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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# The consequences of coping with stalking—results from the first qualitative study on stalking in Denmark

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**Abstract**
*Objectives* The purpose of this article is to explore: (1) how victims of stalking experience the phenomenon in their daily life, (2) how the nature of stalking informs the victim's internal coping strategies, and (3) how the victims' internal coping strategies negatively affect their daily life and well-being.
*Methods* Qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted with 25 victims of stalking. Thematic content analysis was employed, and themes were primarily identified inductively and broad into dialogue with concepts, such as Foucault's panopticism.
*Results* The results of the study indicate that rather than the stalkers' harassment itself; it is the unpredictability of the stalkers' potential actions that inform the victims' primary coping strategy—self-regulation. Self-regulation consists of various strategies victims employ to avoid the stalker. Our analysis shows that self-regulation as a coping strategy has social and psychological consequences for the victims, leading to various degrees of social isolation and apprehension.
*Conclusions* We conclude that it is necessary to consider how professionals advise victims to cope with their situation as how legal measures should focus on the security of victims.

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## Introduction

Stalking has been a well-known phenomenon in countries, such as the United States, Great Britain, and Australia since the 1980s (Coleman 1997; Mullen et al. 2000). Nonetheless, it is only within the past 5 years that stalking has been acknowledged as a specific problem in Denmark. Though well known among professionals working with victims of partner violence, no particular measures had been taken at the time of the study to combat stalking and support victims irrespective of the relational context in which stalking occurs (Danneskiold-Samsøe et al. 2011). In March 2012, stalking was defined in the penal code under the act on restraining orders (The Criminal Law, act no. 112, the 3rd of March 2012). In the act, it was amended that if breaking a restraining order was part of the stalking behaviour, the sentence would increase. To this day, stalking as a specific phenomenon has still not been accorded criminal status in Denmark. It is only with specific actions, such as breaking a restraining order, making threats against a person's life, and very severe harassment, such as malicious damage, that it is considered a criminal offence (Johansen et al. 2013). Following the legal amendments to the act on restraining order, the Ministry of Justice's Research Department funded the two first studies on stalking in Denmark in 2012—a quantitative prevalence study and a qualitative study on the characteristics of the phenomenon and the victim's lived experiences. This article is based on data from the latter study.

## Previous studies

### *Conceptualisation of the phenomenon of stalking*

In the literature, stalking is often described as a social process that develops over time and is only gradually perceived by the victim as stalking (Campbell and Moore 2011; Emerson et al. 1998). Identifying stalking behaviour is a continuous process of interpretation of what may appear to be seemingly ordinary actions, such as telephone calls, showing up at the same public places as the victim or intangible actions, such as gas-lighting tactics (Kotarba and Johnson 2002; Kutcher 1982; Sheridan et al. 2003). Researchers have argued that it can be difficult to define stalking as a particular phenomenon, as the identification depends on the context and the victims' perception thereof (De Fazio 2011; Sheridan et al. 2003). In our study, we used the definition applied in the Danish legislation, where stalking constitutes '*systematically continuing pursuit or harassment through unwanted, repetitive, and intrusive attempts of contact and communication*.'(Johansen et al. 2013). We applied this rather broad definition to explore the variations of the phenomenon.

### *Coping with stalking*

Despite the amount of the literature on stalking, victims' ways of coping have still gained less attention than many other aspects related to this phenomenon, such as the prevalence, consequences, and risk factors (Amar and Alexy 2010; Davis et al. 2002). A significant contribution in this regard comes from Cupach and Spitzberg who, on the basis of a meta-analysis of 15 studies, have developed a five-category typology of what they termed *coping tactics*; including moving away, moving toward, moving against, moving inward, and moving outward (Spitzberg 2002; Spitzberg and Cupach 2007, 2014). Other studies have categorised the victims' responses into other categories, such as formal (i.e., contacting the police) and informal (i.e., dealing with the stalker on their own) (Geistman et al. 2013). In our study, we focus on how behavioural changes become a central coping strategy and the meaning victims attach to these changes.

### *Consequences of stalking*

The negative effects of stalking are well documented in numerous studies, e.g., (Amar 2006; Basile et al. 2006; Baum et al. 2009; Brewster 1998; Cox 2006; Davis et al. 2002; Dressing et al. 2005; Sheridan and Lyndon 2010; Sheridan et al. 2003). They document the pervasive impact that stalking has on the victim and also sometimes their family and social network. A population study from Germany showed that stalking, from a lifetime perspective, was associated with impaired psychological well-being for the victims (Dressing et al. 2005). This is in line with other studies showing victims suffering from trauma symptoms, such as tension, sadness, anxiety attacks, flashbacks, temper problems, insomnia, distrustfulness, and fear of men/women and even post-traumatic stress disorder (Brewster 1998; Kraaij et al. 2007; Logan and Walker 2009; Sheridan and Lyndon 2010). The social consequences, such as caution about dating and disconnection from social networks, have, however, not been given quite as much attention as the health-related consequences; nonetheless, we hypothesise on the basis of a few qualitative studies that they are closely interrelated with the psychological consequences (Cox and Speziale 2009; Logan et al. 2006; Melton 2007).

## Objective

Despite the above-mentioned studies, what is still missing, we argue, is a broader approach to understanding the consequences of stalking for the victim. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to explore: (1) how victims of stalking experience the phenomenon in their daily life, (2) how the nature of stalking informs the victims' internal coping strategies, and (3) how the victims' internal coping strategies negatively affect their daily life and well-being.

# Methods

## Recruitment of informants

This article presents results on the basis of interviews with 25 stalking victims. The victims were recruited from: (a) a national prevalence study commissioned by the Ministry of Justice's (MoJ) Research Office (11), (b) a private Facebook support group for victims and relatives of victims and the Danish Anti-Stalking Association (12), and (c) advertising for professionals in contact with victims (2). In total, 22 women and three men aged 20–76 years participated. Eleven informants, all women, had an intimate relation with their stalker, e.g., a former date or spouse. Another seven had a non-intimate relationship with their stalker, e.g., a colleague or neighbour. Finally, seven had been subjected to stalking from a stranger, whose identity the informant did not know the identity of prior to the stalking. In addition to the victims, we also interviewed 11 professionals from women's shelters, a men's shelter, NGOs, and the police, but findings from these interviews are not included in this article.

### Interview methods

The empirical material was gathered using qualitative semi-structured interviews. The pilot interview showed that it was difficult for the victims to relate the course of the stalking in a linear and chronological narrative. Consequently, timelines were employed as a graphic elicitation tool together with the informant. The tool served to draw an overview of the course, character, and dynamic of the stalking, which formed the basis for the remaining interview. The interview guide consisted of open-ended questions covering the following themes: the character of the stalking, the impact and consequences of the stalking, coping strategies, help-seeking behaviour and support needs, current situation, ideas for support, and the prevention of stalking. The themes in the interview guides were developed on the basis of the overall purpose of the research project.

### Analysis

As no prior research exists on the subject in Denmark, our study was decidedly exploratory, meaning that the theoretical concepts were informed by and brought into dialogue with the empirical material and existing studies of stalking. In more general terms, the study is based on a social-constructivist paradigm, which means that stalking may be perceived differently by different people, changes over time, and is dependent on the relational context (Baptiste 2001; Longino et al. 2002). The qualitative interviews were audiotaped, transcribed verbatim, and subjected to the thematic content analysis, identifying patterns and themes in the empirical material (Hsieh and Shannon 2005). In the analytical process, we combined a deductive and inductive coding strategy using Nvivo 10. First, the material was deductively coded in accordance with the research questions and the international research, leading to codes, such as 'stalking strategies' and 'consequences' (Fraser et al. 2010; Melton 2007). Thereafter, the material was inductively coded by reading the transcripts repeatedly and comparing the findings with the timelines. The codes were then clustered into thematic categories, some leading to the development of additional themes, such as 'the stalking development' and 'coping strategies'. All timelines were in A3 paper format and analysed in the categories 'character/intensity', 'consequences', and 'other circumstances' each category marked by an individual colour code. To ensure validity in the study, we employed a triangulation method (Flick 2004), whereby codes, findings, and analytical perspectives were first discussed between the two researchers (authors) and then presented to an advisory group consisting of a researcher from MoJ's research office, a representative from an NGO working with women experiencing partner stalking and the founder of the Danish Stalking Centre.

## Results

### The nature of stalking—a latent form of violence

Unlike any other form of crime, stalking often consists of actions that are legal separately—but cumulatively form a pattern of harassment. In our study, the tangible tactics, such as unwanted emails, telephone calls, presents, surveillance, and physical violence, were often overshadowed by the constant threat of new harassment. This constant threat of harassment was at the centre of attention for the majority of our informants' experiences and illustrated in the following example. A 32-year-old woman had been stalked for almost 4 years at the time of the interview. She had a short intimate relationship with the stalker whom she met on an online dating site. The behaviour that the victim found odd and peculiar during their relationship, such as his disinterest in her pregnancy, his sudden appearance at her house at late hours and accusations of mental illness, intensified after the break-up and she experienced receiving cryptic messages, and unwanted gifts placed inside her car and house and being physically followed. However, what appeared to have the most adverse effect on her that was not knowing what would come next. As she stated, "*The only thing that's predictable about him is that he's unpredictable. He never does anything twice. He knows very well that if you do the same thing twice you'll have a pattern. And that's what's so mentally exhausting about him; he's always doing something new.*"

Thus, for the victims in our study, an essential part of the stalking was the insecurity of *when* and *what* the stalker would do next. To prepare for this, the victims described having to be on guard at all times and having a constant feeling of anticipation regarding potential future harassment. One victim stated," *You almost get like a sixth sense, where you register and notice everything. Is there anyone nearby? Is anyone standing over there? Is he standing at his usual spot?*" On the basis of this, we argue that stalking works as a latent form of violence. The researcher Per Isdal has defined latent violence in the context of intimate partner violence as "*a form of violence that works because of its opportunity […] The mere risk of violence will control everything the victim does and how she behaves; everything becomes a part of a strategic behaviour in order to avoid new violence*" (Isdal 2000). Being unpredictable establishes the stalker's power over the victim and eventually leaves the victim with a sense of being out of control in her/his own life. In our study, this placed the

victims in a general state of insecurity and prompted feelings of powerlessness. Illustrative of this finding, one victim stated,*"How does it affect me? Well, it affects me like all basic trust in people in gone – also the sense of security. [...] I do whatever I can [to feel safe] but I never really know when this person [stalker] will intrude my life. In the beginning I was terrified, because it was like I couldn't breathe. You're just at his mercy, because you can't do anything and you're alone, so you'll have to make up your mind: Do I want to die in this anxiety or do I want to live? And then you'll have to take one day at the time."* The quote underlines how powerlessness is closely related to the perception of not being able to protect and defend oneself against threats (Isdal 2000). The perception of being in control in terms of choices and directions in life has been proved highly important for human well-being (Logan et al. 2006). Therefore, when we are confronted with a situation that is threatening to us, our innate human response is to change the situation or to try and escape it, but the nature of stalking does not allow the victims to have any refuge. As a consequence, the majority of the victims felt that the stalker had taken control of their life—partly because they were unaware of his/her next intrusion and partly because they were unable to put a stop to the stalking. As one victim described, "*He's allowed to do that [stalking] without anyone stopping him because you can't see what he doing, it doesn't exist.*" Feelings of anxiety and powerlessness often increased as victims realised that the police and social authorities were unable to help them. As the quote underlines, the stalkers often used very subtle methods to harass the victims, methods that, to the outside world, appeared harmless—but to the victims and in the context of stalking induced worry and fear. For instance, walking past the victim's home daily, letting the victim know that his/her holiday plans were known, leaving cryptic gifts, such as a knife on the doorstep, calling up in the middle of the night, or applying for a job at the school where the victim's child was enrolled. Such actions are not unlawful in Denmark, unless the court issues a restraining order against the stalker, but even then it was often difficult to prove that the stalker had the intention to harass the victim.

## Coping with stalking through self-regulation

To assert a kind of control in their life, victims developed different coping strategies. Inspired by Snel and Staring's anthropological approach to coping (Snel and Staring 2001), we define coping strategies as a series of strategic acts based on a conscious assessment of alternative plans of action employed by victims to avoid the stalker. From this perspective, coping strategies are a result of the interrelationship between the individual's intentions, the social relations, and the social context (Banyard and Graham-Bermann 1993; Johansen et al. 2013; Snel and Staring 2001). In contrast to the psychological approach, we focus on the meaning victims attach to their coping strategies and, through this, indirectly cope with the emotions related to their particular situation as well as how these strategies are formed by the nature of the phenomenon and the social context.

In general, we can distinguish between two forms of coping strategies that the victims in our study employed: *external* strategies and *internal* strategies. The external strategies consisted of *formal* and *informal* ways of getting help from external resources to cope with the stalking, which is similar to Spitzberg's coping tactic 'moving outward' (Spitzberg 2002). The *formal* ways could be to contact the police, general practitioner, municipal authorities, or a lawyer. These ways were often employed later in the course of the stalking process; when victims discovered, they were unable to stop the stalker on their own. The more *informal* ways involved talking to friends, family, and colleagues and, in some cases, the stalker's family and/or ex-partners. This form of coping was often secondary to the internal coping strategies. The *internal* coping strategies, which are predominant in our study and, therefore, the focus of this analysis, did not include help from external resources. Instead, they consisted of various ways the victims regulated their behaviour to adapt to the unpredictability of the stalking, which is different from any other tactics described in, e.g., Spitzberg's framework (Spitzberg 2002). Rather than to attempt to avoid contact with the stalker, to reason with the stalker or mentally cope with the stalking (i.e., therapy, self-defence classes, or drug use) (Spitzberg 2002), the internal coping strategies represent a change in everyday routines and the development of new so-called "safety routines". To illustrate, one victim described her routines like this,*" In order to survive in this situation and feel that you have a little bit of control and power over your own life you have to develop some safety routines. For instance, I always have all my things packed in such a way that I'll be able to get out of here. I always have my mobile phone set so I can get hold of the police if he comes in at night. I've put a lock on the inside of my bedroom door. I don't go out if it's dark. (...) And I always look one more time over the shoulder: Does he know where the school is now? Is he following us? And then you'll have to tell yourself that I have the right to live this life, even though he is doing what he is, I have to live my life and then I have to try and react when he's harassing."*

To develop our understanding of this particular kind of coping strategy, we found inspiration in Michel Foucault's understandings of power and particularly his notion of panopticism. Foucault derived his thoughts for the principles of panopticism from the idea proposed by philosopher

Jeremy Bentham in 1787 for an inspection house, where inspectors in a central tower watch over the incarcerated, who are placed in peripheral buildings surrounding the tower (Bozovic and Bentham 1995; Foucault 1977). The power of panopticism lies in the belief that when inmates are under constant visibility, they are driven to self-monitor their behaviour (Wood 2002). To Foucault, this self-monitoring process is the central idea of panopticism, as he argued "*the efficiency of power, its constraining force have, in a sense, passed over to the other side— to the surface of application.*" (Foucault 1977). This principle, we argue, is also essential to the phenomenon of stalking and the power relationship between stalker and victim. The power is not in the stalker's concrete acts of harassment but rather in the feeling of constantly being surveyed and the unpredictability of the timing and nature of the forthcoming acts. Like Bentham's inmates, stalking victims are unable to verify the (physical, virtual, and proxy) presence of the stalker or foresee his next actions. As a response, they develop an internal coping strategy that we term *self-regulation*, as it consists of various ways through which the victims regulate their behaviour to best prepare for any future events of stalking.

For a majority of the victims, self-regulation meant radical changes in their daily life, which conversely gave them a sense of taking back some control over their lives and thus indirectly an attempt to cope with the emotional distress related to their situation. Some of the typical ways in which victims regulated their behaviour to cope with the stalking were to restrict their movement (avoid social activities with friends and family in public places), relocate to a new place (another house or a different city), and adopt different so-called security routines (drive different ways to school, avoiding social media, or constantly changing passwords). In our study, there was a tendency for the degree in which the victims regulated their behaviour to be proportionate with the character of the stalking and those who had been intimate with and had children with the stalker prior to the stalking employed more extensive strategies and felt more threatened. To illustrate, one victim explained how avoiding socialising and going out in public gave her a sense of taking back control of her life, "*I never go out and drink and dance with my friends anymore. If I were to do that, I wouldn't have any control. I don't like losing control of a situation. I want to know things now and I spend enormous resources and energy to predict what might happen if I do things in this or that way.*" Though the victims' efforts to cope are an attempt to take back control of their life, many of their internal coping strategies reflect a rigid pattern of avoidance tactics, which instead reinforce the stalker's power. Following Foucault, the victims are themselves part of the power that exercises control on them as "[…] *he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection*" (Foucault 1977).

However, coping strategies are also influenced by the social context. In our study, the victims' strategies were also formed by the legal system. As described earlier, the legal system lefts little room for the police to intervene in the cases of stalking, which eventually influenced the victims' coping strategies (Johansen et al. 2013).

### Consequences of coping

Coping strategies do not necessarily serve the purpose to which they were intended and unintentional consequences might only perpetuate the vulnerable position, which victims are in (Snel and Staring 2001). For the stalking victims in our study, these unintentional consequences would lead to various degrees of social isolation and apprehension. Many of the victims described how they felt that they had lost contact with family and friends during the course of the stalking. Despite seldom labelling themselves as isolated, victims often described how they deselected contact to people in their social network, both because they found it exhausting to participate in social activities and out of concern for their own as well as their network's safety. Approximately half of the victims reported having a lack of confidence in new people and a general apprehension towards unfamiliar situations. Among intimate stalking victims, this was particularly related to men and forming new intimate relationships as one female victim stated, "*I avoid men altogether, completely. I isolate myself, I'm not social anymore. I'm scared. Though I try to do some things, I'd rather just be on my own.*" Other studies have reported that isolation impacts feelings of low self-worth, loneliness, inferiority and condemnation (Logan and Walker 2009), and similar feelings were described by the victims in our study. Through this, the victims' own coping strategies unintentionally contribute to the mental distress and many of them already feel in relation to the stalking.

## Discussion

The current study has examined the interrelationship between the nature of the phenomenon of stalking, victims' internal coping strategies and the consequences of these. Our analysis showed that unpredictability is a key characteristic of the phenomenon. Similarly, other studies have referred to the "threat of violence" as a central aspect (Cox and Speziale 2009; Davis et al. 2002). The absence of liability leads the victims to develop self-regulating behaviour to re-establish a sense of control of their life. Specific behavioural changes have been put forward in other

studies, both as an intentional strategy to deter the stalker and as an unintentional strategy as a result of mental distress (Amar 2006; Cox and Speziale 2009; Geistman et al. 2013); however, none of these studies discuss how the consequences of stalking might be related to these strategies. Our study shows that victims who had a close or intimate relationship with the stalker prior to the stalking employed more extensive self-regulation strategies and in turn experienced more severe social consequences. It is not our intention to hold victims responsible for the mental anguish they experience, but rather to draw attention to the failure of authorities to take the appropriate measures for the victim to feel safe. Therefore, the consequences of the victims' coping strategies are the result of the inadequacy of the legal system to secure the victims' freedom from stalking. Our study suggests, however, that the social consequences are closely related to the psychological consequences as the former reinforces the latter. This knowledge is of great importance for professionals and law enforcement that advise victims on how to cope with stalking. Victim-centered strategies mean, in some instances, that the victim is encouraged to change their routine, which indirectly put the responsibility of security on the victim (Boon and Sheridan 2001; Sheridan et al. 2003). In a global violence prevention perspective, our study points to the importance of recognising stalking as a particular form of violence, acknowledging the dormant threat that it induces in the victims everyday life. Without appropriate institutional responses, we risk victims' coping strategies deteriorating with social and psychological consequences.

**Compliance with ethical standards**

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**Conflicts of interest** The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

**Ethical approval** All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institution and approved by the Danish Data Protection Agency.

**Informed consent** Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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