



STALKING AND HEALTH CARE PROFESSIONALS: AN ANALYSIS OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

Daniela Acquadro Maran – Valentina Pristerà – Massimo Zedda

Università degli Studi di Torino - Department of Psychology

ABSTRACT

In the last decade stalking has emerged as a significant social problem which now constitutes a specific form of criminal offence in most Western jurisdictions. Also in Italy, the Government has recently introduced new legislation on the subject. Scholars describe Stalking as a constellation of behaviour in which a person (stalker) inflicts on another (stalking victim) repeated unwanted intrusions and/or verbal pressure. Health care professionals, particularly those involved with mental health patients, are at greater risk than the general public of being the victims of stalking, particularly by patients. However, actual incidence and distribution remain largely unknown, owing to international differences in definition and legal status. The purpose of this work is to present the results of literature analysis on the nature and incidence of stalking of helping professional, focussing on the approach adopted in national and international investigations on this subject.

Key words: stalking – health care professionals – literature analysis

INTRODUCTION

In the last decade stalking has emerged as a significant social problem which now constitutes a specific form of criminal offence in most Western World jurisdictions. Also in Italy, in recent months The Government adopted stalking laws. Stalking is a form of intimate violence (Coleman, 1997; Douglas & Dutton, 2001; Kurt, 1995), affecting approximately 1 million women and 400,000 men each year (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000), who are primarily stalked by current or former love interests (see Spitzberg & Cupach, 2001, for review). Pathè and Mullen (1997) describe Stalking as a constellation of behaviors in which a person (stalker) inflicts on another (stalking victim) repeated unwanted intrusions and/or communications. Other scholars, such as Meloy (1998) define the phenomenon as an ongoing course of conduct in which a person behaviorally intrudes upon another's life in a manner perceived to be threatening.

From investigations focused on stalkers motivation emerges that stalking is an ongoing process of disjunctive relationship development in which the pursuer sends messages intended to establish or re-



STALKING AND HEALTH CARE PROFESSIONALS: AN ANALYSIS OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

establish some form of relationship which the object of pursuit refuses (Emerson et al., 1998). Pathè and Mullen (1997) have described five categories of stalkers: *The rejected* who pursue ex-intimates, either in the hope of reconciliation or for vengeance, or out of a mixture of both; *Intimacy* seekers who stalk someone they believe they love and who they think will reciprocate; *Incompetent* suitors who inappropriately intrude on someone, usually seeking a date or brief sexual encounter; *The resentful* who pursue victims to exact revenge for some actual or perceived injury; *The predatory* whose stalking forms part of sexual offending. Anyone can be victim of a stalker, he/she could be previous or present partners, friends or casual acquaintances, professional, workplace colleagues, strangers, and so on.

Investigations on stalking have been reported frequently among individuals from a variety of social groups. For example, Budd and Mattinson (2000) note that in the UK 11.8% of adults aged 16–59 had been stalked on at least one occasion since the age of 16, with 2.9% of the sample reporting a stalking experience in the last year. In Australia, Purcell et al (2002) have observed similar incidences. In 1996 the National Institute of Justice in the USA (Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998) reported similar findings.

Health care professionals, particularly those involved in mental health, are at greater risk than the general population of being stalked, particularly by their patients (Pathè et al, 2002; Purcell et al, 2005b). However, incidence and prevalence rates in this population remain largely unknown (Lion & Herschler, 1998), owing to international differences in definition and legal status.

The aim of this work is to present recent literature analysis on the nature and prevalence of stalking among helping professionals. Our focus is to describe how international and national studies approach this phenomenon and to present an investigation that involves Health care professionals operating in the Piedmont Region.

STALKING AND HEALTH CARE PROFESSIONALS

The analysis of relevant literature on stalking and Health care professionals (HP) shows that abuse and harassment of therapists in a variety of settings by their patients has been examined. Pathè et al. (2002) provide evidence that HP are over-represented in stalking victim populations. Bernstein (1981) found that 14% of therapists reported being assaulted and 36% had been threatened; the sample was constituted by psychologists, social workers, psychiatrists, and marriage and family therapists. In 1986 Tryon reported a survey on psychologists in independent practice who worked at hospitals and clinics: in her sample 81% reported at least one incident (physical attack, verbal abuse, other type of harassment). Guy, Brown and Poelstra (1990) investigated the incidence of physical assault to psychologists practicing psychotherapy by their patients, and found that nearly 40% of their sample reported attack. In 1994 Flannery, Hansen, Penk, and Flannery published a study on risk for physical and verbal assault on the staff at a psychiatric inpatient facility and at residential treatment settings. Pope and Tabachnik (1993) studied physical attack by clients on psychologists, they found that over 18% of their sample reported being assaulted. Stalking has been noted also on the college campus: college professors have reported cases of stalking as college students. Stalkers were mainly fellow students (Romans, Hays & White, 1996).

Stalker clinical characteristics remain largely unknown (Meloy & Gothard, 1995). Zona, Sharma, and Lane (1993) found that erotomaniac individuals were almost twice as likely to engage in stalking behavior than individuals suffering from obsessional disorders. Meloy and Gothard (1995) found that obsessional followers were more likely to have a nonantisocial personality disorder and were also more likely to be older and more consistent with their manipulative behaviors. In a survey in the USA by Sandberg et al (2002) findings show that patient who stalked staff members in psychiatric units were more likely (than a comparison group) to have a diagnosis of personality disorder and/or paranoid disorder. Other investigations show that patients stalker were more likely to have never been married, to misuse drugs and alcohol, to have a history of assault, fear-inducing and self-harming behavior, and multiple hospitalization (Sandberg et al, 1998).



PSICOLOGÍA Y SOCIEDAD: SIGLO XXI, COMPETENCIAS RELACIONALES

As in the rest of the world, also in Italy the characterizations of job tasks does of HP a social group at risk of stalking. In Galeazzi, Elkins and Curci (2005) survey in Italian context emerges that in the doctor population a majority of victims reported patient's desire for more intimacy as the perceived motivation.

Scholars suggested to HP protective measures that psychologists could use, such as refusal to treat certain clients, guarding personal data, prohibiting clients to appear at the therapist's home, and reviewing the safety of the office (Guy, Brown & Poelstra, 1992). Galeazzi et al. (2005) advise HP to maintain high levels of attention to the maintenance of boundaries in working with patients. They also suggest avoiding confusion between personal and professional involvement, taking seriously features that possibly herald the initiation of stalking, such as requests for personal details by patients and reporting stalking incidents to colleagues in team meetings or in supervision.

EVIDENCE FROM STALKING AND HEALTH CARE PROFESSIONALS INVESTIGATION

Since 90 scholars studied the phenomenon of stalking for HP. A survey of psychological literature (Ovid database) showed that 19 investigation have been made on this issue.

In table 1 there is a synthesis of these investigations. The table contains information (from original articles) about author/s, publication year, investigation aim and scope, method, sample and findings. About the publication year our goal was to identify the investigation year, but for most part of it this information is not available. In the sample category there is also where the investigation was conducted (also this information is not available for all investigations): 5 investigations were conducted in the USA, 3 in the UK, 3 in the EU (1 involved different countries, 1 Germany and 1 Italy), 1 in New Zealand, 1 in Australia.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

HP are the professionals most likely to be stalked, aspects of the relationship can produce misunderstandings about the nature of the intimacy generated and about appropriate boundaries in this type of relationship. Few studies have reported the cumulative incidence of stalking of HP. Thus, authors of this work have begun a survey on HP and stalking in the Piedmont Region. The aim is to describe and analyze the phenomenon, stalker characteristics and typology, consequences (physical and psychic) of stalking in individual and context, evolving of the behavior (interruption or not, policy involvement...). The Sheridan Questionnaire on Stalking (2001; 2003) will be used. Sheridan (University of Leicester, UK) assess a questionnaire in order to describe the phenomenon and responses of territorial institutional services (e.g. policy, psychological service, medical service, media...) and improve its quality. The questionnaire covers issues such as: demographic details for both victim and stalker, the nature of their relationship, whether the stalker acted alone and had stalked before, whether the stalker had recruited others to aid his/her campaign, location, duration and frequency of stalking, specific behaviors targeted toward the victim, reason for the stalking, the victim's reaction, the response of the authorities, and action taken by the victim and its consequences. The questionnaire has been translated and adapted to the aim of the investigation and to the sample. Additional pages were provided at the end of the questionnaire for respondents to add any further information or comments about the phenomenon. The questionnaire doesn't request personal data in order to respect the privacy law. After a descriptive study of a non-random sample of convenience of HP in selected institution, our aim is to propose the questionnaire to all HP in the Piedmont Region. Findings will be used by institutions and individuals in order to better understand the stalking phenomenon by patient and to use behavior strategy to promote safety strategy.

**STALKING AND HEALTH CARE PROFESSIONALS: AN ANALYSIS OF RELEVANT LITERATURE**

REFERENCES

- Ashmore, R., Jones, J., Jackson, A., and Smoyak, S. (2006). A survey of mental health nurses' experiences of stalking. *Journal of Psychiatric and Mental Health Nursing*, 13:562-569.
- Bernstein, H.A. (1981). Survey of threats and assaults directed toward psychotherapists. *American Journal of Psychotherapy*, 35(4): 542-549.
- Borski, I., Kamleiter, M. and Nedopil, N. (2005). Psychiatrists as victims of stalking. *Nervenarzt*, 76(3):331-334.
- Budd, T. and Mattinson, J. (2000). *Stalking: Findings from the 1998 British Crime Survey*. London: Home service.
- Coleman, F.L. (1997). Stalking Behavior and the Cycle of Domestic Violence. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 12(3-4): 420-432.
- Dinkelmeyer, A. and Johnson, M.B. (2003). Stalking: Psychotherapists at Risk. *NYS Psychologist*, 15(3):15-18.
- Douglas, K.S. And Dutton, D.G. (2001). Assessing the link between stalking and domestic violence. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 6(6): 519-546.
- Emerson, R.M, Ferris, K.O. and Gardner, C.B. (1998). On being Stalked. *Social Problems*, 45(3): 289-314.
- Flannery, R.B., Hansen, M.A., Penk, W.E. and Flannery, G.J. (1994). Violence against women: Psychiatric patient assaults on female staff. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 25(2): 182-184.
- Galeazzi, G.M. and De Fazio, L. (2006). A review on the stalking of mental health professionals by patients, prevention and management issues. *Primary Care and Community Psychiatry*, 11(2):57-66.
- Galeazzi, G.M., Elkins, K. and Curci, P. (2005). The stalking of mental health professionals by patients. *Psychiatric Services*, 56:137-138.
- Gentile, S.R. (2001). The stalking of psychologists by their clients: A descriptive study. [Dissertation Abstract] Dissertation Abstracts International: Section B: The Sciences and Engineering. Vol 62(2-B), pp. 1077.
- Gentile, S.R., Asaman, J.K., Harmell, P.H. and Weathers, R. (2002). The stalking of psychologists by their clients. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 33:490-494.
- Guy, J.B., Brown, K. and Poelstra, P. (1990). Who gets attacked? A national survey of patient violence directed at psychologists in clinical practice. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 21(6): 493-495.
- Guy, J.B., Brown, K. and Poelstra, P. (1992). Safety concerns and protective measures used by psychotherapists. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 23(5): 421-423.
- Hudson-Allez, G. (2002). The prevalence of stalking of psychological therapists working in primary care by current or former clients. *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research*, 2:139-146.
- Hudson-Allez, G. (2006). The stalking of psychotherapists by current or former clients: Beware of the insecurely attached!. *Psychodynamic Practice*, 12(3): 249-260.
- Hughes, F.A., Thom, K., and Dixon, R. (2007). Nature & prevalence of stalking among New Zealand mental health clinicians. *Journal of Psychosocial Nursing & Mental Health Services*, 45(4): 32-39.
- Kamphuis, J.H., Galeazzi, G.M., De Fazio, L., Emmelkamp, P.M.G., Farnham, F., Groenen, A., James, D. and Vervaeke, G. (2005). Stalking perceptions and attitudes among helping professions: An EU cross-national comparison. *Clinical Psychology and Psychotherapy*, 12:215-225.
- Krammer, A., Stepan, A., Baranyi, A. Kapfhammer, H.P. and Rothenhäusler, H.B. (2007). Auswirkung von Stalking auf Psychiater, Psychotherapeuten und Psychologen: Häufigkeit von Stalking und dessen emotionale Folgen. *Nervenarzt*, 78(7): 809-817.



PSICOLOGÍA Y SOCIEDAD: SIGLO XXI, COMPETENCIAS RELACIONALES

- Kurt, J.L. (1995). Stalking as a variant of domestic violence. *Bulletin of the American Academy of Psychiatry and the Law*, 23: 219–230.
- Lion, J. R. and Herschler, J. A. (1998). The stalking of clinicians by their patients. In Meloy J.R. (Ed) *The Psychology of Stalking. Clinical and Forensic Perspectives*, pp.165-173. San Diego, CA: Academic Press.
- McIvor, R.J., and Petch, E. (2006). Stalking of mental health professionals: An underrecognised problem. *British Journal of Psychiatry*, 188:403-404.
- Meloy, J.R. (Ed) (1998). *The Psychology of Stalking: Clinical and Forensic Perspectives*. San Diego: Academic Press.
- Meloy, J.R. and Gothard, S. (1995). A demographic and clinical comparison of obsessional followers and offenders with mental disorders. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 152:258–263.
- Pathè, M. and Mullen, P.E. (1997). The impact of stalkers on their victims. *British Journal of Psychiatry*, 170: 12–17.
- Pathè, M., Mullen, P.E. and Purcell, R. (2002). Patients who stalk doctors: their motives and management. *Medical Journal of Australia*, 176: 335–338.
- Purcell, R., Powell, M.B. and Mullen P.E. (2005). Clients who stalk psychologists: revalence, methods, and motives. *Professional psychology, research and practice*, 36(5): 537-543.
- Pope, K.S. and Tabachnick, B.G. (1993). Therapists' anger, hate, fear, and sexual feelings: National survey of therapist responses, client characteristics, critical events, formal complaints, and training. *Professional Psychology: Research & Practice*, 24(2), 142-145.
- Purcell, R., Pathè, M. and Mullen, P.E. (2002). The prevalence and nature of stalking in the Australian community. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*, 36:114–120.
- Purcell, R., Powell, M.B., and Mullen, P.E. (2005). Clients who stalk psychologists: Prevalence, methods, and motives. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 36: 537-543.
- Romans, J.S., Hays, J.R. and White, T.K. (1996). Stalking and related behaviours experienced by counselling centre staff members from current or former clients. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 27:595-599.
- Sandberg, D.A., McNeil, D.E. and Binder, R.L. (1998). Characteristics of psychiatric inpatients who stalk, threaten, or harass hospital staff after discharge. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 155:1102-1105.
- Sandberg, D.A., McNeil, D.E. and Binder, R.L. (2002). Stalking, threatening, and harassing behavior by psychiatric patients toward clinicians. *Journal of the American Academy of Psychiatry and Law*, 30:221-229.
- Sheridan, L. and Davies, G.M. (2001). Violence and the prior victim-stalker relationship. *Criminal Behavior and Mental Health*, 11:102-116.
- Sheridan, L.P., Blaauw, E. and Davies, G.M. (2003). Stalking: Knowns and unknowns. *Trauma, Violence & Abuse*, 4:148-162.
- Smoyak, S. (2003). Perspectives of mental health clinicians on stalking continue to evolve. *Psychiatric Annals*, 33: 641–648.
- Spitz, M.A.L. (2003). Stalking: Terrorism at our doors—How social workers can help victims fight back. *Social Work*, 48(4):504-512.
- Spitzberg, B.H. And Cupach, W.R. (2001). Paradoxes of Pursuit: Toward a relational model of stalking-related phenomena. In J.A. Davies (Ed) *Stalking crimes and victim protection*, pp. 97-136. CRC Press.
- Tjaden, P. and Thoennes, N. (1997). *Stalking in America: Findings from the National Violence against Women Survey*. Denver, CO: Center for Policy Research.
- Tjaden, P. and Thoennes, N. (1998). *Stalking in America: Findings from the National Violence Against Women Survey*. Washington, DC: National Institute of Justice and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.



STALKING AND HEALTH CARE PROFESSIONALS: AN ANALYSIS OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

Zona, M.A., Sharma, K.K. and Lane, J.C. (1993). A comparative study of erotomaniac and obsessional subjects in a forensic sample. *Journal of Forensic Sciences*, 38: 894–903.

Fecha de recepción: 28 febrero 2009

Fecha de admisión: 19 marzo 2009