (2013) found that university students with experience of stalking victimisation had slightly more accurate understandings of stalking (i.e., the pervasiveness and harmfulness of stalking, relationships between perpetrators and victims, and motivations for stalking) compared to university students without experience of stalking victimisation, other studies did not find an association between prior stalking victimisation and perceptions of stalking (Kinkade, Burns, & Fuentes, 2005; Phillips et al., 2004). With regard to situational characteristics, research has shown that behaviour is more likely to be considered serious when stalking scenarios contain explicit evidence of intent to cause fear or harm, and/or describe more persistent as opposed to less persistent behaviour (Dennison, 2007; Dennison & Thomson, 2002; Phillips et al., 2004; Scott, Rajakaruna, Sheridan, & Sleath, 2014). Perceiver sex, prior relationship and perpetrator-victim gender represent the most researched personal and situational characteristics, so the literature pertaining to these characteristics is now reviewed in detail.

Perceiver gender

Research investigating the influence of perceiver gender on perceptions of stalking suggests that women are more likely than men to believe a particular course of conduct is serious and will impact on the victim, and are less likely than men to endorse stalking stereotypes and myths. For example, research using stalking scenarios in Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom and the United States found that women were more likely than men to believe behaviour constituted stalking (Dennison & Thomson, 2002; Finnegan & Timmons Fritz, 2012; Phillips et al., 2004, Experiment 2; Scott, Rajakaruna, Sheridan, & Gavin, 2015) and warranted police intervention and a criminal conviction (Scott et al., 2015). This body of research also found that women were more likely to believe the perpetrator intended to cause the victim fear and harm (Dennison & Thomson, 2002), the victim would experience alarm and fear of violence (Scott et al., 2015), and the victim should seek informal (e.g., family and friends) and formal support (e.g., police; Finnegan & Timmons Fritz, 2012). Similarly, research using stalking scenarios within a mock-juror paradigm in the United States found that women rendered more guilty verdicts than men (Dunlap, Hodell, Golding, & Wasarhaley, 2012; Magyarics, Lynch, Golding, & Lippert, 2015), and had more 'negative defendant perceptions' (e.g., were less likely to believe and have sympathy for the defendant) and more 'positive victim perceptions' (e.g., were more likely to believe and have sympathy for the victim; Dunlap et al., 2012) than did men.

However, it is important to acknowledge that several studies did not find an association between perceiver gender and perceptions of stalking. For example, research in the United States found that men and women did not differ in their perceptions of whether behaviour constituted stalking (Cass, 2011; Kinkade et al., 2005; Phillips et al., 2004, Experiment 1), should be reported to the police, and warranted a range of criminal justice responses (e.g., arrest, prosecution and conviction; Cass & Mallicoat, 2015; Cass & Rosay, 2012). These

inconsistent findings are likely caused by methodological differences. Studies that found an association between perceiver gender and perceptions of stalking tended to use stalking scenarios in which the course of conduct was more persistent (lasting several weeks or months; Dennison & Thomson 2002; Dunlap et al., 2012; Magyarics et al., 2015; Phillips et al., 2004, Experiment 2; Scott et al., 2015), whereas studies that did not find an association tended to use stalking scenarios in which the course of conduct was less persistent (lasting several days; Cass, 2011; Cass & Mallicoat, 2015; Cass & Rosay, 2012; Phillips et al., 2004, Experiment 1). Although different, the studies of Finnegan and Timmons Fritz (2012) and Kinkade et al. (2004) are difficult to categorise according to persistence because the former used 11 short stalking scenarios to examine the influence of perceiver gender and perpetrator-victim gender, and the latter used 20 short stalking scenarios to examine to influence of 20 personal and situational characteristics, on perceptions of stalking.

With regard to stalking stereotypes and myths, Yanowitz (2006) provided students with a list of possible stalking behaviours and found that women identified more approach (e.g., unwanted flowers, letters and phone calls) and surveillance behaviours (e.g., following, information seeking and watching) as stalking than did men. Similarly, Lambert et al. (2013) provided students with a set of statements relating to different aspects of stalking and found that women were more likely than men to believe stalking was pervasive, harmful and predominantly an 'ex-partner' concern, and less likely to blame the victim. Finally, research using the Stalking Myth Survey (SMS; Sinclair, 2006) and different variants of the Stalking Related Attitudes Scale (SRAS; McKeon, 2010) found that women were less likely than men to endorse stalking myths (Dunlap, Lynch, Jewell, Wasarhaley, & Golding, 2015; Ratajack, 2011; Sinclair, 2012), mitigate perpetrator behaviour (Ervin, 2015), minimise victim harm, blame the victim (Ervin, 2015; McKeon, McEwan, & Luebbers, 2015) and believe stalking

was a form of courtship behaviour (De Fazio, Sgarbi, Moore, & Spitzberg, 2015; McKeon et al., 2015).

Authors attempting to understand the influence of perceiver gender on perceptions of stalking have drawn attention to defensive attributions (e.g., Scott et al., 2015; Sinclair, 2012), whereby women identify with the role of the victim more than do men because they experience interpersonal aggression more than do men (Dunlap et al., 2012; Scott et al., 2015; Sinclair, 2012). Thus, women are more likely than men to believe a particular course of conduct is serious and will impact on the victim because of their self-protective defensive attributions (Herzog, 2008).

Prior relationship

Research using stalking scenarios to investigate the influence of prior relationship on perceptions of stalking with university student and community samples suggests that a particular course of conduct is more likely to be considered serious and to impact on the victim when the perpetrator and victim are portrayed as strangers or acquaintances rather than ex-partners. For example, Hills and Taplin (1998) asked Australian participants to read a stalking scenario from the perspective of the victim where, amongst other characteristics, the prior relationship was manipulated so that the perpetrator was a stranger, an acquaintance or an ex-partner. The findings revealed that participants were more likely to believe that they would experience fear and call the police when the perpetrator was a stranger rather than an ex-partner. Similarly, research examining perceptions from the perspective of an observer in Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States found that participants were more likely to believe behaviour constituted stalking (Cass, 2011; Phillips et al., 2004; Scott et al., 2014; Scott et al., 2015; Sheridan, Gillett, Davies, Blaauw, & Patel, 2003), and warranted police intervention (Scott et al., 2014; Scott et al., 2015; Sheridan, Gillett et al., 2003) and a criminal

conviction (Scott et al., 2014; Scott et al., 2015) when the perpetrator was a stranger or acquaintance rather than an ex-partner. This body of research also found that participants were more likely to believe the victim would experience alarm and fear of violence (Scott et al., 2014, Scott et al., 2015) and report the behaviour to the police (Cass & Mallicoat, 2015) when the perpetrator was a stranger or acquaintance rather than an ex-partner. In contrast, participants were less likely to mitigate perpetrator behaviour (Scott et al., 2014) and blame the victim (Scott et al., 2014; Sheridan, Gillett et al., 2003) when the perpetrator was a stranger or acquaintance rather than an ex-partner.

Research with police officer samples in the United Kingdom has produced similar findings. For example, Weller, Hope, and Sheridan (2013) found that police officers were more likely to believe behaviour constituted stalking and would continue for a longer period of time when the perpetrator was a stranger rather than an acquaintance or ex-partner. Scott, Nixon, and Sheridan (2013) and Sheridan, Scott, and Nixon (2016) also found that police officers were more likely to believe behaviour constituted harassment, warranted police intervention, and would cause the victim alarm and fear of violence when the perpetrator was a stranger rather than an acquaintance or ex-partner. The term harassment was used rather than stalking in this research because it was conducted before the introduction of the CJL (Scotland) Act 2010 and the PoF Act 2012 in England and Wales. Therefore, police officers followed the dictates of the PfH Act 1997 at the time. Although Weller et al. did not find an association between prior relationship and perceptions of victim blame, Scott et al. and Sheridan et al. both found that police officers were less likely to blame the victim when the perpetrator was a stranger or acquaintance rather than an ex-partner. Furthermore, differences were apparent when perceptions of experienced and non-experienced officers (i.e., experienced officers had direct experience with stalking investigations), and specialist and non-specialist officers (i.e., specialist officers had received specialist training in risk

assessment, child protection, domestic violence, and stalking) were compared. Weller et al. found that experienced officers were more likely than non-experienced officers to believe the situation would take longer to resolve, and less likely than non-experienced officers to blame the victim. Similarly, Scott et al. found that specialist officers were more likely than non-specialist officers to believe behaviour constituted harassment, warranted police intervention, and would cause the victim alarm and fear of violence, and less likely than non-specialist officers to blame the victim.

However, several studies have produced inconsistent findings. For example, some studies in Australia and the United States did not find an association between prior relationship and perceptions of stalking (Dennison & Thomson, 2000; Kinkade et al., 2005). Furthermore, Dennison and Thomson (2002) found that perpetrator persistence and prior relationship interacted such that participants were more likely to believe less persistent behaviour constituted stalking when the perpetrator and victim were portrayed as ex-partners rather than strangers. In contrast, there was no association between prior relationship and perceptions of stalking for more persistent behaviour. Scott et al. (2014) suggested that these inconsistent findings are likely caused by methodological differences. Ceiling effects were observed in Dennison and Thomson's (2000) study (98% of participants believed the behaviour constituted stalking) and the ex-partner was portrayed as possessive in Dennison and Thomson's (2002) study (so additional contextual information was provided regarding the perpetrator's character in the ex-partner condition). With regard to Kinkade et al.'s study, the perpetrator and victim were described as meeting at a high school reunion having dated or not dated previously (so there was no 'true' stranger condition).

Most recently, Scott, Duff, Sheridan, and Rajakaruna (2018) explored the influence of prior relationship on perceptions of stalking by considering the impact of additional contextual information regarding the breakup of the relationship. Australian, U.K. and U.S.

members of the community were asked to read a stalking scenario from the perspective of an observer where the prior relationship was manipulated so that the perpetrator and victim were portrayed as strangers, acquaintances or ex-partners. However, there were five ex-partner conditions whereby the relationship ended because (1) they wanted different things, (2) the perpetrator was physically violent towards the victim, (3) the perpetrator was verbally abusive towards the victim, (4) the victim was moving for work, or (5) the victim was unfaithful. Consistent with the majority of previous research, participants were more likely to believe behaviour constituted stalking, and warranted police intervention and a criminal conviction when the perpetrator was a stranger rather than an ex-partner who wanted different things. Furthermore, participants were more likely to believe the victim would experience alarm and fear of violence when the perpetrator was a stranger rather than an ex-partner who wanted different things. However, the additional contextual information was found to influence perceptions such that participants were *most* likely to believe stalking scenarios were serious and would impact on the victim when the perpetrator was a stranger or physically violent ex-partner and *least* likely to believe stalking scenarios were serious and would impact on the victim when the victim was an unfaithful ex-partner.

Authors attempting to understand the influence of prior relationship on perceptions of stalking have drawn attention to fear of the unknown and belief in a just world. Victims have little or no knowledge of the characteristics, motives or usual behaviour of unknown persons (Hills & Taplin, 1998). Therefore, people may perceive stranger stalkers to be more dangerous than acquaintance and ex-partner stalkers because of the belief that their behaviour is more difficult to predict and control (Cass, 2011; Scott, 2003). With regard to belief in a just world, people are motivated to view the world as a safe place and to attribute responsibility to the victims of crime in order to preserve this belief (Lerner, 1997; Lerner & Simmons, 1966). Therefore, people may perceive the behaviour of acquaintance or ex-partner

stalkers to be more 'reasonable' than the behaviour of stranger stalkers because of the false belief that their victims "…must have perpetrated some misdeed(s) in the past in order to trigger it" (Sheridan, Gillett et al., 2003, p. 96).

The finding that a particular course of conduct is generally more likely to be considered serious and to impact on the victim when the perpetrator and victim are portrayed as strangers or acquaintances rather than ex-partners is concerning when compared with the reality of stalking victimisation. National survey estimates (e.g., Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017; Dovelius, Öberg, & Holmberg, 2006; Finney, 2006; Smith et al., 2017) and research using victim surveys (e.g., Galeazzi, Bučar-Ručman, DeFazio, & Groenen, 2009; Podaná & Imríšková, 2014), police reports (e.g., Belfrage & Strand, 2009; Rosay et al., 2010) and court reports (e.g., Malsch, 2007) suggest that the vast majority of stalking victims knew the perpetrator in some capacity prior to being stalked. For example, Dovelius et al. (2006) found that 66% of victims in a Swedish victimisation survey knew the perpetrator (28% were a current or ex-partner, or a close family member), and Rosay et al. (2010) found that 93% of victims in a review of Alaskan police reports knew the perpetrator (54% were a current or ex-partner). With regard to the seriousness of stalking, research suggests ex-partners are more likely to threaten and to use violence than strangers or acquaintances (e.g., James & Farnham, 2003; McEwan, Daffern, MacKenzie, & Ogloff, 2017; Palarea, Zona, Lane, & Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 1999; Rosenfeld, 2004; Rosenfeld & Lewis, 2005). For example, Palarea et al. examined cases referred to a U.S. police threat management unit over a six-year period and found that intimate stalkers (i.e., current or ex-partners) were more likely to threaten (67%) and be violent (76%) towards the victim than non-intimate stalkers (33% and 24% respectively). Rosenfeld's review of the relevant literature also found that prior relationship was one of the "…most consistent correlates of violence" (p. 31).

Perpetrator-victim gender

Research using stalking scenarios to investigate the influence of perpetrator-target gender on perceptions of stalking with university student and community samples suggests that a particular course of conduct is more likely to be considered serious and to impact on the victim when the perpetrator is portrayed as a man and the victim is portrayed as a woman rather than vice versa. For example, Sheridan, Gillett et al. (2003) asked U.K. participants to read a stalking scenario from the perspective of an observer where, amongst other characteristics, the gender of the perpetrator and victim was manipulated so that the perpetrator was portrayed as a man and the victim was portrayed as a woman or vice versa. The findings revealed that participants were more likely to believe behaviour warranted police intervention and would cause injury when the perpetrator was a man and the victim was a woman. In contrast, participants were less likely to believe the victim was to blame for, and could help alleviate, the situation when the perpetrator was a man and the victim was a woman. Similarly, research examining perceptions in Canada and the United States found that participants were more concerned about the safety of the victim (Finnegan & Timmons Fritz, 2012; Phillips et al., 2004), and more likely to believe the victim should seek informal and formal support when behaviour was perpetrated by a man towards a woman (Cass & Mallicoat, 2015; Finnegan & Timmons Fritz, 2012; Phillips et al., 2004). Cass and Rosay (2012) also found that participants were more likely to believe behaviour warranted a police investigation, arrest and prosecutorial charge when behaviour was perpetrated by a man towards a woman. Most recently, Finnegan, Timmons Fritz, and Horrobin (2018) found that police officers in Canada were more likely to believe behaviour would cause emotional, psychological, physical and financial harm when the perpetrator was a man and the victim was a woman. Finnegan et al. also found that police officers were more likely to believe a judge would recommend a prison sentence when the perpetrator was a man and the victim

was a woman. However, research has not found an association between perpetrator-victim gender and perceptions of whether behaviour constitutes stalking (Cass, 2011; Finnegan et al., 2018; Kinkade et al., 2005; Phillips et al., 2004; Sheridan, Gillett et al., 2003). It is important, therefore, to distinguish between perceptions of whether a particular course of conduct is serious and will impact on the victim, and perceptions of whether a particular course of conduct constitutes stalking.

Limited research has explored the influence of perpetrator and target gender on perceptions of stalking in the context of both opposite- and same-gender stalking scenarios. For example, Scott et al. (2015) found that Australian, U.K. and U.S. members of the community were more likely to believe behaviour warranted police intervention, and would cause the victim alarm and fear of violence when the perpetrator was a man rather than a woman irrespective of the gender of the victim. Scott et al. also found that participants were more likely to believe the victim would experience alarm and fear of violence when the victim was a woman rather than a man irrespective of the gender of the perpetrator. Similarly, research using stalking scenarios within a mock-juror paradigm in the United States found that participants were more likely to render guilty verdicts, have 'negative defendant perceptions' and have 'positive victim perceptions' in response to prototypical (i.e., a man stalking a woman) rather than non-prototypical stalking situations (i.e., a woman stalking a man, a man stalking a man and a woman stalking a woman; Dunlap et al., 2012).

Authors attempting to understand the influence of perpetrator-victim gender on perceptions of stalking have drawn attention to gender-role stereotypes (e.g., Cass & Mallicoat, 2015; Cass & Rosay, 2012; Finnegan & Timmons Fritz, 2012), whereby men are positioned as dominant and threatening, and women are positioned as weak and vulnerable (Gerber, 1991). Thus, a particular course of conduct is more likely to be considered serious and to impact on the victim when the perpetrator is a man and the victim is a woman rather

than vice versa because men are perceived to be more threatening than women and women are perceived to be more vulnerable than men.

The finding that a particular course of conduct is generally more likely to be considered serious and to impact on the victim when the perpetrator is a man and the victim is a woman is concerning when compared with the reality of stalking victimisation. Although National survey estimates (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017; Dovelius et al., 2006; Finney, 2006; Smith et al., 2017) and research using victim surveys (e.g., Galeazzi et al., 2009; Purcell, Pathé, & Mullen, 2002), police reports (e.g., Lyon, 2006; Rosay et al., 2010) and court reports (e.g., Malsch, 2007) consistently demonstrate that stalking is predominantly perpetrated by men against women, research suggests behaviour and its impact is similar irrespective of the gender of the perpetrator and victim (e.g., Carabellese et al., 2013; Purcell, Pathé, & Mullen, 2001; Sheridan, North, & Scott, 2014; Strand & McEwan, 2011, 2012). For example, Strand and McEwan (2012) compared the likelihood of 12 stalking actions using Australian and Swedish perpetration data and found only two differed according to perpetrator gender. Similarly, Sheridan et al. compared the likelihood of 42 social, psychological, physical and financial harms using U.K. and U.S. victimisation data, and found only five differed according to victim gender. However, Carabellese et al.'s review of the relevant literature found that although the impact was similar, women were less likely than men "…to proceed from threats of physical violence to their actual execution" (p. 128).

Why these differences matter

So, why do differences between perceptions and reality matter? Stalking is a particular type of interpersonal aggression that incorporates a range of unwanted behaviours over a protracted period of time that often appear routine and harmless when considered on an incident-by-incident basis (Pathé et al., 2004; Sheridan & Davies, 2001). Therefore, people's

perceptions are integral to determining whether a particular course of conduct constitutes stalking, and misperceptions (i.e., differences between perceptions and reality) are integral to determining whether victims identify their own experiences as stalking, and whether support networks and law officials identify other people's experiences as stalking. For example, Tjaden and Thoennes (2001) analysed the content of 285 domestic violence crime reports that involved stalking or stalking like behaviour in the United States, and found that the word stalking was only present in three percent of victim narratives and seven percent of police officer narratives. Thus, the majority of victims and police officers did not identify their (the victims') experiences as stalking in the corresponding crime reports. Furthermore, victims of stalking may not seek support unless they believe their experiences are serious and constitute a crime (Reyns & Englebrecht, 2014). National survey estimates (e.g., Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017; Baum, Catalano, Rand, & Rose, 2009; Walby & Allen, 2004) and research using victim surveys (e.g., Buhi et al., 2009; Dovelius et al., 2006; Galeazzi et al., 2009) suggest that only 50 percent (or less) of stalking victims report their experiences to the police. Reasons for nonreporting include perceptions that the situation is minor and a personal matter (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006; Baum et al., 2009; Buhi et al., 2009; Dovelius et al., 2006), and that law officials are unable to help resolve the situation (Dovelius et al., 2006; Galeazzi et al., 2009).

Support networks are particularly important because stalking victims often seek support from family and friends in the first instance. For example, Purcell et al. (2002) found that 51% of stalking victims in their Australian sample approached family and friends for help, and Buhi et al. (2009) found that 90% of female stalking victims in their U.S. sample approached friends for help. Furthermore, Galeazzi et al. (2009) found that 74% of victims in their Belgium, Italian and Slovenian samples approached family and friends for help before seeking support from other agencies (e.g., the police). Thus, family and friends are often

approached for help and the advice they give may be influential in determining what stalking victims do next. With regard to law officials, Pearce and Easteal (1999) found that only 23 percent of police officers in their Australian sample had used recently introduced stalking legislation when responding to stalking offences. Reasons for non-use included a lack of evidence of intent, a lack of other evidence and a lack of awareness regarding the availability of relevant legislation. Similarly, Woodroof (2010) found that only 34 percent of police officers in his U.S. sample had a 'good' understanding of the stalking legislation in their state. Perceived reasons for the infrequent use of the relevant legislation included its complicated nature, a lack of evidence and the ability of other legislation to address stalking offences. A recent joint inspection by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC) and Her Majesty's Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate (HMCPSI) in England and Wales also reported that stalking was often misunderstood by police officers and members of the crown prosecution service, and that stalking offences are often mis- or un-recorded as a result (HMIC, 2017).

It is important that stalking is understood as a pattern-based crime rather than an incident-based crime; otherwise, individual incidents may be interpreted as routine and harmless (Farrell, Weisburd, & Wyckoff, 2000; Korkodeilou, 2014). As self-defined victims in Korkodeilou's study commented, perpetrators are often charged and imprisoned for stalking-related offences (e.g., criminal damage and assault) rather than stalking itself, suggesting that law officials are better able to respond to these incident-based crimes (providing they are serious enough) than the pattern-based crime of stalking. Furthermore, the joint inspectorate by HMIC and HMPCSI reported that police officers and members of the crown prosecution service "…continue to treat incidents as a single event, and therefore the patterns of behaviour are not properly understood" (HMIC, 2017, p. 8).

Victim perspective

The literature reviewed in this chapter suggests women are more likely than men to perceive a pattern of behaviour to be a cause for concern, and are less likely than men to endorse stalking stereotypes and myths. It also suggests people are more likely to perceive a pattern of behaviour to be a cause for concern when it is perpetrated by a stranger or acquaintance rather than an ex-partner. These findings are concerning because such perceptions differ from reality. It is possible therefore, that men and/or people stalked by ex-partners will be less likely to identify their experiences as stalking and seek support.

Research using U.S. victimisation data to examine the association between personal and situational characteristics (including perceiver gender and prior relationship), and informal and formal help seeking has produced mixed findings. Analysis of National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) data revealed that women were more likely than men to identify their experiences as stalking (Ménard & Cox, 2016), and to seek support from family and friends (Ménard & Cox, 2016; Reyns & Englebrecht, 2014). Similarly, Jasinski and Mustaine (2001) analysed National Violence Against Women Survey (NVAWS) data and found that women were more likely than men to report their experiences to the police. However, analysis of NCVS data produced inconsistent findings: Reyns and Englebrecht found no association between perceiver gender and formal help seeking, whereas Ménard and Cox found that women were more likely than men to report their experiences to the police. With regard to prior relationship, Jordon, Wilcox, and Pritchard's (2007) survey of female university students found no association between prior relationship and victim self-identification, whereas analysis of NCVS data revealed that victims were more likely to identify their experiences as stalking (Ménard & Cox, 2016) and to seek support from family and friends (Ménard & Cox, 2016; Reyns & Englebrecht, 2014) when the perpetrator was a current or ex-partner rather than a stranger or acquaintance. Similarly, analysis of NCVS data

found no association between prior relationship and formal help seeking (Ménard & Cox, 2016; Reyns & Englebrecht, 2014). However, Jasinski and Mustaine found that victims were more likely, and Jordan et al. found that victims were less likely, to report their experiences to the police when the perpetrator was a current or ex-partner rather than a stranger or acquaintance.

Support network and law official perspectives

The literature reviewed in this chapter suggests people are more likely to perceive a pattern of behaviour to be a cause for concern when it is perpetrated by a stranger or acquaintance rather than an ex-partner, and when it is perpetrated by a man towards a woman rather than vice versa. Again, these findings are concerning because such perceptions differ from reality. It is possible therefore, that family, friends and police officers will be less likely to identify other people's experiences as stalking and provide support when they are being stalked by ex-partners and/or women.

The limited research examining the association between personal and situational characteristics (including prior relationship and perpetrator-victim gender), and informal (e.g., from family and friends) and formal responses (e.g., from police officers) to stalking has again produced mixed findings. Jasinski and Mustaine (2001) analysed NVAWS data and found no association between prior relationship, perpetrator-victim gender and the likelihood of police officers taking a report and/or making an arrest. In contrast, Pathé et al. (2004) provided anecdotal evidence to suggest police officers are susceptible to misperceptions: female stalking victims described how police officers often showed little interest in what they perceived to be 'petty domestic problems', and male stalking victims described how some police officers perceived them to be 'lucky' or 'weak'. Similarly, self-defined victims in Korkodeilou's (2016) study commented that police officers did not take the situation

seriously, especially when it occurred within the context of domestic violence. Furthermore, the joint inspectorate by HMIC and HMPCSI reported that police information notices (i.e., warning notices issued in response to allegations of harassment) are often issued in the absence of any action by them to protect the stalking victim, especially when the situation occurred within the context of domestic violence. Most recently, Ngo (2018) analysed NCVS data and found no association between prior relationship, perpetrator-victim gender and the likelihood of police officers talking to or warning the perpetrator. However, police officers were more likely to recommend that the victim should take self-protective measures and obtain a restraining order when the perpetrator was a current or ex-partner rather than a stranger, acquaintance or family member. Police officers were also more likely to recommend that the victim should take self-protective measures when the perpetrator was a man rather than a woman.

How to address these differences

Although research has produced mixed findings, it is apparent that there are instances where victims, their support networks and law officials have inaccurate understandings of stalking and that these inaccuracies often reflect differences between perceptions and reality. So, how can differences between perceptions and reality be addressed? With regard to victims and their support networks, there is general agreement that education is required to increase people's awareness and understanding regarding the reality of stalking (Brewster, 2001; Cheyne & Guggisberg, 2018; Korkodeilou, 2016; Ogilvie, 2000a; Spence-Diehl & Potocky-Tripodi, 2001). In the United Kingdom, charities such as Protection Against Stalking (see http://www.protectionagainststalking.org/), Suzy Lamplugh Trust (see https://www.suzylamplugh.org/) and Network for Surviving Stalking (see https://www.scaredofsomeone.org/) endeavour to reduce the risks associated with

interpersonal aggression, including stalking, through various campaigns, education and support. For example, these charities were the founding partners of the National Stalking Helpline (launched in 2010) and the National Stalking Awareness Week (launched in 2011).

With regard to law officials, there is general agreement that training is required to increase police officers' ability to recognise and respond to stalking appropriately using the relevant legislation (Farrell et al., 2000; Farrell, Wyckoff, & Weisburd, 2002; Klein, Salomon, Huntington, Dubois, & Lang, 2009; Korkodeilou, 2016; Ogilvie, 2000a; Spence-Diehl & Potocky-Tripodi, 2001; Woodroof, 2010). Research with U.S. police officers has shown that training can improve knowledge regarding stalking so that it is more consistent with reality (Kiser-Griffith, 2008), and research with Canadian and U.S. police officers, civilian support staff and prosecutors has shown that training can improve knowledge regarding risk assessment (Storey, Gibas, Reeves, & Hart, 2011). Furthermore, Scott et al.'s (2013) findings highlighted the benefits of training, as specialist police officers were less susceptible to misperceptions than non-specialist police officers.

Conclusion

This chapter outlined the difficulties associated with defining and legislating against stalking, and reviewed literature examining the influence of various personal and situational characteristics on perceptions of stalking. It then considered how perceptions differ from reality and why these differences matter. Stalking is a particular type of interpersonal aggression that is difficult to define, and perceptions are integral to determining whether victims identify their own experiences as stalking, and whether support networks and law officials identify other people's experiences as stalking.

Research suggests women are more likely than men to perceive a pattern of behaviour to be a cause for concern, and are less likely than men to endorse stalking stereotypes and

myths. It also suggests people are more likely to perceive a pattern of behaviour to be a cause for concern when it is perpetrated by a stranger or acquaintance rather than an ex-partner, and when it is perpetrated by a man towards a woman rather than vice versa. These findings are concerning because they differ from reality: ex-partner stalkers are more likely to threaten and to use violence than stranger or acquaintance stalkers, and stalking behaviour and its impact is often similar irrespective of the gender of the perpetrator and victim. Therefore, people may be less likely to identify their experiences as stalking and seek support if they are a man, and the stalker is an ex-partner and/or woman. Similarly, support networks and law officials may be less likely to identify other people's experiences as stalking and provide support if the stalker is an ex-partner and/or a woman.

Although research has produced mixed findings, there are instances where victims, their support networks and law officials have inaccurate understandings of stalking that reflect previously identified differences between perceptions and reality. There is general agreement that education is required to increase people's awareness and understanding of stalking, and that training is required to increase police officers' ability to recognise and respond to stalking. Therefore, further research is necessary to develop a more complete understanding of differences between perceptions and reality so that suitable education and training can be developed. Furthermore, it is important that researchers collaborate with governmental, community and voluntary organisations to design and evaluate interventions that raise awareness regarding stalking and tackle the misperceptions associated with it. Ultimately, these collaborations will improve the effectiveness of interventions that aim to protect and provide appropriate support for victims of stalking.

Three key points

- Perceptions differ from reality, and research has shown that a range of personal and situational characteristics influence whether a pattern of behaviour is perceived to be a cause for concern.

- These differences matter because perceptions are integral to determining whether victims identify their own experiences as stalking, and whether support networks and law officials identify other people's experiences as stalking.

- There is general agreement that education and training are required to address these differences, to increase people's awareness and understanding of stalking, and to increase police officers' ability to recognise and respond to stalking.

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