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## WOMEN VICTIMS OF STALKING AND HELPING PROFESSIONS: RECOGNITION AND INTERVENTION IN THE ITALIAN CONTEXT

**Background:** Stalking is a heterogeneous and complex behavioural pattern, whose definition and recognition entail subjective elements, which can influence not only the request of help by the victim but also the recognition and the response of helping professionals.

**Objective:** To study factors influencing perception, recognition and the judgment of appropriateness of interventions in stalking cases by primary helping professionals.

**Methods:** The study was conducted in the frame of a multicentric collaboration of the Daphne Research Program of the European Commission. The Italian preliminary results are reported. 50 general practitioners and 50 police officers completed a survey presenting vignettes portraying stalking of women by men and control situations. Subjects were asked to rate the degree of abnormality and illegality of behaviours, to indicate appropriate referrals and interventions for victims and perpetrators and to answer attitudinal questions on stalking in general.

**Results:** General practitioners gave higher ratings of abnormality of the behaviours portrayed in the stalking vignettes, while judgment of illegality tended to be lower in both groups. General practitioners suggested the opportunity of mental health support in favour of the victims of stalking with higher frequency than police officers, which tended to favour criminal justice interventions. Preferred intervention for the stalker indicated by both groups was again mental health care, followed by police actions, while legal options were less considered. General attitudes considering stalking more a nuisance than a crime did inversely correlate with the judgment of illegality of the behaviours. Professional role but not sex of the respondent did influence ratings. Training received by both groups in dealing with stalking cases and the degree to which law assists in this task were considered not optimal.

**Conclusions:** These preliminary results suggest that recognition and response to stalking situations are influenced by professional and personal attitudes, calling for the need of more targeted information, training, and of inter-disciplinary efforts in dealing with this common and serious form of violence.

### INTRODUCTION

Stalking is a complex relational behavioural pattern, which has received only recently attention as a social problem and as a topic of researches aiming at elucidating its dynamics and at basing on evidence strategies for appropriate prevention and interventions. The definition of the object of study itself is not an easy one.

In facts, it is difficult to find an easily agreed upon and universally accepted definition of the stalking phenomenon and the review of the definitions offered in the behavioural, psychological and juridical literature show areas of uncertainty and vagueness. References are often made to specific legal criteria, but these retain the weakness of being open to subjective and idiosyncratic interpretations. This is, to an extent,

possibly due to the impressing velocity by which legislative actions addressed stalking as a crime, with only partial support from lacking scientific findings.

The fact that many of the elemental behavioural interactions which characterize stalking cannot, taken singularly, be defined as illegal, makes the issue of crime characterization even more arduous, contributing to create a "definitory ambiguity" which hinders options for victims' protection and timely interventions. This is apparent when considering variations in the phrasing of legal definitions in different North American Countries and problems encountered in those European Countries which have already passed laws on stalking (Purcell, Pathé & Mullen, 2004).

In this context, given the mentioned difficulties in uniforming the definition and resulting recognition of the phenomenon, the study of what influences the perception of a pattern of behaviour as stalking at the victim's and at the helping professionals' level, appears of great importance. In facts, the emergence of stalking in the public domain is heavily influenced by the recognition of the victims of being target of a peculiar type of violence, by their active request for protection and intervention by agencies who also recognize what is going on as the peculiar phenomenon known as stalking. If these stages do not happen, stalking can go unrecognised as such, even if clear elements supporting its presence can be retrospectively found, as research reports on domestic violence shows. Research investigating police practices in stalking cases (Brewster, 2003), confirms that often behaviours that could be treated as stalking cases, are officially handled with a focus on other and different associated criminal offences, possibly due to incomplete awareness and lacking recognition of stalking specificity, as well as to difficulties posed by the normative regulations.

Available research studies have so far explored mainly epidemiological data on stalking, its diffusion and distribution, psychological and practical consequences for victims and various stalkers' characteristics (Meloj, 1998; Mullen, Pathé & Purcell, 2000; Kamphuis & Emmelkamp, 2000); the fields of risk factors to victims' safety and that of factors influencing the perception of stalking campaigns from victims and professionals are less well known (Rosenfeld, 2004).

It is generally recognized that this perception is significantly influenced by social and cultural determinants, which underlie the opposite risks of false positives ("false victims") and missed cases.

There are studies on perception of stalking which have used case scenarios to investigate the effect of the previous relationship between stalker and victim, the effect of gender and of persistence of the harassing behaviours (Dennison & Thompson, 2002), or of various combinations of gender, relationship between actor and target of the intrusive behaviours and intent as manifested by overt threat or explicit statements (Phillips, Quirk, Rosenfeld & O'Connor, 2004).

Given these premises and this research background we decided to adopt a pragmatic stance in exploring the key-interface between victims' and helping professions' perception and recognition from the side of the helping professionals.

It is important to note that their reactions to a request of help from a possible stalking victim not only can have profound impact on her future safety, but they can lead to the worsening of the situation (in case of inappropriate advice, e.g. if the professional suggests to the victim to try negotiation with the stalker), and to secondary victimization when the victim feels that her request has been superficially dismissed. In regard

to this last mentioned possibility, a mismatch between victims' expectations and actually obtained interventions can originate also from unrealistic and disproportionate hopes on their part and this must be taken in consideration (Freeddy, Resnick, Kilpatrick, Dansky, & Tidwell, 1994). In a criminal justice perspective, the vagueness of stalking laws which entail the criterion of reasonable fear in the victim, make even more important the evaluation of victims and professionals perception and their attitude towards the recognition of the phenomenon, in respect to the appropriate enforcement of the law and the prosecutions of stalking criminal conducts.

Two different types of factors have been shown to influence the interpretation of possible stalking scenarios. The first types of factors are the inherent characteristics of the depicted scenario: gender of harasser and of victim, previous relationship, explicit intent to harm, and persistence. Second types of factors so far explored are those pertaining to the respondent to the survey (gender, personal experience of stalking).

Research paradigms which have used the administration of varying conditions to different subjects (Hills & Taplin, 1998) pose interpretative problems, for example regarding the influence of genders of stalker and victim in the vignette and gender of the respondent. Despite that, gender of the stalker doesn't seem to influence the interpretation of a situation as a stalking case, but does influence sense of being unsafe and perception of risk of violence (higher when the stalker is a male), thus possibly influencing the request for help. Similarly, the presence of overt threats doesn't seem to interfere with the perception of fear of the victim, but does influence the chance of referring the case to the police.

As far as the relationship between stalker and victim is concerned, a greater chance to refer the stalking to the police has been found when the stalker is a stranger.

Personal experience of stalking hasn't been found consistently (Phillips, et al., 2004; Smoyak, 2003) to influence the ratings of respondents, a finding similar to what happens in the field of sexual harassment, where no correlation has emerged between previous personal victimization and sensitivity of respondents in rating possible harassment cases (Stockdale, O'Connor, Gutek & Geer, 2002).

It is apparent that these findings have relevant implications not only in legal protection decisions, but also can lead to serious consequences in term of victims' safety (for example victims of female stalkers can underestimate the risk for their safety (Purcell, Pathè & Mullen, 2001).

In the lack of relevant data, we decided to study the possible impact of the professional role in influencing stalking cases perception, recognition, and judgment regarding the appropriateness of proposed interventions. Two key professional roles were chosen for this investigation: general practitioners (gps) and police officers.

## **METHODS**

### **INSTRUMENTS**

A questionnaire was developed in the frame of the multicentric research program: "Women victims of stalking and helping professions: recognition and intervention models", conducted in the frame of the Daphne Program of the European Commission to prevent and combat violence against children, young people and women. The primary aim of this project was to assess and compare recognition of stalking situa-

tions and evaluation of needed interventions among general practitioners and police officers belonging to four member states of the European Union: Belgium, the Netherlands, United Kingdom and Italy: namely, Countries with different degrees of awareness, options for legal intervention and publicity for the stalking phenomenon. An ad hoc questionnaire was developed for the research aims during a joint meeting of ten researchers of all participating centres.

The questionnaire (available from the first author of this paper) is composed of three parts. The first part presents case vignettes of approximately 200 words presenting 12 typical stalking scenarios ("true" stalking) and 4 control vignettes, considered not to depict a stalking scenario by the researchers. Each vignette introduces a woman who is imagined to consult the professional responding to the questionnaire in a worried emotional state, which is characterized in all scenarios as "concerned and significantly distressed". In all cases, the "candidate" stalker is of male sex.

The twelve stalking scenarios were constructed varying three different a priori decided factors: previous *relationship* between the woman and the man, *frequency* of the intrusive attempts at communication and contacts, and degree of *intrusiveness* of the harassing behaviours.

The three relationship conditions were: stranger (S), acquaintance (A), and ex-partner (EP).

The frequency conditions were low frequency (LF), roughly defined as less than one contact per week vs. high frequency (HF), roughly defined as more than three contacts per week for more than one month. A condition of high intrusiveness (HI) vs. low intrusiveness (LI) was defined according to whether the stalker needed to have spied or collected private information to implement his harassing behaviours, or the behaviours were conducted at the presence of workmates of the victim, involving her family or spreading private material and information on the victim.

The combination of the different conditions brought to  $3 \times 2 \times 2 = 12$  stalking cases.

Three control vignettes were added which were unanimously considered not to have the formal characteristics of stalking: one representing the situation where a female opera singer appears distressed by repeated attentions of a fan who sends flowers and presents to her dressing-room after performances (VIGN4), one describing an employee who is worried after a single rage outburst with verbal aggression by her boss, who soon afterwards apologized for that (VIGN5), the other showing a separated father trying to get legal custody of his children, sending official letters through his lawyer and making phone calls to the ex-wife regarding the children (VIGN11). A further control vignette was added where it is a male who consults the professional regarding his sexual preoccupation with a female neighbour, which has caused distress only to himself, since he hasn't acted on his desires yet. We will not expand on this vignette further.

As a test to the face validity of the vignettes, these were sent to two senior authors in stalking research who rated them blindly answering if they judged the vignette to represent a stalking scenario or not and if they judged them to be at high or low frequency and depicting high or low intrusiveness situations. Changes were made to the phrasing of all vignettes taking in to account their comments. In the Appendix, two vignettes are presented. VIGN 8 shows the condition of ex-partner, high frequency and high intrusiveness, and VIGN 5 is reported in order to show an example of a control not-stalking situation.

Each vignette was followed by questions investigating perceptions of the respondents about the vignettes. Questions asked the respondents to rate, on a 1-7 Likert-type scale, to what extent the man's behaviour amounted to a form of persistent unwanted attention, which diverges clearly from normal forms of behaviours, and to what extent they believed that the law should define the man's behaviour as illegal. Subjects were also requested to rate if they considered that the woman needed professional intervention and, if yes, of which nature (psychological/psychiatric, medical, of the police or of a lawyer/court). The same questions were asked regarding the man. It was chosen not to mention the word "stalking" in this initial core part of the instrument, but to refer to persistent unwanted attention causing concern and significant distress, in order to avoid the differential impact that the wording "stalking" could have had in the different Countries where the instrument has been administered, where there is a different level of popularity of this concept.

The second part of the questionnaire investigated socio-demographic data of the respondent, marital status, and professional role. Respondents were asked if they had heard of stalking before of the research (only at this point stalking was defined as a pattern of repeated behaviours in which one individual inflicts on another repeated unwanted intrusions and communications causing distress in the target), to which degree they thought that the legal system actually helped them in dealing with persistent unwanted attention, and if they thought that their training had equipped them to deal with these issues effectively (1-7 Likert scale).

The third part of the survey was composed by a 34 items questionnaire (by courtesy of McKeon, Mullen and Ogloff, unpublished), with answers again in Likert-type 1-7 points format (from 1= absolutely untrue to 7= absolutely true), exploring attitudes of the respondent on the following topics: stalking in general (e.g.: <Any person could be "stalked">), courtship behaviour (e.g.:< If a woman says no, even once, a man should leave her alone.>), attitudes to machist statements (e.g.: <Some women actually want to be "stalked"; they see it as a compliment>).

The questionnaire was developed in English and then translated independently in each national language by two researchers, discrepancies have been resolved by consensus. In this paper we will present partial results from the Italian sample.

## SUBJECTS

A target sample of 50 gps and 50 police officers was sought for. To this end the 365 gps of the Province of Modena were randomised to have a list of 150; the questionnaire was sent to these by surface mail and a reminder was sent to non-respondents after three weeks. 52 questionnaires were sent back, two of them were grossly incomplete and were not analysed. The 286 police officers of the Province of Modena were randomised to have a list of 100; these were contacted directly by the medical officer of the Police who distributed the questionnaire. 57 police officers returned the completed survey and, of these, seven were incomplete and not analysed.

The percentage of female respondents in both groups was 24% and there was no significant difference in the fraction of single (4% in the gps and 16% in the police), living with partner or married (88% of the gps vs. 80% of the police officers) and separated/divorced/widowed (8% vs. 4%). Mean age of the gps (48.8 y., sd 6.2) was higher than that of the police officers (36.5 y., sd 6.5;  $t = 9.68$ ,  $df 97$ ,  $p < .000$ ). The proportion of general practitioners having children was higher than that of the police officers (Chi square 8.507,  $df 1$ ,  $p = .004$ ).

## ANALYSIS

Data were analysed using the statistical software SPSS version 10.0.

## RESULTS

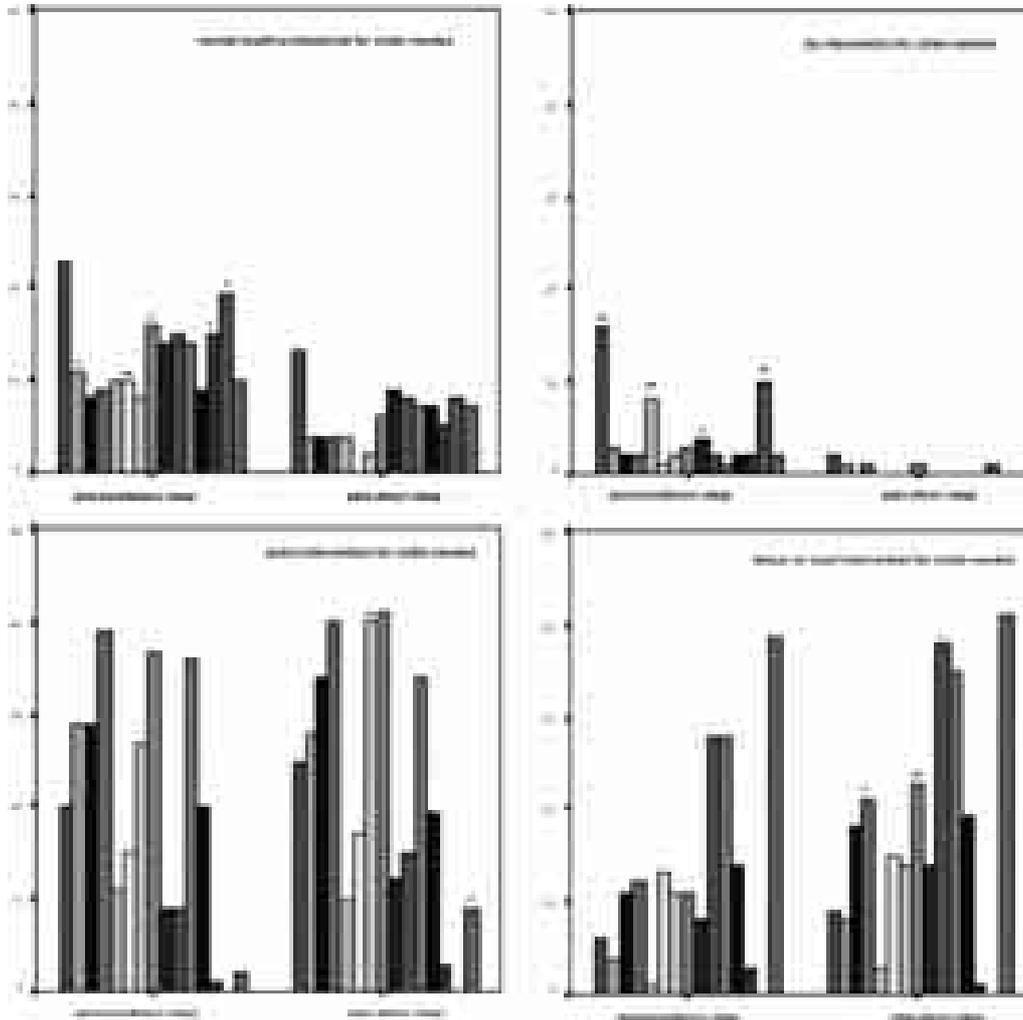
Table 1 reports mean ratings of gps and police officers on the degree of abnormality and illegality of the behaviours depicted in the scenarios. In all stalking scenarios, absolute rating of abnormality is higher in the gps group, and for six out of twelve of them this difference reaches statistical significance. In one of the control vignettes, instead, police officers have a higher score of abnormality.

*Table 1*

Stalking situation	Judgment of abnormality range 0-7; mean (sd)			Judgment of illegality range 0-7; mean (sd)		
	gps	Police officers	p	gps	Police officers	p
Stranger, LF, LI	5.98 (1.19)	5.34 (1.62)	.027*	4.18 (2.10)	3.98 (1.68)	.600
Stranger, HF, LI	6.02 (1.20)	5.20 (1.82)	.009*	4.04 (1.98)	4.26 (1.59)	.541
Stranger, LF, HI	6.22 (1.36)	5.84 (1.48)	.184	5.22 (1.72)	5.22 (1.45)	1
Stranger, HF, HI	6.60 (0.64)	6.00 (1.78)	.027*	5.86 (1.07)	5.64 (1.19)	.334
Acquaintance, LF, LI	4.80 (1.74)	4.66 (1.85)	.697	3.24 (2.02)	2.74 (1.71)	.184
Acquaintance, HF, LI	5.64 (1.34)	4.84 (1.67)	.010*	3.74 (1.89)	3.88 (1.73)	.701
Acquaintance, LF, HI	6.18 (1.30)	5.58 (1.67)	.048*	5.00 (1.97)	4.94 (1.36)	.860
Acquaintance, HF, HI	6.12 (1.59)	5.90 (1.69)	.505	5.66 (1.33)	5.76 (1.27)	.702
Ex-partner, HF, LI	4.60 (1.88)	4.36 (1.55)	.488	3.42 (2.10)	3.24 (1.55)	.627
Ex-partner, HF, LI	5.20 (1.53)	4.84 (1.67)	.263	4.06 (2.06)	4.44 (1.53)	.298
Ex-partner, LF, HI	6.66 (0.63)	5.90 (1.40)	.001**	6.00 (1.05)	5.76 (1.06)	.258
Ex-partner, HF, HI	5.62 (1.61)	5.56 (1.51)	.848	4.60 (2.01)	4.16 (1.81)	.253
VIGN5	2.06 (1.20)	2.40 (1.75)	.260	2.18 (1.38)	1.98 (1.42)	.477
VIGN6	4.58 (1.90)	4.48 (1.93)	.794	2.70 (1.95)	3.22 (2.07)	.200
VIGN11	2.38 (1.61)	3.14 (1.92)	0.34*	2.14 (1.61)	2.30 (1.45)	.610

The mean rating of abnormality of gps and police officers for respectively ten and eight of the "true" stalking vignettes were equal or above 5 (on a scale from 1 to 7, having 4 as neutral point). None of the control vignettes reached this threshold. As to what the judgment of illegality is concerned, no statistical significant difference was found in the two groups and the mean rating was equal or higher than 5 in five ratings of stalking vignettes given by general practitioners and in four given by police officers. No gender effect was observed in ratings of abnormality and illegality, with the exception of the judgment of illegality in VIGN15, a condition where a former partner harasses his divorced wife with daily phone calls, which female respondents rated significantly more illegal in comparison to males.

The whole group of one hundred respondents felt that an intervention was needed for the victim of stalking situations in a high percentage, with a range from 55% to 96%, with values higher than 70% in 9 out of the 12 scenarios; as regards control vignettes only 26 and 33 out of one hundred respondents suggested an intervention directed to the woman in VIGN4 and VIGN5, whereas in VIGN11 an intervention was judged needed by 88% of the respondents.



\*p = .05, \*\*p = .001

**Figure I**  
***Interventions found appropriate by a group of 50 Italian general practitioners and by 50 police officers in favour of the woman victim of 12 stalking vignettes and three control cases (see also text).***

Figure I details comparisons of which type of intervention was felt needed in each cases by gps and by police officers and their answers are compared. Each column in each graph represents, for the 12 different case scenarios and for the 3 "control" vignettes, the number of times the fifty general practitioners and fifty police officers considered appropriate the intervention of the mentioned professional in favour of the real or self-perceived victim of the harassment described in the vignettes. First four columns of the two blocks in each graph refer to vignettes where the stalker is a stranger, the second group of four in each block refers to vignettes where the perpetrator is an acquaintance, the third group of four columns refers to vignettes where the perpetrator is an ex-intimate partner of the victim, and the fourth group of three columns refers to the three control vignettes. For what concerns need of a mental health professional to help the victim, gps rated this a necessity in a statistically higher

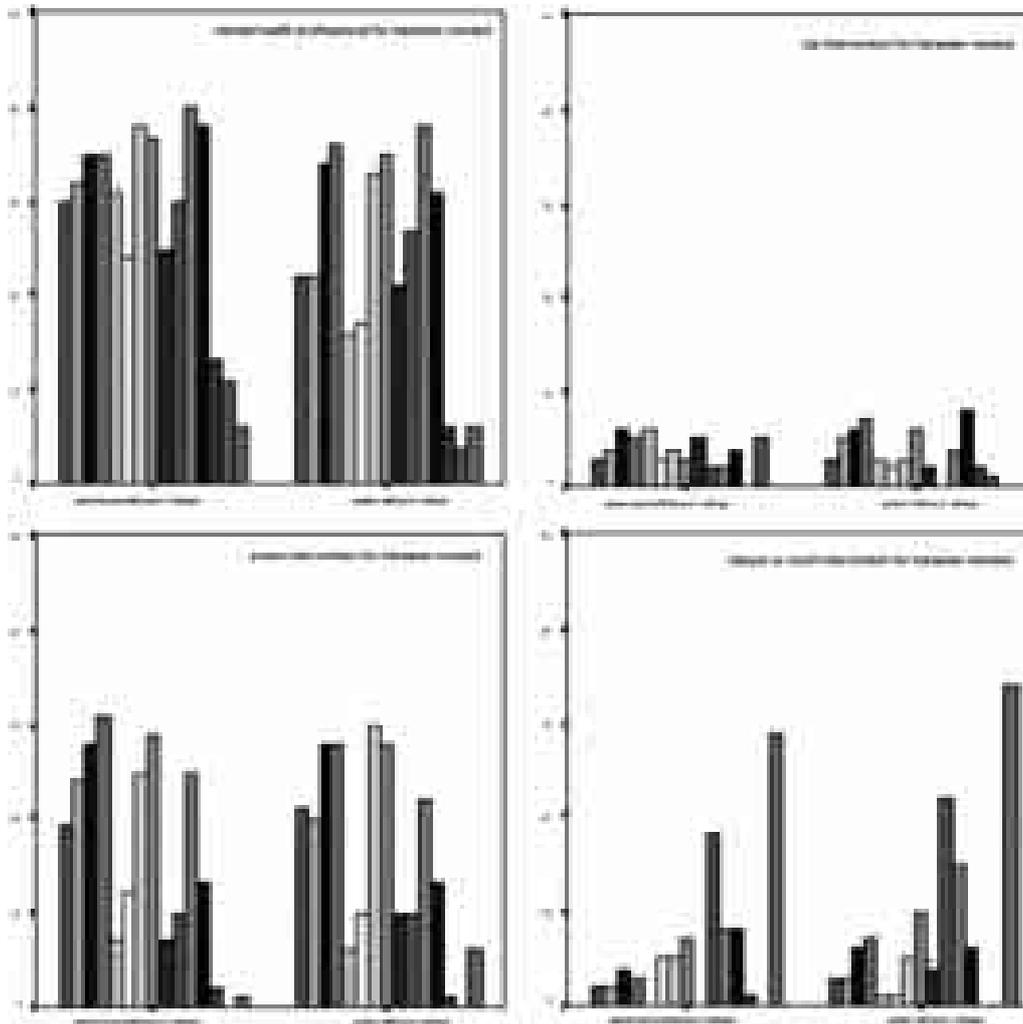
significant fraction than police officers in five cases (in three cases of stalking and in two control cases). The judgment of necessity of this referral ranged from 16% to 58% among gps according to the different stalking scenario considered, and between 0 and 26% among police officers.

The intervention of a gp was considered needed by a fraction ranging from 2% to 32% by gps themselves vs. a range of 2% to 4% scored by police officers. Also regarding this intervention gps tended to have higher endorsement rates, which were statistically higher in three stalking scenarios and in one control case.

The appropriateness of the involvement of the police in favour of the victim received support in a higher fraction of stalking vignettes, in a range going from 16% to 78% in the gps group and from 18 to 82% in the police officers. In one stalking case (and in a control vignette), where the stalker is an acquaintance and harasses with low frequency and high intrusiveness, police officers found their intervention appropriate in a fraction higher than gps, and this difference was statistically significant.

The intervention of a lawyer or court for the victim was indicated by 2% to 54% of gps for the different stalking situations, this percentage ranged 2% to 76% in police officers and for three stalking scenarios the difference with gps was statistically significant with police officers having higher scores.

An intervention targeted to the man was considered needed by a fraction from 54% to 95% of the one hundred respondents in stalking vignettes, while intervention was considered needed by 19%, 21% and 69 % for the man in VIGN4, VIGN5 and VIGN11 respectively, which were control cases.



\*p = .05, \*\*p = .001

**Figure II**  
***Interventions found appropriate by a group of 50 Italian general practitioners and by 50 police officers in favour of the stalker of 12 stalking vignettes and three control cases (see also text).***

Figure II details comparisons of which type of intervention the group of gps and of police officers felt appropriate for the man in each scenario.

Scores are presented with the same schema of Figure I where each column for the two professional blocks presents scores regarding the four vignettes where the stalker is a stranger, then the four where the stalker is an acquaintance and then the four where the stalker is an ex-partner, to end with ratings for the three controls vignettes VIGN4, VIGN5 and VIGN11.

The intervention of a mental health professional for the man was judged appropriate by gps in a range of 48% to 80% across the different stalking scenarios, and by 12% to 26% of respondents in the three control cases. 34% up to 76% of police officers rated

this intervention appropriate in stalking scenarios, and only in a percentage going from 4 to 8 % in control vignettes. In one scenario, condition S, LF and LI, 62% of the gps rated this intervention appropriate for the harasser vs. 34% of the gps, a statistical significant difference.

The intervention of a family doctor was considered needed for the harasser of stalking scenarios by a fraction ranging from 4% to 10% of the gps themselves vs. a range of 4% to 16% scored by police officers. Intervention of the police on the harasser was found needed by a percentage of the gps group oscillating from 14% to 62% in the various stalking vignettes, and by 14% to 60% of the police officers. This intervention was suggested by only a fraction of 0 to 4% of gps and 0 to 10% of police officers for control vignettes.

Intervention of a lawyer or court for the stalker was indicated by 0% to 36% of gps for the different stalking situations, this percentage ranged 2% to 46% in police officers. This intervention was found highly indicated in control vignette VIGN11, with 58% of gps and 70% of police officers suggesting its usefulness.

When asked to rate to which extent their training helped them in dealing with issues of persistent unwanted attention on a 7 point Likert-type scale going from 1 (not at all) to 7 (thoroughly), general practitioners and police officers scored a mean of 3.5 (sd 1.5) and 4.2 (sd 1.7) respectively, a not significant difference.

The evaluation of the surveyed gps on how much the legal system actually helped in practise in dealing with persistent unwanted attention was 4.1 (sd 1.7), while police officers had a mean score of 3.7 (sd 1.6) ( $t = 1.142$ ,  $df 97$ ,  $p = .256$ ).

10 (20%) gps and 11 (22%) police officers had already heard of "stalking", defined as a pattern of "behaviours in which one individual inflicts on another repeated unwanted intrusions and communications causing distress in the target". Only one of the 7 (14%) gps and 6 (12%) police officers among those who qualified for personal or immediate family member experience of stalking, had heard of this form of crime before of the survey.

As regard the attitudinal questions, the group of gps differed significantly only in two items from police officers.

They agreed to a higher degree with the statement "a certain amount of repeated phoning and following is okay, even if a woman has said no" (1= absolutely untrue to 7= absolutely true, mean of gps 2.2, sd 1.8 vs. mean of police officers 1.6 sd 0.9;  $t=2.18$ ,  $df 98$ ,  $p=.03$ ) and they endorsed more strongly than police officers the view that stalking is a type of violence (mean 6.5, sd 0.9, vs. 6.0, sd 1.3;  $t=2.18$ ,  $df 98$ ,  $p=.03$ ). These differences held true when controlling for sex of the respondent.

A preliminary principal component analysis with varimax rotation on the 34 attitudinal questions, conducted on the data of the whole sample of one hundred respondents (and after checking for permissiveness of the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin test and Bartlett's test of sphericity), revealed the presence of eleven components with eigenvalues exceeding 1.0, but the inspection of the scree plot revealed a clear break after the second component, thus bringing to the retention of two factors. The two factors so selected explained respectively 11.9% and 8.3% of the total variance. The first factor, which could be called "Blaming the victim", is composed by the statements: «Victims of "stalking" are often women wanting revenge on their ex-boyfriends», «Even if they were annoyed, most women would be at least a little flattered by "stalking"», «"Stal-

kers" only continue because they get some sort of encouragement», «Some women actually want to be "stalked": they see it as a compliment», and «If someone continues to say nice things and give nice gifts, then "stalking" is far more acceptable». On the second factor, which we have called "Nuisance not crime" load the following statements: «If there is no actual violence, it shouldn't be a crime», «"Stalking" is just an extreme form of courtship», «"Stalking" should be dealt with in civil, not, criminal law», «"Stalkers" are a nuisance but they are not criminals», «Repeatedly following someone, making phone calls and leaving gifts doesn't actually hurt anyone».

A partial correlation controlling for sex and professional role between these two factors' scores and the composite global score of the judgment of abnormality and illegality of stalking cases (summing all scores of individual "true" stalking vignettes) showed a small (-.23), but significant ( $p=.02$ ) inverse correlation between factor "Nuisance not crime" and the judgment of illegality.

## DISCUSSION

The very partial results here presented must be taken cautiously considering a number of limitations on the study. Perception and recognition of stalking here explored refer only to situations where the victim is a woman and the potential stalker a man. This, on the other hand, avoids difficulties in interpretation arising in research paradigms where victim's and stalker's sex rotate across vignettes and respondents. Another limitation concerns the generalizability of the findings to the whole Italian situation, and the small sample size.

There is no guarantee that the situations depicted in the vignettes capture the essence of the stalking phenomenon but, as said in the introduction, even relying on legal definition of stalking in the construction of the vignettes wouldn't have avoided the problems posed by the inherent definitory difficulties.

Our strategy has implied a phenomenological "dissection" of the constitutive elements of stalking, since we decided not to refer to this term in vignettes and questions. So a constant element is distress and worrying in the victim (plus ensuing request of help). The conditions of frequency and intrusiveness, on the other hand, address the other constitutive elements of stalking which seem to retain face validity, not only judging from the referees' feedback, but also from the correspondence in the graduation of ratings of respondents according to different combinations of variables, which is apparent in many of the graphs reported in Figure I and Figure II. The dissociation between the judgment of abnormality and that of illegality of the different situations reflects, in our opinion, part of the different semantics and meanings relevant to the recognition and comprehension of the stalking phenomenon.

Gps and police officers differ in judging the abnormality of the stalking vignettes. Gps recognize a higher level of abnormality of the stalking situations in comparison to police officers and in six out of twelve cases of "true" stalking this difference is significant, so it is probable that professional roles influence this judgment. It could be hypothesized that gps are more sensitive to possible psychopathological motivations in the stalking behaviour, as expected. A good differentiation between the mean ratings of abnormality of stalking cases vs. control cases is also apparent.

The judgment of illegality, the other judgment explored which is central to the recognition of stalking, the judgment of illegality doesn't show significant differences across

professional roles, and ratings are lower than those of abnormality, albeit the differentiation between stalking and control cases is preserved.

In this judgment the two professional roles probably are not differentially assisted by expertise in a contiguous area, such as knowledge of psychopathology in the judgment of abnormality. It will be interested to see if in other participating Countries, where a specific anti-stalking law exists, contrary to Italy, the two roles will differ in the judgment of illegality, portraying differential familiarity with the legal sphere depending on professional role. Our subjects had more difficulties in seeing the portrayed behaviours as illegal vs. their ability in judging them abnormal, even though harassment is present in the Italian Penal Code as a misdemeanor.

First conclusions that can be drawn from these results are therefore that the recognition of stalking behaviour as illegal is influenced by professional role and this would suggest the importance of a interdisciplinary assessment of stalking situations, while, regarding the ability to recognize stalking behaviours as abnormal, information and education efforts seem warranted.

The analysis of the perceived need for intervention and of which type in the two groups allows for further comments. An intervention in favour of the victim is considered appropriate in high percentage, but this could be influenced by the emphasis, in each vignette, on the high degree of distress in the client. Intervention was advised in much lower percentage in control cases.

Considering the type of proposed intervention for the victim one could note that, by and the large, gps tend to suggest interventions implemented by health care agencies, while police officers rely on the criminal justice system. Here, again, the professional role seems to be able to influence the answer.

Apart from VIGN11 (where the situation portrayed naturally calls for a tribunal intervention for court sanctioned divorce) men in the stalking vignettes attract a higher referral rate than control cases. The most prevalent referral of the stalker is to a mental health professional, followed by continuing intervention of the police. The opportunity of tribunal intervention is neglected, coherently with the low degree of recognition of the illegality of the described situations and, one could say, the tendency of society to delegate all sort of deviant behaviours to mental health.

Regarding the impact of personal attitudes, even recognizing the limitations due to the small sample size, the two factors found "Blaming the victim" and "Nuisance not crime" have clear face validity and seem to be relevant, at least in this preliminary analysis in influencing perceptions of stalking cases, as suggested by the inverse correlation of factor two with the judgment of illegality.

These preliminary data on the Italian sub sample seem promising in showing role and personal differences in the evaluation of stalking cases by health professionals. Further analysis on the whole dataset of this multicentric study are in preparation and should assist in better elucidating the complex aspects of stalking recognition, which has obvious repercussions for initiatives directed at both victims and stalkers.

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## APPENDIX

### *Vignette 8: ex-partner, high frequency, high intrusiveness*

Sylvia, a woman in her thirties from a local housing estate, comes to ask for your help. She is concerned and significantly distressed about recent events in her life. A year previously, she had met a plumber called Mike, who she found witty and charming. Soon they had become lovers. After a few months, things had begun to change. Mike was no longer as attentive. Rather, he had become controlling and jealous. He insisted at the end of each day on knowing where she had been and who she had talked to. After six months, Sylvia decided that they were not compatible, and told him bluntly that the relationship was over. Mike, however, refused absolutely to accept this decision. Every day when Sylvia got home, there were letters and telephone messages from him, telling her that fate had determined that they would always be together and that she was unable to change what had been pre-destined. This continued for many weeks to her evident discomfort. One day, Sylvia arrived at work to find her desk covered in cards and flowers. Her colleagues congratulated her enthusiastically on her forthcoming marriage. Confused and then frightened, she discovered that her former boyfriend had been to her place of work and handed out formal invitations to their supposed wedding.

### *Vignette 5: not-stalking case*

Julia, a 19-year old employee of a bank, comes to ask for your help. She is concerned and significantly distressed about recent events in her life. Three months ago, something strange had happened between her and her boss, Mr Prentice. Since then, she had been feeling really uncomfortable in his presence. Previously, he had seemed to be a very friendly and understanding person. But one day, as they were preparing for a meeting, he had suddenly gone into a rage, yelled at her and looked as if he was going to hit her, when the phone had rung and interrupted him. He had then apologized and his behaviour now seemed on the surface to be back to normal. However, she did not trust him anymore, and was wary of him each time he spoke to her. Yesterday, she had seen a newspaper story about a man who killed his secretary, felt frightened, and thought she should come and see you.