

Police officer perceptions of harassment in England and Scotland

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Abstract

Purpose: Research has demonstrated that certain relational biases exist within perceptions of stalking. One such bias concerns the perception that ex-partner stalkers are less dangerous than those who target strangers or acquaintances despite applied research suggesting the opposite.

Method: 135 police officers in England (where stalking has been outlawed since 1997) and 127 police officers in Scotland (where stalking has been outlawed since 2010) responded to vignettes describing a stalking scenario in which the perpetrator and victim were portrayed as strangers, acquaintances or ex-partners.

Results: Although typical relational biases existed in both samples, Scottish police officers were less susceptible to these biases than English police officers. Victim responsibility mediated the relation between prior relationship and perceptions of stalking for the English, but not the Scottish, police officers.

Conclusions: Future work should examine whether these biases may be found in other areas of the criminal justice system, and how far they are influenced by policy, practice and training.

Introduction

As is now the case in many Western countries, stalking is recognised in the United Kingdom as a significant social problem. In 1997 the Protection from Harassment Act (PfHA) was introduced to help deal with stalkers in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Although ‘stalking’ was not specifically named in this legislation, the more recent Protection of Freedoms Act 2012 (Commencement No. 2) Order 2012 includes the creation of two new offences, namely ‘stalking’ and ‘stalking involving fear of violence’. Scotland’s first anti-stalking law was introduced in 2010 and named stalking as an offence from the outset, which many campaigners argued was necessary across the whole of the United Kingdom (e.g., National Association of Probation Officers, 2012). The present study investigates whether differences exist between English and Scottish police officers’ perceptions of whether behaviour: constitutes stalking; necessitates police intervention; would cause the victim alarm, personal distress or to fear the use of violence; and can be attributed to encouragement on the part of the victim. It also investigates whether the nature of the prior relationship influences these perceptions, and whether this relationship is mediated by judgments of victim responsibility.

The word ‘stalking’ was not included in the original PfHA 1997 largely because of definitional difficulties. Instead, the following was included: “a person must not pursue a course of conduct which amounts to harassment of another, and which he knows or ought to know amounts to harassment of the other” (section 1, Protection from Harassment Act, 1997). ‘Harassment’ in turn was not defined. By its very nature, stalking is diffuse and often comprises behaviours that are ostensibly routine and harmless. Instead, these behaviours become sinister when they are repeated and start to cause the victim alarm (see Mullen, Pathé, & Purcell, 2009; Sheridan, Blaauw, & Davies, 2003). Some early works on stalking sought to distinguish between socially acceptable courting behaviours and behaviours of a

type and volume that are pathological. The consensus reached by this work was that specific definitions of stalking are problematic because laypersons generally recognise stalking when they see it but are unable to define it exhaustively (Sheridan, Davies, & Boon, 2001). This work also suggested a dichotomy between innocuous, self-limited harassment experiences and protracted stalking, with a two-week period being the critical threshold where the former becomes the latter (Purcell, Pathé, & Mullen, 2004).

One particular factor that differentiates behaviours that are defined as ‘innocuous’ from those that are defined as ‘stalking’ is the degree of prior intimacy between the perpetrator and the victim. For example, perception research has demonstrated that the greater the degree of prior intimacy, the less likely people are to label a harassing situation stalking (Cass, 2011; Phillips, Quirk, Rosenfeld, & O’Connor, 2004; Scott, Lloyd, & Gavin, 2010; Scott & Sheridan, 2011; Sheridan, Gillett, Davies, Blaauw, & Patel, 2003). This finding contrasts with applied research which suggests that ex-partner stalkers represent the most persistent and dangerous relational subtype (e.g., Farnham, James, & Cantrell, 2000; Meloy & Gothard, 1995; Mullen, MacKenzie, Ogloff, Pathé, McEwan, & Purcell, 2006; Purcell et al., 2004; Rosenfeld, 2004), and are more resistant to legal interventions than other relational subtypes (Mohandie, Meloy, McGowan, & Williams, 2006). However, recent work with an international sample of 1,565 stalking victims found that extreme violence was predicted better by an abusive prior relationship rather than a prior relationship per se (Sheridan & Roberts, 2011).

The bias towards judging harassing situations as being less serious and the victims as being more responsible when perpetrators are ex-partners rather than strangers or acquaintances has been demonstrated to some extent among student and community samples. For example, perception research in the United Kingdom and Australia has found that behaviour is *more* likely to be perceived to necessitate police intervention and cause the

victim alarm, fear and mental or physical harm when the perpetrator and victim are portrayed as strangers rather than ex-partners (Scott et al., 2010; Scott & Sheridan, 2011; Sheridan, Gillett et al., 2003). It has also found that the victim is *less* likely to be perceived to be responsible for encouraging the behaviour when the perpetrator and victim are portrayed as strangers rather than ex-partners. These relational biases are parallel to those identified in the rape myth literature and by domestic violence research. That is, men and women raped by acquaintances or partners/ex-partners are apportioned a greater degree of blame than those raped by strangers (e.g., Stewart, Dobbin, & Gatowski, 1996). In domestic violence cases, victims who have shared a longer relationship with their abuser receive a greater degree of blame than those who have shared a shorter relationship (e.g., Yamawaki, Ochoa-Shipp, Pulsipher, Harlos, & Swindler, 2012). A summary by Krahe and Berger (2009) suggests that schematic information processing in rape cases undermines the victim and exonerates the perpetrator, but this does not extend to non-interpersonal crimes such as robbery (Bieneck & Krahe, 2011).

Such biased judgements have been explained by the Just World Hypothesis (JWH) and by basic norm violations. According to the JWH, people are perceived to deserve their fate and unjust situations are reinterpreted to ensure a belief in a controllable and 'just world' (Lerner & Simmons, 1966). In the context of stalking, this means that individuals are motivated to believe the victim has encouraged the perpetrator's behaviour in order to provoke their stalking behaviour in some way. By holding this belief, individuals are able to feel safe on the understanding that they will not be stalked unless they encourage the behaviour of a potential perpetrator. This bias, therefore, provides individuals with a sense of control over their risk of victimisation. With regard to basic norm violations, childhood lessons dictate that strangers should be feared and that unknown perpetrators pose the greatest threat (Scott, 2003). This fear is pervasive throughout the lifespan.

Scott et al. (2010) pointed out that biased judgements “could have a significant impact at various stages of the criminal justice system, affecting police and discretionary decision making about the seriousness of stalking cases” (p. 1192). However, little research has examined the influence of prior relationship on perceptions of criminal justice system responses or on perceptions of stalking with police samples. Scott et al. found that a greater proportion of student participants believed some form of intervention was necessary when the perpetrator and victim were portrayed as strangers rather than acquaintances or ex-partners. Furthermore, Cass and Rosay (2012) found that student participants believed stranger stalkers were more likely to be arrested than ex-partner stalkers, although they did not believe prior relationship would influence how cases were treated in the courtroom. With regard to the influence of prior relationship on perceptions of stalking with police samples, Weller, Hope, and Sheridan (2013) found that non-specialist English police officers (and members of the community) were more likely to believe behaviour constituted stalking and would continue for a longer period of time when the perpetrator and victim were portrayed as strangers rather than acquaintances or ex-partners. Consistent with this work, Australian police officers have been found to be less likely to employ anti-stalking legislation in cases where the victim was targeted by an ex-partner (Pearce & Eastal, 1999).

It is important for further research to examine the influence of prior relationship on perceptions of stalking with police samples given the recent move towards instructing police officers in the United Kingdom to make autonomous decisions about often ambiguous stalking incidents. The complex and chronic nature of stalking behaviour was highlighted by a recent study investigating the risk assessment strategies of specialist Canadian police officers. Storey and Hart (2011) found that a wide range of tactics were employed by the police, the victims and others involved (median 19, range 1 to 52) in an attempt to stop the stalking behaviour. Furthermore, there was no relationship between the number of tactics

employed and the perceived risk to victims. Although Weller et al. (2013) extended the literature by providing an investigation of the influence of prior relationship on perceptions of stalking with a police sample, they acknowledged the need for further research in different regional areas, stating that training procedures likely vary across police forces and that these and other variations are likely to influence how stalking is perceived and managed.

The present study investigates whether differences exist between English and Scottish police officers' perceptions of stalking, and further extends the literature by investigating police officers' perceptions in two different regional areas governed by different legal systems and varying methods of dealing with stalkers. Specifically, the study examines the influence of prior relationship (stranger, acquaintance and ex-partner) and sample (English and Scottish) on police officers' perceptions of whether the perpetrator's behaviour is considered to:

1. constitute harassment,
2. necessitate police intervention,
3. cause the victim alarm or personal distress, and
4. cause the victim fear the use of violence.

The study also examines the influence of prior relationship and sample on police officers' perceptions of whether the victim is considered to:

5. be responsible for encouraging the perpetrator's behaviour.

Finally, the study examines the extent to which victim responsibility mediates the possible influence of prior relationship on police officers' perceptions of whether the perpetrator's behaviour is considered to constitute harassment, necessitate police intervention, cause the victim alarm or personal distress, and cause the victim fear the use of violence.

Method

Participants

Participants were 135 English police officers (82 men and 53 women) and 127 Scottish police officers (41 men and 29 women; 57 did not indicate their sex). The average age of English police officers was 34.42 years ($SD = 8.42$) while the average age of Scottish police officers was 37.42 years ($SD = 8.38$). English police officers had been with the service for an average of 11.67 years ($SD = 7.59$) and 85 percent had experience of investigating stalking/harassment cases. Scottish police officers had been with the service for an average of 13.30 years ($SD = 7.84$) and 58 percent had experience of investigating stalking/harassment cases. It is important to note that 84 Scottish police officers did not indicate their age, length of service or experience of investigating stalking/harassment cases because they were concerned about the anonymity of their responses (several citing negative consequences following previous research participation). There were 45 participants in all experimental conditions except for the Scottish police ex-partner condition which had 37 participants. Within both police service groups, a senior civilian administrator determined how many officers of each rank and sex were to be approached in order that the invited participants reflected the wider service in terms of rank and sex. The research was conducted in accordance with the ethical requirements of the British Psychological Society.

Materials

The study utilized a questionnaire comprising a vignette; five scale items relating to perceptions of stalking; and questions concerning demographic information (sex, age, rank, length of service and experience of investigating stalking/harassment cases). There were three versions of the vignette, representing the different prior relationships: stranger, acquaintance and ex-partner. All vignettes described the same situation; the stranger vignette

is provided below:

Linda first met John when she visited the estate agents where he works to renew the lease on her apartment. As Linda was leaving the office John asked if she would like to join him for lunch. Linda thanked him for the offer, but declined. During the three months that followed, John sent Linda between 5 and 10 text messages a day, many of these messages asking why she was not interested in him. John also approached Linda on her way to work and telephoned her at home. Linda asked John to stop calling her, but he continued to call her regularly. In the end Linda disconnected the phone and John left several messages blaming her for what was happening. Most recently, John arrived at Linda's home soon after she returned from work. Linda pretended that she was out.

In the acquaintance and ex-partner conditions Linda and John first met when Linda started working at the same estate agents office as him. In the acquaintance condition Linda and John had worked together for three months when he invited her to dinner. Linda thanked him for the offer, but politely declined. In the ex-partner condition Linda and John had been in a relationship for three months when she ended it on the grounds that they wanted different things from the relationship. After this information regarding the nature of the prior relationship had been provided, the vignettes described identical stalking scenarios following Linda declining John's invitation (stranger and acquaintance condition) or Linda ending the relationship with John (ex-partner condition).

The following five scale items were all measured on 11-point Likert scales:

1. To what extent does John's behaviour constitute harassment?* ('Definitely not harassment' to 'Definitely harassment')
2. To what extent does John's behaviour necessitate police intervention? ('Not at all necessary' to 'Extremely necessary')

3. Do you think John's behaviour will cause Linda alarm or personal distress? ('Definitely not' to 'Definitely')
4. Do you think John's behaviour will cause Linda to fear that he will use violence against her? ('Definitely not' to 'Definitely')
5. To what extent is Linda responsible for encouraging John's behaviour? ('Not at all responsible' to 'Totally responsible')

* The term 'harassment' was employed as opposed to 'stalking' as this is the term employed by English police officers following the dictates of the PfHA 1997. It is worth noting that a recent study found that the framing of repetitive behaviour as either 'harassment' or 'stalking' did not influence perceptions of stalking using four of the five scale items used in the current work (Scott, Rajakaruna, & Sheridan, 2013). The scale items have been employed in previous works (e.g., Scott et al., 2010; Scott et al., 2013; Scott & Sheridan, 2011; Scott & Tse, 2011); while the vignettes were developed following a review of vignettes employed in recent works (e.g., Scott & Gavin, 2011; Scott et al., 2010; Scott et al., 2013; Scott & Sheridan, 2011).

Procedure

English and Scottish police officers were invited to participate in a study on perceptions of behaviour. The English police sample was recruited with the assistance of senior officers in all divisions of a single police force in the UK. The senior officers circulated the questionnaires, collected the completed questionnaires and forwarded them to the researchers. The Scottish police sample was recruited by the first author. All participants were told that participation was voluntary and involved the reading of a one-paragraph vignette followed by the answering of scale items regarding their perceptions of the situation described. Participants received a copy of the questionnaire and were told that it would take

about 10 minutes to complete. Debrief statements were provided upon completion.

Results

All statistical analyses were performed using IBM SPSS Statistics 19. A 3 (prior relationship: stranger, acquaintance, ex-partner) \times 2 (sample membership: English police officer, Scottish police officer) multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was performed on the five scale items and significant main effects were obtained for prior relationship, $F(10, 504) = 11.57, p < .001, \eta^2 = .19$, and sample, $F(5, 252) = 17.99, p < .001, \eta^2 = .26$. There was also a significant interaction effect for prior relationship and sample, $F(10, 504) = 7.74, p < .001, \eta^2 = .13$. Further univariate analyses of variance (ANOVAs) utilising Bonferroni corrected alpha values of .01 were performed on the individual scale items. The F ratios and significance are displayed in Table 1.

--- Table 1 about here ---

Analyses of the individual scale items revealed five significant main effects for prior relationship: harassment, $F(2, 256) = 33.95, p < .001, \eta^2 = .21$; intervention, $F(2, 256) = 19.99, p < .001, \eta^2 = .14$; alarm, $F(2, 256) = 10.00, p < .001, \eta^2 = .07$; violence, $F(2, 256) = 7.72, p = .001, \eta^2 = .06$; and responsibility, $F(2, 256) = 18.17, p < .001, \eta^2 = .12$. It also revealed four significant main effects for sample: intervention, $F(1, 256) = 82.89, p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 1.06$; alarm, $F(1, 256) = 21.93, p < .001$, Cohen's $d = .55$; violence, $F(1, 256) = 8.19, p = .005$, Cohen's $d = .35$; and responsibility, $F(1, 256) = 7.56, p = .006$, Cohen's $d = .30$. There was no significant main effect for sample on the harassment scale item, $F(1, 256) = 1.44, p = .240$, Cohen's $d = .13$.

There was no significant interaction effect for prior relationship and sample for the intervention scale item and post-hoc tests (Tukey HSD) showed significant differences between all three prior relationship conditions (all $p < .05$). Across both samples, police

intervention was considered most necessary in the stranger condition ($M = 7.27$) followed by the ex-partner ($M = 6.71$) and acquaintance ($M = 5.93$) conditions. With regard to sample, English police officers were more likely to believe intervention was necessary ($M = 7.41$) than Scottish police officers ($M = 5.80$). Analyses of the remaining scale items revealed four significant interaction effects for prior relationship and sample: harassment, $F(2, 256) = 5.16$, $p = .006$, $\eta^2 = .04$; alarm, $F(2, 256) = 9.39$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .07$; violence, $F(2, 256) = 11.08$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .08$; and responsibility, $F(2, 256) = 13.78$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .10$. For this reason, separate ANOVAs were performed for the English and Scottish police samples. The descriptive statistics and estimates of Cohen's d for the overall sample and the separate English and Scottish police samples are provided in Table 2.

--- Table 2 about here ---

The separate ANOVAs revealed that prior relationship influenced English and Scottish police officers' perceptions of the harassment scale item, $F(2, 132) = 20.15$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .23$ and $F(2, 124) = 18.16$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .23$ respectively, and the violence scale item, $F(2, 132) = 17.76$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .21$ and $F(2, 124) = 3.08$, $p = .050$, $\eta^2 = .05$ respectively. However, it did so in different ways. Post-hoc tests (Tukey HSD) showed that perceptions of harassment were significantly higher in the stranger condition ($M = 9.58$) compared to the acquaintance ($M = 8.27$) and ex-partner ($M = 8.31$) conditions in the English police sample (both $p < .001$), but were significantly higher in the stranger ($M = 9.20$) and acquaintance ($M = 8.67$) conditions compared to the ex-partner condition ($M = 7.62$) in the Scottish police sample (both $p < .001$). Furthermore, perceptions of fear of the use of violence were significantly higher in the stranger condition ($M = 8.38$) compared to the acquaintance ($M = 7.11$) and ex-partner ($M = 6.47$) conditions in the English police sample (both $p < .001$), but in contrast, were significantly lower in the acquaintance condition ($M = 6.24$) compared to the ex-partner condition ($M = 7.19$) in the Scottish police sample ($p < .05$).

With regard to the alarm and responsibility scale items, prior relationship influenced English police officers' perceptions, $F(2, 132) = 18.11, p < .001, \eta^2 = .22$ and $F(2, 132) = 22.47, p < .001, \eta^2 = .25$ respectively, but did not influence Scottish police officer's perceptions, $F(2, 124) = 1.81, p = .168, \eta^2 = .03$, and $F(2, 124) = 2.68, p = .078, \eta^2 = .04$ respectively. Post-hoc tests (Tukey HSD) showed that English police officers were *more* likely to believe the perpetrator's behaviour would cause the victim alarm or personal distress when the perpetrator and victim were portrayed as strangers ($M = 9.38$) rather than either acquaintances ($M = 8.13$) or ex-partners ($M = 7.78$, both $p < .001$). Furthermore, significant differences were found between all three prior relationship conditions for the responsibility scale item (all $p < .05$): English police officers were *least* likely to believe the victim was responsible for the situation in the stranger condition ($M = .38$) followed by the acquaintance ($M = 1.13$) and ex-partner ($M = 2.13$) conditions.

Length of Service and Previous Experience

An additional MANOVA was performed to examine whether length of service and previous experience investigating stalking/harassment cases influenced perceptions. The 3 (prior relationship: stranger, acquaintance, ex-partner) \times 2 (sample membership: English police officer, Scottish police officer) \times 2 (previous experience: yes, no) MANOVA with length of service entered as a covariate revealed no significant main effects for previous experience or length of service, $F(1, 161) = 2.04, p = .075, \eta^2 = .06$ and $F(1, 161) = 1.29, p = .270, \eta^2 = .04$ respectively. The interactions between prior relationship and previous experience and between sample membership and previous experience were also non-significant, $F(10, 322) = 1.05, p = .403, \eta^2 = .03$ and $F(5, 161) = .32, p = .902, \eta^2 = .01$ respectively. In the English police sample, all of the five scale items intercorrelated at the .05 level of significance (ranging from -.43 for the intervention and responsibility scale items to

.71 for the harassment and alarm scale items). None were correlated with length of service but three were significantly (weakly) correlated with police officer age: whether the behaviour constituted harassment, $r = .15$, $n = 135$, $p < .001$; would cause the victim alarm or personal distress, $r = .17$, $n = 135$, $p = .03$; and would cause the victim to fear the use of violence, $r = -.16$, $n = 135$, $p = .03$. In the Scottish police sample, there were far fewer intercorrelations between the five scale items (5 of a possible 10 were significant, ranging from .24 for the harassment and intervention scale items to .46 for the intervention and alarm scale items). In addition, none correlated with either length of service or police officer age.

Victim Responsibility

Finally, regression analyses were performed to examine the extent to which victim responsibility mediates the influence of prior relationship on police officers' perceptions of the harassment, intervention, alarm and violence scale items. In accordance with Baron and Kenny (1986), a series of analyses were performed for each of the scale items (outcome variables) to establish whether prior relationship (the predictor) significantly related to victim responsibility (the mediator), whether the predictor significantly related to the outcome variables, and whether the mediator significantly related to the outcome variables. Sobel tests were also performed to determine whether the indirect effects of the predictor on the outcome variables via the mediator were significant (Sobel, 1982). Two dummy variables were constructed for the predictor (stranger yes/no and acquaintance yes/no) and these dummy variables were entered into the regression analyses.

In the English police sample, the predictor was significantly related to the mediator, the predictor was significantly related to each of the outcome variables and the mediator was significantly related to each of the outcome variables. However, in the Scottish police sample, the predictor was not significantly related to the mediator, the predictor was only

related to three of the four outcome variables and the mediator was not related to any of the outcome variables. The regression coefficients and significance for the English police sample are displayed in Table 3.

--- Table 3 about here ---

The four regressions with prior relationship entered into the analyses produced significant models: harassment, $R^2 = .23$, $F(2, 132) = 20.15$, $p < .001$; intervention, $R^2 = .13$, $F(2, 132) = 9.82$, $p < .001$; alarm, $R^2 = .22$, $F(2, 132) = 18.11$, $p < .001$; and violence, $R^2 = .21$, $F(2, 132) = 17.76$, $p < .001$. Furthermore, the four regressions with prior relationship and victim responsibility entered into the analyses produced significant models: harassment, $R^2 = .50$, $F(3, 131) = 43.17$, $p < .001$; intervention, $R^2 = .26$, $F(3, 131) = 15.57$, $p < .001$; alarm, $R^2 = .49$, $F(3, 131) = 42.67$, $p < .001$; and violence, $R^2 = .33$, $F(3, 131) = 21.83$, $p < .001$. The regressions revealed that prior relationship and victim responsibility influenced perceptions of stalking, and Sobel tests demonstrated that victim responsibility partially mediated the associations between prior relationship and 1) harassment (*Sobel* $z = 3.92$, $p < .001$), 2) intervention (*Sobel* $z = 3.28$, $p = .001$), 3) alarm (*Sobel* $z = 3.94$, $p < .001$), and 4) violence (*Sobel* $z = 3.29$, $p = .001$). Regressions with prior relationship and victim responsibility entered into the analyses were not performed for the Scottish police sample because the predictor was not significantly related to the mediator and the mediator was not related to any of the outcome variables.

Discussion

The present study investigated whether differences exist between English and Scottish police officers' perceptions of stalking, as well as whether these perceptions are influenced by the nature of the prior relationship between the perpetrator and the victim. Clear relational biases towards judging harassing situations as being less serious and the victims as being

more responsible when perpetrators are ex-partners rather than strangers or acquaintances have been demonstrated by previous works that have mainly examined student and community responses. As such, this study extended the literature by investigating police officers' perceptions in two regional areas governed by different legal systems and employing varying methods of dealing with stalkers.

There were four main findings from this study. First, both English and Scottish police officers were most likely to label behaviour harassment and believe it necessitated police intervention when the perpetrator was portrayed as a stranger. These findings are similar to those of earlier works, and demonstrate a robust relational bias regarding the perceived danger of stranger stalkers (Cass, 2011; Phillips et al., 2004; Scott et al., 2010; Scott & Sheridan, 2011; Sheridan, Gillett et al., 2003). Second, Scottish police officers only demonstrated typical relational biases for two of the scale items, whereas English police officers demonstrated typical relational biases for all five scale items. Similar to earlier works, English police officers perceived stranger stalkers to cause the victim more alarm, personal distress and fear of the use of violence than either acquaintance or ex-partner stalkers (e.g., Scott et al., 2010; Scott & Sheridan, 2011; Sheridan et al., 2003). Furthermore, English police officers were least likely to assign responsibility to the victim of a stranger stalker and most likely to assign responsibility to the victim of an ex-partner stalker. These findings for English police officers are consistent with those of Weller et al. (2013), although the relational bias was not as strong in their jointly analysed police and community sample.

Third, although Scottish police officers were less susceptible to typical relational biases than English police officers, they were less likely to label behaviour harassment, or believe it necessitated police intervention, and would cause the victim alarm, personal distress or to fear the use of violence. Scottish police officers also assigned more responsibility to the victim than English police officers. Consequently, it appears that

Scottish police officers could be less aware of the seriousness of stalking cases than English police officers. Fourth, victim responsibility partially mediated the association between prior relationship and all the other scale items when both participant samples were jointly analysed. Victim blaming is known to be a key predictor of negative judgements in the rape and domestic violence literature (e.g., Krahe & Berger, 2009) and the present finding supports this theme within a stalking context. However, when the English and Scottish police samples were analysed separately, the mediation analysis was significant for the English police officers, but not significant for the Scottish police officers.

With regard to explanations for such biased judgements, findings from the English police sample are consistent with both the JWH and basic norm violations. Not only were English police officers *most* likely to label behaviour harassment, believe it necessitated police intervention and believe it would cause the victim alarm, personal distress and fear of the use of violence when the perpetrator was portrayed as a stranger; they were also *least* likely to assign responsibility to the victim when the perpetrator was portrayed as a stranger. However, findings from the Scottish police sample were not consistent with either explanation. Although Scottish police officers were more likely to label behaviour harassment and believe it necessitated police intervention when the perpetrator was portrayed as a stranger, prior relationship did not influence perceptions of alarm, personal distress or fear of the use of violence. Neither did it influence attributions regarding encouragement on the part of the victim. It is apparent therefore, that the Scottish police officers exhibited a less typical relational bias than did the English police officers. It is unlikely to be the case that relational biases are simply learned. Rather, as noted above, they are responses to basic norm violations and examples of thinking consistent with the JWH hypothesis. It is of interest that when the Protection from Harassment Act was first introduced, discussions relating to the relationship between stalking and domestic violence were seen in the legal and policing

literatures (see e.g., Hadley, 1996; Lawson-Cruttenden, 1996). It was assumed by many that stalking was distinct from domestic violence, but more recent thinking is accepting of an overlap between the two (see e.g., Association of Chief Police Officers, 2009). The English police officers viewed ex-partner stalking as akin to stalking by acquaintances, whilst the Scottish police officers viewed ex-partner stalking as distinct from stalking by acquaintances. As such, the viewpoint of the Scottish police officers was consistent with pre-legislation thinking. This finding suggests that relational biases in stalking are only triggered when the observer has a good understanding of what stalking actually encompasses. Another finding from the present work supports this argument. For the Scottish police officers, the scale items were less intercorrelated than they were for the English police officers. This finding might suggest that Scottish police officers had more individualised viewpoints than English police officers, and no real shared understanding of stalking.

This interpretation is, of course, speculative and other, perhaps more straightforward, explanations are available. At least some of the differences identified between the two samples may derive from how participants approached their participation in the study. The English police sample was approached with the help of senior officers and the questionnaire was completed out of sight of the researchers. The Scottish police officers had direct contact with the principal researcher and this may have resulted in the research being taken more seriously by this sample. Thus, the Scottish police officers may have spent more time completing the questionnaire and engaged in higher levels of information processing than the English police officers. That the latter may have processed the information more heuristically could be reflected in the higher correlations between the variables in the English police sample as well as the stronger relational bias.

The present study was limited to the investigation of whether differences exist between the perceptions of police officers from one English and one Scottish police force. It

is also acknowledged that additional factors may have a greater impact on perceptions of stalking than region alone. For example, the policing of domestic violence may have a significant impact on police officers' judgements of stalking, and future research could seek to address the following questions. Do police forces that deal with stalking within domestic violence units take stalking more or less seriously than police forces that do not refer stalking to domestic violence units? Does investigating stalking within domestic violence units assist in the reduction of typical relational biases and the recognition of ex-partner stalkers as the most persistent and dangerous relational subtype? It is also important to examine police officers' perceptions of stalking where a legal or policy change relating to stalking is pending. In particular, future work should seek to identify when relational (and other) biases are formed. Finally, it would be useful to establish whether the biases persist throughout the criminal justice-system, for instance, whether they are reflected by sentencing decisions.

It is important that future work adopts a broader approach, incorporating factors relating to policy and practice and legislative change, as well as measures of police officer training. Regional studies with victims of stalking will also help assess whether the identified relational biases translate into action/inaction on the part of police officers and influence how victims of stalking are treated. Data from the National Crime Victimization Survey in the United States suggests that the identified relational biases may not be held by victims of stalking, as prior relationship was only found to have a minimal impact on victims' decisions to report harassing situations to the police (Reyns & Englebrect, 2010). Instead, the seriousness of the behaviour and the perpetrator's criminal history were found to significantly influence victims' reporting decisions. It is important therefore to determine if and how the nature of the prior relationship between the perpetrator and the victim impacts on the decision making of police officers. For example, the relational bias noted in the present study may have been diminished if the prior relationship in the ex-partner condition had been

characterised by physical violence or verbal abuse.

The present study found that susceptibility to typical relational biases and judgements differed across two police forces in the United Kingdom. It is now important to conduct larger-scale regional studies in order to address questions relevant to policy and practice, the answers to which can be used to inform stalking service provision. These studies will provide a valuable opportunity for research to enhance current responses to this recently criminalised and often complex offence.

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Table 1

Multivariate and Univariate Analyses of Variance F ratios for the Five Scale Items by Prior Relationship and Sample Membership

Variable	ANOVA					
	MANOVA	Harassment	Intervention	Alarm	Violence	Responsibility
	<i>F</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>F</i>
Relationship	11.57***	33.95***	19.99***	10.00***	7.72**	18.17***
Sample	17.99***	2.43	82.89***	21.93***	8.19*	7.56**
R × S	7.74***	5.16**	1.44	9.39***	11.08***	13.78***

Note. *F* ratios are Wilk's Lambda approximations of *F*s. MANOVA = multivariate analysis of variance;

ANOVA = univariate analysis of variance. Bonferroni corrected alpha value = .01. ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Table 2

Means and Standard Deviations for the Five Scale Items as a Function of Prior Relationship

Condition	Five scale items									
	Harassment		Intervention		Alarm		Violence		Responsibility	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Overall										
English	8.72	1.26	7.41	1.43	8.43	1.48	7.32	1.73	1.21	1.43
Scottish	8.55	1.34	5.80	1.60	7.65	1.34	6.71	1.76	1.56	0.77
			(1.06)		(.55)		(.35)		(.30)	
Stranger	9.39 _a	0.84	7.27 _a	1.70	8.56 _{a,b}	1.36	7.58 _{a,b}	1.88	1.00 _a	0.98
									(.79)	
Acquaintance	8.47 _a	1.13	5.93 _a	1.57	7.74 _a	1.38	6.68 _a	1.52	1.24 _b	0.92
	(.92)		(.82)		(.60)		(.53)		(.60)	
Ex-partner	8.00 _a	1.48	6.71 _a	1.62	7.83 _b	1.54	6.79 _b	1.77	1.95 _{a,b}	1.39
	(1.16)		(.34)		(.50)		(.43)			
English										
Stranger	9.58 _{a,b}	0.75	8.11	1.35	9.38 _{a,b}	1.01	8.38 _{a,b}	1.45	.38 _a	0.86
Acquaintance	8.27 _a	1.05	6.89	1.19	8.13 _a	1.24	7.11 _a	1.53	1.13 _a	1.12
	(1.44)				(1.11)		(.85)		(.75)	
Ex-partner	8.31 _b	1.43	7.24	1.48	7.78 _b	1.65	6.47 _b	1.65	2.13 _a	1.63
	(1.11)				(1.17)		(1.23)		(1.34)	
Scottish										
Stranger	9.20 _a	0.89	6.42	1.59	7.73	1.16	6.78	1.92	1.62	0.65
	(1.29)									

Acquaintance	8.67 _b	1.19	4.98	1.31	7.36	1.42	6.24 _a	1.40	1.36	0.65
	(.78)									
Ex-partner	7.62 _{a,b}	1.48	6.05	1.56	7.89	1.41	7.19 _a	1.85	1.73	0.99
										(.58)

Note. For prior relationship, column means sharing subscripts are significantly different ($p < .05$) and the bracketed values are estimates of Cohen's d . When there are significant differences between all three prior relationship conditions, bracketed values relate to the 'stranger, acquaintance' and 'stranger, ex-partner' comparisons. The five scale items utilised 11-point Likert scales.

Table 3

Regression Coefficients and Significance for the English Police Sample for the Four Scale Items by Prior Relationship (Model 1) and by Prior Relationship and Victim Responsibility (Model 2)

Harassment						
Variable	Model 1			Model 2		
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β
Constant	8.31	.17		9.43	.19	
Stranger	1.27***	.24	.48	.35	.22	.13
Acquaintance	-.04	.24	-.02	-.57**	.20	-.21
Victim responsibility				-.52***	.06	-.59
<i>R</i> ²	.23			.50		
<i>F</i>	20.15***			43.17***		
Intervention						
Variable	Model 1			Model 2		
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β
Constant	7.24	.20		8.15	.26	
Stranger	.87***	.28	.29	.12	.30	.04
Acquaintance	-.36	.28	-.12	-.78**	.28	-.26
Victim responsibility				-.42***	.09	-.42
<i>R</i> ²	.13			.26		
<i>F</i>	9.82***			15.57***		
Alarm						
Variable	Model 1			Model 2		
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β
Constant	7.78	.20		9.13	.23	
Stranger	1.60***	.28	.51	.49	.26	.16

Acquaintance	.36	.28	.11	-.28	.24	-.09
Victim responsibility				-.63***	.08	-.61
R^2	.22			.49		
F	18.11***			42.67***		
Violence						
	Model 1			Model 2		
Variable	B	$SE B$	β	B	$SE B$	β
Constant	6.47	.23		7.51	.30	
Stranger	1.91***	.33	.52	1.06***	.35	.29
Acquaintance	.64*	.33	.18	.16	.32	.04
Victim responsibility				-.49***	.10	-.40
R^2	.21			.33		
F	17.76***			21.83***		

Note. Model 1 = regressions with prior relationship (dummy variables: stranger yes/no and acquaintance yes/no) entered into the analyses. Model 2 = regressions with prior relationship and victim responsibility entered into the analyses. * $p \leq .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.