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The Influence of Contextual Information regarding the Breakdown of Relationships and Perpetrator-Target Sex Composition on Perceptions of Relational Stalking

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Abstract

The present study examines the influence of prior relationship (with contextual information regarding the breakdown of the relationship) and perpetrator-target sex composition on perceptions of relational stalking. The study employed an experimental 7×2 independent measures design, and the sample comprised 1,260 members of the community residing in Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States. Participants received one of 14 versions of a hypothetical scenario and responded to scale items concerning the situation described. The situation was perceived to be most serious when the perpetrator was a stranger or a physically violent ex-partner and least serious when the perpetrator was an ex-partner of an unfaithful target. Scenarios involving a male perpetrator and a female victim were also perceived to be more serious than scenarios involving a female perpetrator and a male target. It is apparent therefore that the context of the relationship breakdown and the sex of the perpetrator and target significantly influence perceptions of relational stalking.

Keywords: relational stalking, perceptions, prior relationship, relationship breakdown, intimate aggression

Introduction

Stalking-like behaviour has a long history but the introduction of stalking legislation is relatively recent, with California introducing the first anti-stalking law in 1990. Although stalking legislation has subsequently been introduced in all U.S. states and other countries including Australia and the United Kingdom, there is no definitive anti-stalking law and stalking is legislated against in a variety of ways (Sheridan, Blaauw, & Davies, 2003). For example, stalking legislation in Australia and the United States generally focuses on the unwanted repetition of specified behaviour and the intention to cause apprehension, fear or harm (Ogilvie, 2000; Tran, 2003). Stalking legislation in the United Kingdom, by comparison, uses a 'reasonable person' test to determine whether a particular pattern of unwanted behaviour amounts to stalking according to ss2A and 4A of the Protection of Freedoms Act 2012.

Despite variations in stalking legislation, stalking appears to be a universal phenomenon (e.g., Sheridan, Scott, & Roberts, 2016) that results in a range of negative consequences, many of them severe (see McFarlane, Campbell, & Watson, 2002; Noffsinger, 2015). National survey estimates indicate that 4% of women and 2% of men in Australia, 5% of women and 3% of men in the United Kingdom, and 4% of women and 2% of men in the United States are victims of stalking annually (note that some variance can be explained by definitional differences; Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017; Office for National Statistics, 2017; Smith, et al., 2017). National survey estimates also suggest that only a minority of women and men report their victimisation to the police (women: 40% in Australia; 31% in the United Kingdom, 42% in the United States; men: 37% in Australia, 30% in the United Kingdom, 37% in the United States; Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017; Baum et al., 2009; Walby & Allen, 2004). Reasons given for non-reporting include the belief that the situation is

minor and that it is a family or personal matter (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006; Baum et al., 2009).

Perception research is important because misperceptions have the potential to influence both informal (e.g., family and friends) and formal (e.g., the police and jury) responses to stalking victimisation, as well as discretionary decision making about the seriousness of behaviour that may constitute stalking. The present study contributes to a body of research that examines the influence of various extra-legal characteristics (e.g., prior relationship and perpetrator-target sex composition) on perceptions of relational stalking to increase understanding and inform the development of measures to counter pertinent misperceptions.

Prior Relationship

National surveys and applied research suggest stalking is most likely to be perpetrated by someone known to the victim (e.g., Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017; Finney, 2006; Smith et al., 2017), and that ex-partner stalkers represent the most violent subtype of relational stalker (e.g., McEwan, Daffern, MacKenzie and Ogloff, 2017; Pathé & Mullen, 1997; Sheridan and Davies, 2001). However, research examining perceptions of relational stalking suggests behaviour is perceived to be more serious when perpetrated by a stranger rather than an acquaintance or ex-partner (exceptions include Dennison & Thomson, 2000, 2002, and Kinkade, Burns, & Fuentes, 2005, see Scott, Rajakaruna, Sheridan, & Sleath, 2014). For example, Hills and Taplin (1998) examined perceptions from the perspective of the 'victim' with an Australian student sample and found that behaviour is more likely to be perceived as fear invoking and as requiring intervention when perpetrated by a stranger rather than an ex-partner. Similarly, research examining perceptions from the perspective of an 'observer' with Australian, U.K. and U.S. student and community samples has found that behaviour is more likely to be perceived as stalking and as requiring intervention when perpetrated by a stranger rather than an ex-partner (e.g., Cass, 2011; Phillips, Quirk,

Rosenfeld, & O'Connor, 2004; Scott, Rajakaruna et al., 2014; Sheridan, Gillett, Davies, Blaauw, & Patel, 2003). Behaviour is also more likely to be perceived as causing the target alarm or personal distress and fear of violence, as being reported to the police, and as requiring a restraining/intervention order or conviction when perpetrated by a stranger (e.g., Cass & Mallicoat, 2015; Scott, Rajakaruna et al., 2014; Scott, Lloyd, & Gavin, 2010).

With the exception of Scott, Rajakaruna et al. (2014) and Cass and Mallicoat (2015), the previously reviewed research was limited to three types of prior relationship: stranger, acquaintance and ex-partner. Scott, Rajakaruna et al. included a fourth ex-partner 'possessive' type whereas Cass and Mallicoat included a fourth 'casual sex' type. However, research by Duff and Scott (2013) examined perceptions from the perspective of the 'victim' with a female U.K. community sample and further explored the influence of prior relationship by considering the impact of additional contextual information regarding the breakdown of the relationship. Duff and Scott differentiated seven types of prior relationship: stranger, acquaintance, ex-partner, and four additional ex-partner conditions in which the relationship ended because the ex-partner was 1) physically violent or 2) verbally abusive, or because the target 3) relocated for work or 4) was unfaithful. Although findings for the conditions involving strangers, acquaintances and ex-partners (with no contextual information) were consistent with previous research, findings for the additional ex-partner conditions varied according to the nature of the contextual information provided. The presence of physical violence and verbal abuse had a particularly strong impact, increasing the perceived seriousness of the situation to levels comparable to perceptions of stranger perpetrators.

Authors attempting to understand the influence of prior relationship on perceptions of relational stalking have drawn attention to people's belief in a 'just world' (e.g., Sheridan et al., 2003; Scott, Rajakaruna et al., 2014), whereby people are motivated to view the world as

a safe place in which people get what they deserve and deserve what they get (Lerner & Simmons, 1966). Thus, it is easier to mitigate the behaviour of the perpetrator and attribute blame to the target when they are portrayed as ex-partners rather than strangers because of their shared history (see Scott, Gavin, Sleath, & Sheridan, 2014).

Perpetrator-Target Sex Composition

Applied research suggests stalking behaviour and its impact on the victim is similar irrespective of the sex of the perpetrator and victim (e.g., Meloy & Boyd, 2003; Pathé, Mullen, & Purcell, 2000; Purcell, Pathé, & Mullen, 2001; Sheridan, North, & Scott, 2014; Strand & McEwan, 2011, 2012). However, research examining perceptions of relational stalking suggests behaviour is perceived to be more serious when perpetrated by a man rather than by a woman. For example, research with Canadian, U.K. and U.S. student and community samples has found that behaviour is more likely to be perceived as serious, as causing physical injury, and as requiring a police investigation, arrest and prosecution when the perpetrator is a man and the target is a woman than vice versa (Cass & Mallicoat, 2015; Cass & Rosay, 2012; Phillips et al., 2004; Sheridan et al., 2003; Sheridan & Scott, 2010). Female targets of male perpetrators are also perceived to experience more worry and fear, and to be less able to defend themselves than male targets of female perpetrators. Cass and Mallicoat highlighted that men are perceived to be less likely to report stalking victimisation to the police because they are more likely to be embarrassed than women. Finally, research with a Czech victim sample found that perceptions of seriousness and levels of fear, as experienced by victims, are greater when the perpetrator is a man and the victim is a woman than vice versa (Podaná & Imríšková, 2016).

Authors attempting to understand the influence of perpetrator-target sex composition on perceptions of relational stalking have drawn attention to the role of gendered norms and expectations (e.g., Cass & Rosay, 2012; Finnegan & Timmons Fritz, 2012), whereby women

are characterised as weak and vulnerable, and men are characterised as dominant and threatening (Gerber, 1991). Thus, male perpetrators are perceived to be more dangerous than female perpetrators, and male targets are perceived to be better able to defend themselves than female targets.

Present Study

Most previous research examining perceptions of relational stalking has considered the influence of prior relationship in the absence of additional contextual information (e.g., Cass, 2011; Phillips et al., 2004; Sheridan et al., 2003). Although Duff and Scott (2013) examined the influence of this additional information, the generalisability of their findings was limited by the use of a non-representative female U.K. community sample ($N = 180$). Furthermore, they were unable to examine the influence of perpetrator-target sex composition because perceptions were examined from the perspective of the 'victim'. The present study therefore replicates and extends previous research by examining the influence of prior relationship (with contextual information regarding the breakdown of the relationship) and perpetrator-target sex composition on perceptions of relational stalking from the perspective of an 'observer'. Specifically, the study examines whether these extra-legal factors influence the extent to which the perpetrator's behaviour is perceived to (1) constitute stalking, (2) necessitate police intervention, (3) necessitate a criminal conviction, (4) cause the target alarm or personal distress, and (5) cause the target fear of violence. The study also examines whether these extra-legal factors influence perceptions of the most appropriate outcome if the perpetrator is arrested and the case goes to trial.

The continued examination of additional contextual information is important because it increases understanding regarding how the *nature* of the perpetrator and target's shared history influence perceptions of relational stalking over and above the *presence* of their shared history. Furthermore, the examination of perceptions from the perspective of an

'observer' is important because research has demonstrated that victims of stalking are more likely to seek informal support (e.g., from family and friends) than formal support (e.g., from the police; Buhi, Clayton, & Surrency, 2009; Ferreira & Matos, 2013; Kaukinen, 2004; Reyns & Englebrecht, 2014), and that informal support may be influential in determining whether or not victims seek formal support (Kaukinen, 2004; Reyns & Englebrecht, 2014).

Method

Design

The study employed an experimental 7 × 2 (prior relationship × perpetrator-target sex composition) between-participants design. The seven prior relationship conditions portrayed the perpetrator and target as strangers, acquaintances or ex-partners. Additional contextual information was provided regarding the breakdown of the relationship in the five ex-partner conditions. The relationship was described as ending because: the perpetrator and target wanted different things; the perpetrator was physically violent towards the target on several occasions, the perpetrator was verbally abusive to the target on several occasions, the target relocated to another city for work, and the target was unfaithful. The two perpetrator-target sex composition conditions portrayed the perpetrator as a man and the target as a woman, or the perpetrator as a woman and the target as a man.

Participants

The sample comprised 1,260 members of the community (630 men and 630 women) residing in Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States. Australian participants resided in the State of Victoria, U.K. participants resided in England, and U.S. participants resided in the state of New York. Data were collected in 2010 and combined for the present study because 1) the pattern of findings was consistent across the three countries and 2) previous research has reported on the nature of any cross-national differences in perceptions (see Scott, Rajakaruna, Sheridan, & Gavin, 2015; Scott, Rajakaruna et al., 2014). Participants

had an average age of 39.73 years (*SD* = 11.79; ranging from 18 to 60 years of age). With regard to occupation, the largest proportion of participants held professional positions (24.0%), followed by managerial positions (13.6%) and clerical or administrative positions (11.3%; see Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013, for further details regarding the classification of occupations). In addition, noteworthy proportions of participants were responsible for home duties (9.7%), or were otherwise unemployed (7.3%). The number of participants (*n* = 90) was consistent across all experimental conditions.

Materials

Participants completed an online questionnaire that included one of 14 versions of a hypothetical scenario, five scale items concerning perceptions of relational stalking, one question concerning the most appropriate outcome, and three questions relating to participants' demographic information (sex, age and occupation). Consistent with the reviewed literature, participants were not provided with a definition of stalking. An example scenario for the 'ex-partner-physical violence, male perpetrator-female target' condition is provided below:

Sarah first met James when she started working in the same estate agents office as him. A romance developed and subsequently they dated for six months. Sarah ended the relationship because James had been physically violent towards her on several occasions. During the two months that followed, James sent Sarah more than 30 text messages asking why she was no longer interested in him. James also approached Sarah several times on her way to work and telephoned her at home. Sarah asked James not to call her, but he still called frequently. When Sarah screened her calls James left messages expressing his interest in resuming a relationship. Most recently, James approached Sarah while she was walking her

dog in the local park. James asked Sarah to change her mind on the grounds that they could still be good together.

Prior relationship was manipulated so that James and Sarah were strangers who met when Sarah renewed the lease on her apartment at the estate agents where James works; were acquaintances who had worked together at the same estate agents office for six months; or were ex-partners who had worked together at the same estate agents office and been romantically involved for six months. The following additional contextual information was provided regarding the breakdown of the relationship in the five ex-partner conditions: Sarah ended the relationship because they wanted different things (no future), James was physically violent towards her on several occasions (physical violence), James was verbally abusive towards her on several occasions (verbal abuse), Sarah was going to be moving to another city for work (relocation), or Sarah had become romantically involved with another person (unfaithful). Perpetrator-target sex composition was manipulated so that James was seeking the attention of Sarah or Sarah was seeking the attention of James.

The five stalking items were measured on 11-point Likert-type scales. Items 1, 2 and 3 ranged from 'Definitely not' to 'Definitely' and items 4 and 5 ranged from 'Not at all' to 'Extremely':

1. To what extent do you consider the perpetrator's behaviour to constitute stalking?
2. To what extent does the perpetrator's behaviour necessitate police intervention?
3. To what extent is a criminal conviction necessary for the resolution of this situation?
4. Do you think the perpetrator's behaviour will cause the target alarm or personal distress?
5. Do you think the perpetrator's behaviour will cause the target to fear that he/she will use violence against her/him?

An additional question asked participants to indicate which of three outcomes (case dropped, restraining/intervention order or criminal conviction) would be the most appropriate if the perpetrator was arrested and the case went to trial. The restraining/ intervention order and criminal conviction outcomes were collapsed for analysis because of the low expected frequencies for the criminal conviction category.

Procedure

Participant recruitment was organised by Research Now (www.researchnow.com.au), a global online sampling and data collection company, who distributed emails to samples of panel members from the State of Victoria, England and the State of New York. The samples of panel members were designed to match the demographic characteristics of the respective states/country. Interested panel members read an informed consent page before deciding whether to participate in the study. Participants who decided to take part were randomly presented with an online questionnaire containing one of 14 versions of the hypothetical scenario, which took about 15 minutes to complete. On completion of the questionnaire participants were directed to a debrief page. Data collection was completed during a two-week period, with the data collection process ceasing as soon as there were '90 completes' for each experimental condition. All participants received the equivalent of AU$1 for taking part in the study, which received approval from the university ethics committee and was conducted in accordance with the requirements of the Australian Government's National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research, the British Psychological Society, and the American Psychological Association. Participants were assured of the confidentiality of their

data, and were only identifiable to Research Now via a unique 'response identification number' for the purpose of payment.

Data Analysis

All data were entered, checked and analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics Version 24. There were several normal distribution and homogeneity of variance assumption violations for the multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA). However, the analysis was considered robust given the size of the sample (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013) and given that separate non-parametric analyses revealed a consistent pattern of univariate significance. The univariate analyses of variance (ANOVAs) used Bonferroni corrected alpha values of .01 and the associated post-hoc analyses (Tukey HSD) used non-Bonferroni corrected alpha values of .05. There were no assumption violations for the loglinear and chi-square analyses. The post-hoc analyses for the chi-square analyses were performed using adjusted p-values (Bonferroni method).

<div align="center">

Results

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A 7 × 2 MANOVA was performed to determine the influence of prior relationship and perpetrator-target sex composition on the combined stalking items. The analysis revealed significant main effects for prior relationship, $F(30, 4970) = 9.80$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .05$, and perpetrator-target sex composition, $F(5, 1242) = 32.92$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .12$. There was no significant interaction effect for prior relationship and perpetrator-target sex composition. Univariate ANOVAs were therefore performed on the individual stalking items. The F ratios and significance values are displayed in Table 1.

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--- Table 1 about here ---

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Stalking

Prior relationship and perpetrator-target sex composition were found to influence whether behaviour was considered to be stalking, $F(6, 1246) = 16.33$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .07$ and

$F(1, 1246) = 7.08$, $p = .008$, $\eta^2 = .01$ respectively. Participants were most likely to consider the behaviour to be stalking in the stranger condition ($M = 8.63$, $SD = 1.68$) and least likely to consider the behaviour to be stalking in the ex-partner 'unfaithful' condition ($M = 7.00$, $SD = 2.03$). The post-hoc analyses, means and standard deviations are displayed in Table 2. Regarding perpetrator-target sex composition, the behaviour of a male perpetrator towards a female target was more likely to be considered stalking ($M = 8.00$, $SD = 1.96$) than the behaviour of a female perpetrator towards a male target ($M = 7.71$, $SD = 2.02$).

--- Table 2 about here ---

Intervention

Prior relationship and perpetrator-target sex composition were found to influence whether police intervention was perceived to be necessary, $F(6, 1246) = 24.02$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .10$, and $F(1, 1246) = 44.25$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .03$ respectively. Police intervention was perceived to be most necessary in the ex-partner 'physical violence' condition ($M = 7.51$, $SD = 2.22$) and least necessary in the ex-partner 'unfaithful' condition ($M = 5.06$, $SD = 2.76$). The post-hoc analyses, means and standard deviations are displayed in Table 3. Regarding perpetrator-target sex composition, police intervention was perceived to be more necessary when the perpetrator was a man and the target was a woman ($M = 6.73$, $SD = 2.45$) than vice versa ($M = 5.82$, $SD = 2.68$).

--- Table 3 about here ---

Conviction

Prior relationship and perpetrator-target sex composition were found to influence whether a criminal conviction was perceived to be necessary, $F(1, 1246) = 20.12$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .09$, and $F(2, 1246) = 21.44$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .02$ respectively. A criminal conviction was perceived to be most necessary in the ex-partner 'physical violence' condition ($M = 5.98$, $SD = 2.64$) and least necessary in the ex-partner 'unfaithful' condition ($M = 3.65$, $SD = 2.90$).

The post-hoc analyses, means and standard deviations are displayed in Table 4. Regarding perpetrator-target sex composition, a criminal conviction was perceived to be more necessary when the perpetrator was a man and the target was a woman ($M = 5.01$, $SD = 2.78$) than vice versa ($M = 4.32$, $SD = 2.78$).

--- Table 4 about here ---

Alarm

Prior relationship and perpetrator-target sex composition were found to influence perceptions of whether the target would experience alarm or personal distress, $F(6, 1246) = 14.75$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .07$, and $F(1, 1246) = 58.03$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .04$ respectively. The target was perceived to experience the most alarm or personal distress in the ex-partner 'physical violence' condition ($M = 8.37$, $SD = 1.71$) and the least alarm or personal distress in the ex-partner 'unfaithful' condition ($M = 7.04$, $SD = 2.18$). The post-hoc analyses, means and standard deviations are displayed in Table 5. Regarding perpetrator-target sex composition, the target was perceived to experience more alarm or personal distress when the perpetrator was a man and the target was a woman ($M = 8.22$, $SD = 1.86$) than vice versa ($M = 7.40$, $SD = 2.07$).

--- Table 5 about here ---

Violence

Prior relationship and perpetrator-target sex composition were found to influence perceptions of whether the target would experience fear of violence, $F(6, 1246) = 35.29$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .15$, and $F(1, 1246) = 143.54$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .10$ respectively. The target was perceived to experience the most fear of violence in the ex-partner 'physical violence' condition ($M = 8.06$, $SD = 1.97$) and the least fear of violence in the ex-partner 'unfaithful' condition ($M = 5.13$, $SD = 2.51$). The post-hoc analyses, means and standard deviations are displayed in Table 6. Regarding perpetrator-target sex composition, the target was perceived

to experience more fear of violence when the perpetrator was a man and the target was a woman ($M = 7.01$, $SD = 2.38$) than vice versa ($M = 5.49$, $SD = 2.46$).

--- Table 6 about here ---

Most Appropriate Outcome

Log linear analysis was performed to determine whether prior relationship and/or perpetrator-target sex composition were associated with perceptions of the most appropriate outcome. The likelihood ratio of the model was $\chi^2(0) = 0$, $p = 1$, and two second order interactions (the prior relationship × most appropriate outcome, perpetrator-sex composition × most appropriate outcome) were significant, $\chi^2(19, N = 1260) = 50.41$, $p < .001$. Chi-square analysis for prior relationship revealed that a greater proportion of participants in the ex-partner 'physical violence' condition (93.3%) believed a restraining/intervention order or criminal conviction was most appropriate compared to participants in the ex-partner 'new job' (80.0%), ex-partner 'no future' (79.4%) and ex-partner 'unfaithful' (74.4%) conditions. Differences were also apparent between participants in the stranger condition (91.1%) compared to participants in the ex-partner 'no future' and ex-partner 'unfaithful' conditions; and between participants in the acquaintance condition (88.3%) compared to participants in the ex-partner 'unfaithful' condition, $\chi^2(6, N = 1260) = 38.83$, $p < .001$, $\varphi_c = .18$. Chi-square analysis for perpetrator-target sex composition revealed that a greater proportion of participants believed a restraining/intervention order or criminal conviction was most appropriate when the perpetrator was a man and the target was a woman (86.8%) than vice versa (82.1%), $\chi^2(1, N = 1260) = 5.44$, $p = .020$, $\varphi_c = .07$.

Discussion

The present study replicated and extended previous research by examining the influence of prior relationship (with contextual information regarding the breakdown of the relationship) and perpetrator-target sex composition on perceptions of relational stalking. The

findings relating to the stranger, acquaintance and ex-partner 'no future' conditions are consistent with the majority of previous research, which has found that behaviour is perceived to be more serious when perpetrated by a stranger rather than an acquaintance or ex-partner (e.g., Cass, 2011; Cass & Mallicoat, 2015; Phillips et al., 2004; Scott et al., 2010; Scott, Rajakaruna et al., 2014; Sheridan et al., 2003). Furthermore, the findings relating to the ex-partner conditions with contextual information regarding the breakdown of the relationship indicate that the context of the relationship breakdown has a significant impact on perceptions of relational stalking. Consistent with Duff and Scott (2013), the stranger and ex-partner 'physical violence' conditions were perceived to be comparable with regard to perceptions of whether the behaviour is stalking, the need for police intervention, and the likelihood of causing the target alarm or personal distress. Furthermore, the ex-partner 'physical violence' condition was perceived to be more serious than the stranger condition with regard to the likelihood of causing the target fear of violence. Participants in the ex-partner 'physical violence' condition were also most likely to believe the perpetrator should receive a restraining/intervention order or conviction, followed by participants in the stranger condition. In contrast to Duff and Scott, the ex-partner 'unfaithful' conditions, as opposed to the acquaintance and ex-partner 'no future' conditions, were consistently perceived to be the least serious.

The finding that stalking behaviour is perceived to be most serious when the perpetrator is a stranger or a physically violent ex-partner and least serious when the perpetrator is the ex-partner of an unfaithful target may be explained with reference to the just world hypothesis (Lerner & Simmons, 1966). Arguably, it would be more difficult to mitigate the behaviour of a stranger or an ex-partner who has a history of physical violence (i.e. the perpetrator) and easier to attribute blame to an ex-partner who has a history of being unfaithful (i.e., the target). The finding may also be explained with reference to widely

accepted stereotypes and stalking myths (McKeon, McEwan, & Luebbers, 2015; Sinclair, 2012; Spitzberg & Cadiz, 2002). For example, the finding that the behaviour of a stranger is most likely to be considered stalking reflects the common stereotype that 'stalkers tend to be strangers' (Spitzberg & Cadiz, 2002) and 'stranger stalking is the only real stalking' (McKeon et al., 2015). Furthermore, research relating to stalking myths suggests that certain factors, including external attributions for the perpetrator's behaviour and dispositional attributions for the target's behaviour, increase the likelihood of blame being attributed to the target (Sinclair, 2012). In the present study, external attributions relating to the breakdown of the relationship and dispositional attributions relating to the target's dishonesty may have been used to mitigate the perpetrator's behaviour and blame the target when the relationship ended because the target was unfaithful (Sinclair, 2012).

Surprisingly, there was an overall lack of difference in the perceived seriousness of the situation according to whether the reason for the breakdown of the relationship was neutral to the perpetrator and target or internal to the target. This overall lack of difference may have been caused by the phrasing of the scenarios, in which the target always decided to end the relationship irrespective of the reason for the breakdown. As such, it was never a truly mutual decision and blame may have been attributed to the target for misleading the perpetrator during the relationship. Further research is necessary to explore the influence of various reasons for the breakdown of the relationship on perceptions of blame given that the same behaviours appear to be perceived very differently as a result. As Duff and Scott (2013) stated, "Knowledge concerning the influence of additional contextual information is important … when developing an understanding why ex-partner stalkers are favoured in the legal system in comparison to stranger stalkers" (pp. 142-143).

With regard to perpetrator-target sex composition, the findings of the present study are consistent with those of previous research in demonstrating that behaviour perpetrated by

a man is considered more likely to need police intervention and a criminal conviction, and more likely to cause the target alarm or personal distress and fear of violence, compared to behaviour that is perpetrated by a woman (Cass & Mallicoat, 2015; Phillips et al., 2004; Sheridan et al., 2003; Sheridan & Scott, 2010). Participants were also more likely to believe the perpetrator should receive a restraining/intervention order or conviction when the perpetrator was a man and the target was a woman.

The finding that stalking behaviour is perceived to be more serious when perpetrated by a man rather than a woman may be explained with reference to stereotypes and gendered norms and expectations (Gerber, 1991; Spitzberg & Cadiz, 2002). For example, the finding that the behaviour of a male perpetrator towards a female target is more likely to be considered stalking than the behaviour of a female perpetrator towards a male target reflects the common stereotype that stalkers are typically men and victims are typically women (Spitzberg & Cadiz, 2002). Furthermore, the finding that the victim is perceived to experience more alarm or personal distress and fear of violence when the perpetrator is a man and the target is a woman than vice versa reflects gendered norms and expectations whereby women are more vulnerable than men and men are more threatening than women (Gerber, 1991).

It is important to redress the misperceptions regarding prior relationship and perpetrator-target sex composition highlighted in the present study and to challenge the inaccurate stereotypes and stalking myths highlighted by previous research (e.g., McKeon et al., 2015; Sinclair, 2012; Spitzberg & Cadiz, 2002). On balance, national surveys and applied research suggest that ex-partner stalkers represent the most common (e.g., Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017; Finney, 2006; Smith et al., 2017) and violent (e.g., McEwan et al., 2017; Pathé & Mullen, 1997; Sheridan and Davies, 2001) subtype of relational stalker; and that stalking behaviour and its impact on the victim is similar irrespective of the sex of the

perpetrator and victim (e.g., Meloy & Boyd, 2003; Pathé et a., 2000; Purcell et al., 2001; Sheridan et al., 2014; Strand & McEwan, 2011, 2012). McKeon et al. (2015) highlight the benefits of specific education to helping professionals in addition to general public awareness campaigns in order to minimise misperceptions regarding stalking and maximise the provision of appropriate support. They also acknowledge that current campaigns are often supported by organisations targeting violence against women and therefore overlook male experiences of stalking victimisation.

A recent report by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (2017) in the United Kingdom found that stalking was frequently misunderstood by both the police and the Crown Prosecution Service, with stalking offences being mis- or un-recorded. It was noted that police officers often fail to consider the history and context in which stalking occurred, interpreting individual incidents as innocuous. The report also found that many victims who had a prior relationship with the person who became their stalker are not provided adequate support. This latter finding is consistent with research examining perceptions within U.K. police samples, whereby behaviour is perceived to be more serious when perpetrated by a stranger rather than an ex-partner (Scott, Nixon, & Sheridan, 2013; Sheridan, Scott & Nixon, 2016; Weller, Hope, & Sheridan, 2013). Specialist police officers located in Family Crime Intervention or Domestic Violence Units have, however, been found to be less susceptible to this common misperception (Scott et al., 2013). Inadequate support in circumstances when the perpetrator is an ex-partner, is also consistent with the perception that stalking behaviour perpetrated by an ex-partner is less serious than that perpetrated by a stranger because it represents a 'domestic situation' that is 'normal' in the context of the breakdown of a relationship (Dennison, 2007; Scott et al., 2010). Among a range of detailed recommendations, the report stated that awareness must be increased via the provision of guidance and training regarding stalking. The findings of the present study and previous

research suggests that this training should include coverage of the now established misperceptions, stereotypes and stalking myths that support the misinterpretation of stalking and its seriousness.

With regard to limitations, participants were recruited from samples of panel members who originally enlisted with Research Now for market research purposes. Although the samples of panel members were designed to match the demographic characteristics of the respective states/country, participation was likely affected by self-selection bias and the representativeness of the final samples is unknown. Further research incorporating alternative methods of recruitment and the collection of additional demographic information (e.g., ethnicity, income and previous experience of stalking) is necessary therefore to ensure the representativeness of the samples and to examine the influence of previous experience of stalking on perceptions of relational stalking.

In addition, participants were not provided with a definition of stalking and the hypothetical scenario did not include the inent to cause apprehension, fear or harm. The absence of a definition of stalking is consistent with previous research (e.g., Cass, 2011; Phillips et al., 2004; Sheridan et al., 2003), and was considered appropriate given the inherent difficulties associated with defining stalking. Furthermore, the study examined perceptions of relational stalking from the perspective of an 'observer', and it has been suggested that members of the community (including family and friends who might be required to provide informal support) "…tend to know very little about stalking" (Geistman, Smith, Lambert, & Cluse-Tolar, 2013, p. 58). Preliminary analysis of currently unpublished data with 3,803 members of the community residing in Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States certainly supports this suggestion. Only 21.4% indicated that they were familiar with the legislation governing stalking in their respective states/country, and the overall level of understanding was extremely rudimentary. With regard to the hypothetical scenario, its

content was informed by previous research (e.g., Scott, Rajakaruna et al., 2014; Scott et al., 2015) and Pathé and Mullen's (1997) definition in which stalking is described as "…a constellation of behaviours in which one individual inflicts on another repeated unwanted intrusions and communications" (p. 12). Although the absence of the intent to cause apprehension, fear or harm may prevent the scenarios from meeting the legal definitions of stalking under some Australian and U.S. anti-stalking laws, the hypothetical scenario purposefully described a 'low-level' situation (i.e., non-threatening intent, see Scott & Sheridan, 2011) to avoid ceiling effects. As Finnegan and Timmons Fritz (2012) highlighted, participants in their study expressed high levels of concern despite the absence of descriptions of target fear or perceptions of harm. Furthermore, there is ongoing debate regarding the inclusion of fear requirements, as stalking legislation would offer greater protection to self-defined victims of stalking if fear requirements were lowered (see Owens, 2016; Tjaden, Thoennes, & Allison, 2000). Ultimately, further research is necessary to determine whether the apparent misperceptions identified in the present study and the broader literature remain when participants are provided with a definition of stalking (or presented with summaries of the respective stalking legislations), and a hypothetical scenario that includes the intention to cause apprehension, fear or harm.

The present study examined the influence of prior relationship (with contextual information regarding the breakdown of the relationship) and perpetrator-sex composition on perceptions of relational stalking. The situation was perceived to be most serious when the perpetrator was a stranger or a physically violent ex-partner and least serious when the perpetrator was the ex-partner of an unfaithful target. Scenarios involving a female target of a male perpetrator were perceived to be more serious than scenarios involving a male target of a female perpetrator. The findings provide further insight into the influence of contextual information in relation to the consistent finding that behaviour is perceived to be more serious

when perpetrated by a stranger rather than an acquaintance or ex-partner. The nature of the perpetrator and target's shared history influenced perceptions of relational stalking over and above the presence of their shared history, highlighting the importance of whether the context of the relationship breakdown is external to the target (e.g., the perpetrator being physically violent towards the target), neutral to the perpetrator and target (e.g., the target relocating to another city for work), or internal to the target (e.g., the target being unfaithful).

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Table 1

Multivariate and univariate analyses of variance F ratios for the five stalking items by prior relationship and perpetrator-target sex composition

	MANOVA	ANOVA				
		Stalking	Intervention	Conviction	Alarm	Violence
Variable	F	F	F	F	F	F
Relationship	9.80***	16.33***	24.02***	20.12***	14.75***	35.29***
Sex	33.92***	7.08**	44.25***	21.44***	58.03***	143.54***
R × S	1.22	1.93	.61	1.68	1.33	.67

Note. F ratios are Wilks' Lambda approximations of Fs. MANOVA = multivariate analysis of variance; ANOVA = univariate analysis of variance. Bonferroni corrected alpha value = .01. **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$.

Table 2

Post-hoc analyses, means and standard deviations for the stalking item as a function of prior relationship

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.
1. Stranger	-						
2. Acquaintance	*p* = .650	-					
3. Ex-partner 'No future'	***p* < .001**	***p* = .006**	-				
4. Ex-partner 'Physical violence'	*p* = .464	*p* = 1.000	***p* = .016**	-			
5. Ex-partner 'Verbal abuse'	***p* = .002**	*p* = .253	*p* = .843	*p* = .410	-		
6. Ex-partner 'Relocation'	***p* < .001**	***p* < .001**	*p* = .956	***p* < .001**	*p* = .240	-	
7. Ex-partner 'Unfaithful'	***p* < .001**	***p* < .001**	*p* = .070	***p* < .001**	***p* = .001**	*p* = .519	-
M	8.63	8.30	7.57	8.24	7.84	7.37	7.00
SD	1.68	1.74	2.07	1.86	1.86	2.19	2.03

Note. Bold text indicates significant differences between prior relationship conditions (*p* < .05).

Table 3

Post-hoc analyses, means and standard deviations for the intervention item as a function of prior relationship

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.
1. Stranger	-						
2. Acquaintance	$p = .283$	-					
3. Ex-partner 'No future'	***p < .001***	***p = .005***	-				
4. Ex-partner 'Physical violence'	$p = .864$	***p = .009***	***p < .001***	-			
5. Ex-partner 'Verbal abuse'	***p = .018***	$p = .940$	$p = .136$	***p < .001***	-		
6. Ex-partner 'Relocation'	***p < .001***	***p = .001***	$p = 1.000$	***p < .001***	$p = .052$	-	
7. Ex-partner 'Unfaithful'	***p < .001***	***p < .001***	$p = .209$	***p < .001***	***p < .001***	$p = .409$	-
M	7.18	6.61	5.67	7.51	6.33	5.58	5.06
SD	2.15	2.31	2.71	2.22	2.41	2.71	2.76

Note. Bold text indicates significant differences between prior relationship conditions ($p < .05$).

Table 4

Post-hoc analyses, means and standard deviations for the conviction item as a function of prior relationship

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.
1. Stranger	-						
2. Acquaintance	$p = .362$	-					
3. Ex-partner 'No future'	**$p < .001$**	**$p = .006$**	-				
4. Ex-partner 'Physical violence'	$p = .556$	**$p = .002$**	**$p < .001$**	-			
5. Ex-partner 'Verbal abuse'	$p = .283$	$p = 1.000$	**$p = .010$**	**$p = .001$**	-		
6. Ex-partner 'Relocation'	**$p < .001$**	**$p = .006$**	$p = 1.000$	**$p < .001$**	**$p = .010$**	-	
7. Ex-partner 'Unfaithful'	**$p < .001$**	**$p < .001$**	$p = .976$	**$p < .001$**	**$p < .001$**	$p = .976$	-
M	5.48	4.90	3.89	5.98	4.86	3.89	3.65
SD	2.41	2.74	2.74	2.64	2.55	2.75	2.90

Note. Bold text indicates significant differences between prior relationship conditions ($p < .05$).

Table 5

Post-hoc analyses, means and standard deviations for the alarm item as a function of prior relationship

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.
1. Stranger	-						
2. Acquaintance	$p = 1.000$	-					
3. Ex-partner 'No future'	**$p = .027$**	$p = .077$	-				
4. Ex-partner 'Physical violence'	$p = 1.000$	$p = .997$	**$p = .013$**	-			
5. Ex-partner 'Verbal abuse'	$p = .135$	$p = .289$	$p = .997$	$p = .077$	-		
6. Ex-partner 'Relocation'	**$p < .001$**	**$p < .001$**	$p = .144$	**$p < .001$**	**$p = .030$**	-	
7. Ex-partner 'Unfaithful'	**$p < .001$**	**$p < .001$**	**$p = .019$**	**$p < .001$**	**$p = .002$**	$p = .991$	-
M	8.33	8.26	7.69	8.37	7.81	7.18	7.04
SD	1.64	1.76	1.94	1.71	1.87	2.43	2.18

Note. Bold text indicates significant differences between prior relationship conditions ($p < .05$).

Table 6

Post-hoc analyses, means and standard deviations for the violence item as a function of prior relationship

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.
1. Stranger	-						
2. Acquaintance	*p* = .575	-					
3. Ex-partner 'No future'	***p* < .001**	*p* = .165	-				
4. Ex-partner 'Physical violence'	***p* < .001**	***p* < .001**	***p* < .001**	-			
5. Ex-partner 'Verbal abuse'	*p* = .994	*p* = .934	***p* = .007**	***p* < .001**	-		
6. Ex-partner 'Relocation'	***p* < .001**	***p* = .002**	*p* = .771	***p* < .001**	***p* < .001**	-	
7. Ex-partner 'Unfaithful'	***p* < .001**	***p* < .001**	*p* = .212	***p* < .001**	***p* < .001**	*p* = .970	-
M	6.70	6.28	5.69	8.06	6.54	5.35	5.13
SD	2.04	2.34	2.49	1.97	2.43	2.72	2.51

Note. Bold text indicates significant differences between prior relationship conditions ($p < .05$).