Recent advances in stalking risk assessment and management

The Problem
The risk assessment problem created by those who send troubling communications or persistently engage in or attempt unwanted contact with public figures has been exacerbated in recent years, both by the rise of the terrorist threat and the frequency of injurious and lethal attacks on politicians and celebrities (Meloy et al. 2004; Phillips, 2007; James et al., 2007).

In this regard, the threat posed by terrorists, organised crime, information seekers and violent activism is clearly defined, and the motivation and modus operandi of such groups is well understood. However, the actions of individual harassers and stalkers have not, until now, proved readily comprehensible for protective security managers with the result that they are rarely, if ever addressed in standard risk assessment models.

The Solution
The field of stalking is itself relatively new and has been subject to systematic research only over the last twenty years. Initially, this focussed on defining the phenomenon, ascertaining its prevalence, understanding the motivations for the behaviour and looking at the associations of particular forms of adverse outcome.

Recently, the results of these endeavours have been integrated in to evidence-based tools. Two such instruments have been published. In Australia and the UK, the Stalking Risk Profile: Guidelines for the Assessment and Management of Stalkers (SRP) was developed by MacKenzie, McEwan, Pathé, James, Ogloff & Mullen (2009), while in Canada, Kropp, Hart & Lyon (2008) published the Guidelines for Stalking Assessment and Management (SAM). Co-authored by one of its own clinical team, the SRP appears to be gaining more widespread acceptance and is the primary tool used by Theseus for the assessment and management of stalking risk.

The first principle on which effective stalking risk assessment is based is that there is no such thing as a unitary concept of stalking. People can stalk ex-intimates, casual acquaintances, professional contacts, work colleagues or total strangers. Risks may be present, not only to the main victim, but also to third parties, such as family, friends, colleagues or employees who become caught up in the process. Above all, stalking is a pattern of behaviour which individuals may engage in for very different reasons: love, hate, resentment, retaliation, revenge, social inadequacy or, more rarely, sexual predation. The risk factors for the different domains of risk vary according to the underlying motivation. Therefore, it is necessary first to define the motivation before one can assess risk.

The second principle is that there is no unitary concept of stalking risk – there are different domains of risk. All stalking victims are concerned with the risk, not only that their stalker will become violent, but also that the intrusions will persist, that they will escalate to more frightening forms of behaviour, or that the stalking behaviours – once
ceased – will recommence, or that the victim will suffer psycho-social damage. Disruption to business and public events is an additional concern. Each of these different domains of risk is associated with different risk factors. The risk in one domain may be high whilst the risk in another is low: each has to be assessed separately.

The third principle is that risk and its management are influenced by the underlying psycho-pathology of the stalker. This is vital to understanding what may have predisposed an individual to engage in stalking, what precipitated a particular pattern of problematic behaviour or what now sustains it. An important finding of research studies is that, of stalkers who are not former sexual intimates of their victims, the majority are suffering from serious mental illnesses, characterised by the presence of delusional ideas.

The Benefits
Incorporating these approaches to assessing risk enables the following:

- a clearer and more nuanced understanding of the likely risk in the domains of persistence, recurrence, escalation, disruption, violence and psychological damage;
- an appropriate use of protective security and legal resources;
- the rapid development of focussed and more effective management plans;
- the catalysing of responses from appropriate statutory agencies as part of the management plan, including the resources of NHS psychiatric services;
- provision to police of evidence as to risk in a manner that will make appropriate and prompt police responses more likely;
- the ability to measure responsivity to intervention by serial administration of the SRP;
- provision to the victim of a clear understanding of what is happening and why, how the problem can best be addressed and vulnerability reduced;
- an increased opportunity for individuals engaged in stalking behaviour to access appropriate support and treatment.

The new approach introduces parallel avenues of intervention to that of the criminal justice system. These can be significantly faster and, by identifying and tackling the cause of the stalking behaviour, more likely to bring about lasting resolution.

This latest advance in stalking risk management is an effective and complimentary addition to the risk assessment techniques employed by security companies on behalf of protected clients and by corporate security functions more generally. Indeed, security risk management providers will need to adopt these new techniques in order to be said to be providing truly comprehensive risk assessment services.

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