

Letter to the Editor

Stalking and autism

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Stalking occurs on a continuum that can range from harassment to threatening behaviour to assault and homicide (Snow 1998). Stalking is one of the behaviours which is known to bring those with autism into contact with the criminal justice system. There are very few treatment models for stalking (Jerath et al., 2023) with very few reports evaluating the treatments and even less attempting to describe and evaluate psychological treatment models for those with autism engaged in stalking behaviours. The literature on stalking differentiates types of stalkers and their motivations (Mullen et al., 1999). Considering Mullen, those with autism appear to mostly fall into the ‘incompetent suitor’ category (Ventura et al., 2022) and thus studies of stalking behaviours in those with autism have tended to focus on lack of appreciation of social cues and difficulty understanding the nuances of behaviours in a social interaction e.g. appropriate/inappropriate contact after rejection by a love interest, as well as obsessional behaviours (Mogavero & Hsu, 2020). The interventions reported are ‘functional’ approaches, determining the gains/losses of the stalking behaviour (Post et al., 2014). However, stalking in autism is not limited to romantic interest and friendships but has been known to include unwanted and uninvited contact as a result of a ‘perceived slight’. The ‘resentful stalker’ better explains this behaviour with the autistic person insisting that they are giving an apology for the ‘perceived slight’. There are suggestions that there are fundamental psychological traits common to all stalkers (MacKenzie and James 2011) and there is likely to be fundamental traits common to the autistic people who engage in stalking behaviours (Linenberg, 2021).

The motivations behind the stalking behaviours in those with autism are important as it informs the interventions/treatments offered to help the person stop the behaviour. The threat of criminal conviction has been shown by some studies to be insufficient to halt the behaviours and may well inflame them (Ostermeyer et al., 2016). Studies have suggested a combination of criminal conviction threat plus educational programmes may be helpful in halting the behaviours in autism but there are few outcome papers reporting any success with this approach (Mullen et al., 2001). Anecdotally, stalking behaviours conducted by those with autism are very difficult to stop and may continue for many years despite actual conviction by the criminal justice system and educational programmes designed to increase social awareness of cues and appropriate behaviours. An initial examination of the literature reveals very few publications specifically on autism and stalking behaviours. Those which exist focus on reports of the

experiences of victims and of the demographics of those engaging in the behaviours. There are few publications examining the motivations of those with autism engaging in stalking behaviours which we argue is the most important factor when attempting management of these behaviours. Many of the publications are older than 10 years. An important next step would be an in-depth examination of this literature focussing on those which address motivations for those with autism who engage in stalking.

Individuals with autism have common challenges and this includes egocentricity most probably linked to difficulties with theory of mind (Stokes et al., 2007). There is also evidence that they experience a higher-than-average external locus of control (Bertrams 2021). There is evidence that those engaged in stalking behaviours tend to have an external locus of control (Civillotti et al., 2020). Interestingly one paper described an offender report, ‘I just wanted to get my emotional needs met’ (Jerath et al., 2023, p.1173) but it was unclear if this person had autism. We suggest that an unexplored theory behind stalking behaviours conducted by those with autism may be externalisation of locus of control for emotional wellbeing combined with egocentricity. The person with autism may struggle to heal their own emotional distress due to difficulties understanding and processing their own emotions internally and may look for others to do this for them. Plainly put, the person with autism holds the external person responsible for their emotional state.

Exploring this is important because if this is the case, because while there is already a suggestion that Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) for self-management be used to manage emotions (Post et al., 2014) and a suggestion of helping the person with autism appreciate various social cues (Stokes et al., 2007), we further suggest the use of a programme helping the person recognise the person's own emotions as their own. This could involve the person learning to understand that they themselves are responsible for their own emotions and not an external person or force. We suggest a useful starting point may be to explore how those with autism involved in stalking behaviours view their locus of control and explore this area as a potential target in future psychological treatment protocols.

There is heightened public interest in stalking behaviour (McDonagh 2024). The recent ratification of new Irish legislation (Criminal Justice (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act, 2023) in this regard relates to both a recognition of the prevalence of stalking and wide-ranging consequences of stalking both for the victims and the perpetrator. A review of available interventions and their effectiveness for people with Autism would be timely.

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