States of Mind With Respect to Adult Attachment and Reflective Functioning in a Sample of Men Detained for Stalking: Evaluation and Clinical Implications

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Abstract

The efficacy of treatment for stalkers might depend on identifying peculiarities in the life stories of members of this population and their specific needs. We interviewed 14 Italian male stalkers between 27 and 78 years old ($M = 44.5$ years) detained in two northwest Italian correctional facilities. We aimed to investigate two main aspects: First, we evaluated the subjects' states of mind (SoMs) with respect to early attachment using the Adult Attachment Interview. Second, we assessed the possible recurrence of narrative clusters between the narratives of these offenders, whom we also interviewed about their persecutory acts, using the Index Offense Interview. The results indicated that the vast majority of the stalkers in our sample had a dismissing SoM with respect to their early attachment, as well as many unresolved traumas. Furthermore, by comparing their narratives, we outlined six narrative themes: (a) the perception of rejection as a main motivational factor, (b) the representation of the self as right and as a victim of others' behaviors, (c) a lack of impulse control, (d) the idealization of attachment figures, (e) intense separation anxiety, and (f) a personal theory about stalking. Given this population's high recurrence rates following detention, the study of which adult attachment representations are linked with the stalking phenomenon and which critical themes are present in stalkers' narratives may improve clinical interventions for this specific population.

Stalking is a dangerous concern in modern society because of its possible consequences for the well-being of the victims, the people around them, and the stalkers. Descriptions of stalking vary in the literature (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2014); however, it is often defined as a phenomenon characterized by repetitive and intrusive behaviors, surveillance, control, communication, and contact seeking by a stalker against a victim who is afraid of, worried about, or annoyed by such attention. In Italy, this behavior is a crime. Italian law states the following:

> . . . it is a criminal offence, punishable with imprisonment ranging from six months up to four years, to continuously threaten or harass another person to such an extent as to cause a serious, continual state of anxiety or fear, or to instill in the victim(s) a motivated fear for his/her own safety or for the safety of relatives or other persons linked to the victim(s) by virtue of kinship or emotional relationship or to force the victim(s) to change his/her living habits. (Acquadro Maran et al., 2017)

Considering stalkers' high recurrence rates following detention, which Rosenfeld (2003) identified in 49% of cases

during a 2.5- to 13-year period (80% of whom reoffended during the first year), clinical interventions focused on persecutory acts that must be improved (Coker et al., 2016; MacKenzie & James, 2011; Rosenfeld et al., 2007). Many epidemiological studies' results have indicated that stalking victimization is a widespread phenomenon with a lifetime prevalence of 12% to 16% among women and 4% to 7% among men (Dressing et al., 2006; Purcell et al., 2002).

Researchers in many theoretical and practical disciplines such as law, sociology, criminology, and psychology have explored and addressed stalking (Duntley & Buss, 2012)

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using sociocostructionist frameworks (Walker et al., 2018), as well as cognitive (Beck & Deffenbacher, 2000; Murphy et al., 2007) and psychodynamic approaches (Hoffmann & Meloy, 2008) and neurobiological perspectives (Marazziti et al., 2015). Scholarly explanations of stalkers' motives for beginning their stalking behavior are informed by various approaches, such as the clinical (Nijdam-Jones et al., 2018), gender-based (Yanowitz, 2006; Yanowitz & Yanowitz, 2012), social–psychological (Pryor et al., 1995), and cultural approaches (Jagessar & Sheridan, 2004). From among the possible interpretative frameworks, we adopted the attachment perspective as a possible risk factor; this approach aligns with prior research by Meloy (1992), which employed the same approach.

Stalking and Attachment Theory: Literature Review

Dysfunctional attachment, as Patton et al. (2010) note, is a possible, albeit not unique, framework for understanding stalking behaviors. Kienlen et al. (1997) explained that many stalkers have an insecure attachment that is reinforced by continuous rejection and victims' unwillingness to continue the relationship. Moreover, Dennison and Stewart (2006) found that feelings such as anger and jealousy, the need for control, and dysfunctional attachment predicted stalking behaviors.

The scientific literature affirms the importance of childhood experiences in shaping and regulating an individual's emotional functioning, and numerous studies have unequivocally reinforced this idea (e.g., Cassidy, 1994; Felitti et al., 1998; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007, 2015). For example, Shorey et al. (2011) argued that men who perpetrated psychological aggression had more emotion regulation deficits than nonperpetrators. Research on attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969/1982, 1970, 1980) and many studies on stalkers have indicated that the origins of dysfunctional behaviors can be found in deep wounds linked to past experiences. Specifically, many attachment theorists posit that childhood experiences with primary caregivers may influence beliefs, expectations, and behaviors in future relationships, particularly with romantic partners (Feeney & Noller, 1990; Shaver & Hazan, 1987).

Consistent with this premise, the scientific literature in this field has indicated that subjects who developed coherent narratives of their childhood experiences as evaluated by the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI; George et al., 1985) engaged in more satisfying interactions with their romantic partners than did insecure individuals (Holland & Roisman, 2010). Moreover, some researchers emphasized that rejection could strengthen insecure attachment and provoke feelings such as anger, jealousy, and the need for control (Dennison & Stewart, 2006). Meloy and Gothard (1995) were among the first to hypothesize that attachment to a caregiver could be compatible with difficulty in detaching

from the caregiver and could later constitute a basis for vulnerability to future stalking behavior.

The vast majority of studies in the literature contained results that indicated that the entangled or preoccupied state of mind (SoM) with respect to adult attachment is linked most strongly to the adoption of stalking behavior (Cupach & Spitzberg, 2014; Davis et al., 2000; Patton et al., 2010). Due to the personal vulnerability of one's self-image, these subjects seem to be more jealous, requesting, and clingy, and are proximity seekers. Conversely, in a study on incarcerated offenders, Levinson and Fonagy (2004) found that offenders were more likely to have a dismissive SoM characterized by disavowal of attachment-related experiences and a very low capacity for reflective functioning. According to these researchers, a lack of metacognitive processes and mentalizing capacities can be linked to impaired monitoring of aggressive conduct, making these subjects more prone to harm other people.

Douglas and Dutton claimed that, despite the large number of studies that indirectly link stalkers to the symptoms and perceived effects of insecure attachment, these studies have not yet reached empirical consistency. Patton et al.'s (2010) study also demonstrated this: Although it contained positive implications in demonstrating the correlation between insecure–anxious attachment and stalking behavior, it failed to demonstrate that stalking is directly caused by insecure attachment even though many other studies have confirmed this theory (Guerrero, 1998; Lewis et al., 2001; MacKenzie et al., 2008).

The present study is aimed at broadening knowledge of etiopathogenetic factors and specific vulnerabilities of stalkers, especially in terms of attachment issues and critical themes that they use as narrative cluster to organize the discourses around both infancy and the persecutory acts for which they are detained. In this study, we aim to provide an overview of emotional functioning in stalkers to tailor efficient interventions that account for factors such as personal history and emotional regulation.

Method

Ethics

The Bioethics Committee of Turin University approved this study (reference number 256431). Each subject signed an informed consent form that contained detailed explanations of the procedure they would undergo, their rights as willing participants, and a description of privacy norms (e.g., they were granted anonymity in front of their data's analyzer).

Research Design

In this study, we used a cross-sectional design based on the administration of two clinical interviews in a sample of detained male stalkers in two northwest Italian correctional

facilities. The research design focused on the textual data gathered from the AAI (George et al., 1985) and the Index Offense Interview (IOI; McGauley et al., 2013), which we analyzed at two levels using the standard coding procedure and interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA; Brocki & Wearden, 2006; Levitt et al., 2017), within the context of qualitative analyses. We adopted the qualitative approach because it is traditionally used in clinical psychology (e.g., Silverman, 2016) and in attachment studies (Bateman & Fonagy, 2016; Main, 1993) to shed light on subjects' narrative mental content.

Materials

The AAI is a semistructured clinical interview based on developmental psychology and early attachment experiences and their effects. The interviewer asks the participants to report their SoM with respect to their early attachments, to assess their internal working models of internalized relationships (George et al., 1985).

The AAI's coding procedure comprises three stages: the analysis of experiences, the analysis of the SoM, and the analysis of unresolved trauma or losses. First, the analysis of experiences, which is conducted by attributing the behavior to the episodes or the semantic knowledge (of the mother, father, or another caregiver) of the subject and providing a label such as *loving, rejecting, role reversal, neglecting*, or *pressure to achieve*. Second, the qualitative analysis of the SoM evaluates how the conversation's procedural characteristics can be linked to the internal working models. This analysis assesses nine features: the first three evaluate SoM with respect to each parent or another caregiver and are termed *idealizing, involving anger*, and *dismissing derogation*. The others are specific scales for overall SoMs, termed *overall derogation of attachment, insistence on lack of recall, metacognitive process, passivity or vagueness of discourse, fear of loss*, and *overall coherence of transcript*. Third, the analysis of unresolved trauma or loss is undertaken by evaluating failures to monitor discourse or reasoning, such as the enactment of extreme behaviors. In the end, five attachment classifications of the overall SoM are obtained. Three classifications are substantial and classified: *free/autonomous* (F), *dismissing/avoidant* (Ds), and *entangled/preoccupied* (E); whereas two are unclassified: *unresolved with respect to loss or abuse* (U) and *cannot classify* (CC). Based on data collected from more than 10,500 interviews, the usual percentages of the AAI classification distributions in the nonclinical population are as follows: 56% are labeled F, 16% are labeled Ds, 9% are labeled E, and 18% are coded U or CC (Bakermans-Kranenburg & van IJzendoorn, 2009).

The IOI is a semistructured interview comprising eight open-ended questions intended to encourage participants to apply mentalization skills to their most serious stalking offense (based on Article 612-bis of the Italian Code). The subjects are asked to reflect on their own and others' thoughts, including the victim's thoughts, and to understand their own and others' behaviors based on thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and desires while always referring to the crime committed. The interview is thought to offer the researcher multiple opportunities to test the reliability of the subject's affirmations regarding how they represent their stalking behavior.

Data Analyses

Coding the two interviews required their recording and verbatim transcription. All personal details that might lead to the identification of the participants were anonymized to guarantee the data's confidentiality. To achieve the study's first aim, the study's first author (CC), who is a certified AAI coder, performed the AAI coding procedure. To achieve the study's second aim, the second author (CS) explored all transcripts by applying the IPA approach to both parts of the interview to more deeply account for the subjects' reports of their attachment experiences and their stalking vicissitudes.

The IPA methodology is focused on the search for detailed explanations of each case using the individual's perspective before moving to more general claims (Facchin & Margola, 2016). The phenomenological and hermeneutical analyses of personal meanings associated with the attachment experience comprise various phases (Smith et al., 2009). The first is reading, rereading, and repeated listening of each interview. This is followed by initial case-by-case notes based on the subject's lived experiences and their interpretation of the experiences' meaning. Later, these notes are converted into broader, more abstract emergent themes that are ultimately synthesized to identify connections between themes in a few words that constitute a cluster (i.e., a meaningful label that is representative of the particular narrative and reconstructed by the analyzer). Applying this procedure to the next case provides further material. Finally, eventual recurrent patterns between subjects are synthesized in a final overall report.

Participants

Our study sample comprised 14 Italian male stalkers detained in two northwest Italian correctional facilities. Inclusion criteria were prosecution for a crime under Article 612 of the Italian Criminal Code (persecutory acts), Italian comprehension, and voluntary participation in all or part of the investigation process. Demographic data were collected through the initial part of the AAI. The participants' ages ranged between 27 and 78 years ($M = 44.50$ years, $SD = 13.14$ years). Nine subjects were Italian, two were North African, two were East European, and one was South American. Only two subjects held bachelor's degrees, and most had completed only primary education in their home countries. Most (13) subjects were employed prior to incarceration. All were heterosexual and had good Italian comprehension and verbal fluency (see Table 1).

Table 1. Sample Characteristics.

Participants' characteristics	M	SD
Age	44.5	13.14
	N	%
Nationality		
Italian	9	64.3
North African	2	14.3
Eastern European	2	14.3
South American	1	7.1
Education		
Primary education	12	85.7
Bachelor's degree	2	14.3
Work status before incarceration		
Employed	13	92.9
Unemployed	1	7.1

Note. N = 14.

To provide an integrated overview, we identified the main motivational types (according to Mullen et al., 2000) that could have encouraged the subjects' stalking behaviors. All group members had *rejection-based* motivation, except for one member, who had never had an intimate relationship with the victim. He was instead classified as an *intimacy seeker*. The *rejected* category is the most inclusive, as it contains those subjects who experienced breakups at the end of loving relationships, those who experienced betrayal, and those who fought for custody of their child following a separation but were dissatisfied with the outcome, as well as a father who insisted on maintaining close proximity to his daughter even though she opposed it. In any case, most situations were related to the end of a previous intimate relationship.

Findings

SoMs With Respect to Attachment Classification

Table 2 contains a description of the sample's adult SoMs with respect to attachment. Most (10 out of 14) subjects' SoM with respect to early attachment was categorized as Ds. These subjects usually tended to attempt to limit the influence of early attachment relationships in their present lives. One subject made the following comment:

> The only unfavorable thing in my childhood was me and only me, because I have not—I repeat—I have never been punished unfairly or received unfair treatment. If I received them, it was because I did something mischievous or made trouble.

The subjects frequently presented themselves as strong and independent from any past influence, and they tended to exhibit a considerable idealization of their early relationships and lives during infancy, even in the face of contradictory or unsupportive evidence:

Table 2. Adult State of Mind With Respect to Attachment.

State of mind	N	%
Dismissing	10	85.7
Entangled	2	7.1
Cannot classify	1	7.1
Presence of unresolved trauma(s)	9	64.3

Note. N = 14.

> It influenced me in a positive way because [if I had my own family] I surely would have m—would not have made the mistakes that my father did because it weighed on me, and it is still this way nowadays.

Two stalkers presented features characteristic of the E SoM. These subjects answered questions in a confused manner and showed signs of great anger and of being overwhelmed while recounting their past experiences. At times, they were passive and vague or conflicted and unconvincingly analytical regarding their pasts and the roles of the characters in their narratives:

> An excellent mother. That is, she has always been the best, and I can't live without my mother. I spent little time because I was always—my mother always worked a lot when I was a child. She had three jobs, so I was almost always alone, so I did what I wanted.

One subject demonstrated a CC SoM that showed a severe lack of integration and great difficulty in coherently describing his past history.

Nine of 14 subjects presented signs of irresolution, especially regarding previous grief.

Narrative Cluster Analyses

Rejection. Rejection accounted for the majority of motivations by which the stalkers in our sample were driven. It usually triggered uncontrollable sadness and delusion in the subjects interviewed for this study, and they tended to disguise these feelings with anger and other dysregulated emotional strategies, as we describe below.

Their self-representations varied from perceptions of omnipotence, self-reliance, and autonomy in their past to representations of themselves as passive victims of unfair situations. This unfairness was attributable to others' evil intentions or prejudices against them or to the insanity of their victims and the people around them. These results confirm Meloy and Gothard's (1995) studies on projective defensive mechanisms in stalking. We also noted a certain narcissistic fragility. The subjects frequently admitted they had problems properly managing their emotions, especially negative ones, and reported an uncontrollable urge to express their impulses in response to the perception of being under attack, especially from a narcissistic point of view (Bleichmar,

1997). From Spitzberg and Cupach's (2003) perspective, they were motivated differently by love and hate (most of them presented an admixture of these driving forces) and motivated differently by the need to control their victims (all women), as demonstrated by their impulses to express their feelings, especially anger and sadness.

Self as right versus self as victim. The subjects we interviewed exhibited, in general, contrasting self-representations: On one hand, they represented themselves as right, strong, sometimes omnipotent and magnificent, compulsively self-reliant in the face of difficulties, and autonomous. A quote from Alex (pseudonym), who explained the rightness of his educational principles, demonstrates this: "Because I was educated in that way—that I am great, big, and an adult—how do they say it? I can look out for myself." Alfonso's words implicitly refer to his wife's homicide:

> I did the right thing, the legal thing, and that was my mistake, because, unfortunately, when you have your own ideas, and you can see that one has the force to concretize them, but you don't have someone next to you who can understand . . . I tell you this so that you will not make a mistake next time. If, after you tell him, he does it again, send him to the hospital.

Conversely, all subjects represented themselves as passive victims of unfair situations, demonstrated an external locus of control, and blamed their victims with great signs of arousal in tandem with anger toward them. In fact, we sometimes could not administer the IOI or found it difficult to do so because the subjects were confident that the accusations for which they were detained were unfounded. They attributed evil, manipulative intentions or mental illnesses to their victims to explain their denunciations. In most cases, the subjects did not portray their relationships as deteriorated. Even if they experienced guilt for what they did, they tended to defend, implicitly or explicitly, their positions and motivations as right and understandable. Antonio's words contain an extreme example that includes a role reversal: "Stalking is what she makes me do . . . when I phoned my sons, [she said to me,] 'My partner is better than you.'"

This projective tendency may correspond to the general lack of reflective functioning that we detected because of an imprecise or absent representation of others' thoughts and feelings at the moment of perpetration. This could easily be related to an egocentric perspective, from which the other party's reasons and explanations would be intolerable. Fuzzy breakups and ambiguous management of the ends of relationships and of boundaries might have increased the subjects' imprecision when mentalizing: Several subjects reported that confusion made them lose their minds. Almost every subject described having been fooled by their former partners or disrespected in terms of their needs. In any case, the subjects' reflective functioning seemed to have improved during their detention, as many subjects reported understanding their own and others'

motivations. This understanding seemed inconceivable while they were immersed in the turbulent dynamics related to their stalking behaviors.

Maladaptive underregulation of emotions and lack of impulse control. Most subjects reported many negative emotions regarding their present detention period, which some of them described as traumatic, and the period prior to their incarceration. Anger toward their ex-partners was the most recurrent emotion, even if it was sometimes denied (perhaps to demonstrate their low danger level or to detach themselves from the past). Sadness seemed to be anger's counterpart during periods in which the stalking campaign was active: Many narratives contained depressive and anxious moments; we also detected obsessive jealousy, paranoia, and shame, but not to the extent we expected. Instead, we found unexpectedly recurrent alternating outbursts of anger and guilt for the threats and insults to victims, such as frightening or physically violent behaviors. Emotional dysregulation or, more precisely, differing manifestations of maladaptive emotional underregulation, were present. Damiano, for example, said, "There's a lot of people able to hide feelings . . . it's hard. For me, it's hard. I have to say and do what I feel."

Difficulty with impulse control manifested in various forms. Many subjects reported periods of alcoholism and drug addiction (especially to cocaine, but also heroin), as well as deviance and criminality (especially robberies, but also one homicide) involving episodes of physical violence toward others (mainly against intimate partners).

Idealization of attachment experience and covert anger. Regarding the subjects' SoMs with respect to attachment, the propensity to attack their ex-partners contrasted with the difficulty, for many members, of attacking their families and their attachment memories during their weak moments. Most of them presented an idealized view of their pasts and of their relationships with their mothers and fathers. For example, Benedetto cried when he was asked to name five adjectives that described his relationship with his mother during infancy: "There aren't five words to—beautiful, wonderful . . . ah . . . the top of the top, the, the, the mother of every child's dreams!"

This recollection seems like an empty memory based on semantic circuits and the inability to access episodic memories, which could support abstract generalizations about attachment experiences. Only three subjects permitted themselves to express overt anger toward one or both parents for physical (widespread) or sexual (one case) abuse, perceived carelessness, excessive severity, or betrayal of the subject's trust. These subjects tended to exhibit E SoMs. Others expressed multiple covert signals of anger, such as saying something aggressive and recanting it or experiencing a slip of the tongue.

The majority of the sample also enacted various defensive strategies to avoid painful memories, especially those

of rejection or harsh physical violence by parents. Normalization, rationalization, and changes in conversation were common, except in subjects with higher mentalizing skills or who received psychological treatment. Painful, unresolved grief for beloved figures, as well as for parents, was present in almost all the subjects, who frequently found it difficult to go beyond the feelings associated with loss. Some subjects also considered the loss of a revered figure, especially if the loss occurred during adulthood, as a precursor to the deterioration of their lives or loving relationships and, thus, of their stalking and detention. Conversely, early periods of grief were usually considered completely irrelevant to the formation of their personalities and as having no consequences for their later lives. Macrotraumatic (unannounced and unexplainable) life events, such as prolonged illness, destructive incidents, sexual abuse, severe physical violence, and even torture, emerged in many narratives. The vast majority of subjects described microtraumatic, relational, or continuous traumas, but the phenomenological experience of infancy was positive for almost all subjects, and they interpreted punishments, absences, or the negative aspects of their early environments as justifiable and motivated by valid reasons.

Separation anxiety and intolerance. Even if we cannot generalize it as an absolute principle, we can say that forced separations, perceptions of abandonment (or, for one subject, real abandonment at a hospital when he was 2 months old), traumatic losses, or parental absence during infancy were present for the large majority of the sample. Most subjects minimized, denied, or compensated for these experiences with a radically positive general description. The avoidance of real contact with their subjective pasts may be explained by the undesirability of recalling painful memories in the present. Moreover, leaving home early was a very common aspect of their stories: Some subjects were only 15 years old, whereas others were older, but four subjects moved out or escaped from home to live in distant places. They usually recounted this without any affective connotation or explanations, and without noticing the contradiction with their previous idyllic representation of life in their developmental environment.

A subject's personal theory about stalking. We conclude by reporting the interpretation that Damiano, the subject with the lowest reflective function levels, provided for his controlling stalking behaviors (he used to be able to sleep only when he was in his ex-partner's house). He talked about missing an empty interior space that needed to be filled by other people, proximity, strong emotions, a fusion of souls, acceptance, and tolerance of the subject's essence and defects by the other. The lack of self, which dramatically apparent in this subject, resulted, in his view, in addiction to another person and to the impossibility of contemplating a life without that person or the world they built together. In fact, for many

subjects, separation from their sons and the failure of their families caused real grief and constituted a primary motivation for anger and harassment. Damiano attempted suicide several times during incarceration and escaped from jail to see his ex-partner. Due to his excessive dependence on a partner and almost exclusively loving motivation, his case is not considered representative of the sample. In any case, in telling us his personal beliefs about stalking, Damiano summarized the goal that we wanted to achieve in this research. He explained that nobody is born a stalker: "You become a stalker. Everybody, I think. Everybody [becomes one]."

Discussion

Within attachment theory, stalking is framed as an "extreme attachment disorder" (Meloy, 1992, pp. 37–38). Therefore, we retrace some of the etiopathogenetic hypotheses situated within this framework (attachment during childhood and mental states in adults) to provide an idea of how behaviors considered normal within certain limits lead to the disturbing and intrusive behaviors typical of this phenomenon. Specifically, this article seeks to outline the current conceptualization of emotional regulation (Platts et al., 2002) and explore the evidence for a link between the attachment SoM and stalking in adulthood. Specifically, it investigated whether attachment may play a role in the adoption of dysfunctional belief, leading to a cascade of obsessive thoughts, ruminations, and eventually persecutive acts.

Feeney and Noller (1990) observed that, according to attachment theory, individuals with insecure attachment are unable to accurately interpret their parents' social signals. This often leads them to respond inappropriately by further damaging the relationship with the caregiver. This is especially true for individuals who have developed an insecure–avoidant attachment; although they report less emotional stress in relationships compared with those with an insecure–anxious attachment, individuals with insecure–avoidant attachment also seem more distant or dismissive toward their parents (Patton et al., 2010).

Accordingly, the internal representation of attachment in our group of stalkers, as indicated by their SoMs with respect to early attachment experiences (from AAI), was never assessed as F. The Ds configuration represented the large majority based on the scoring of the AAI, and a small percentage was assessed as E. These results contrast with the literature on stalking and adult attachment patterns, which indicates that fearful/preoccupied patterns should be far more diffused in stalking samples than Ds patterns (e.g., Cupach & Spitzberg, 2014; Davis et al., 2000; Fonagy, 2018a, b; Meloy & Gothard, 1995). A preoccupied SoM is mostly described as the typical attachment pattern underlying stalkers' behaviors and motivation, but the great majority of these studies refer to general or student populations, whereas our study focused on detained subjects with specific emotional mechanisms, features, and needs. In fact, our

results confirm the findings of Levinson and Fonagy (2004), who asserted that prisoners, especially psychiatric ones, are mainly labeled Ds in their attachment patterns; our findings are also in agreement with the results of Grattagliano et al. (2015), even if their sample of sex offenders was not entirely comparable with our stalking sample. Another explanation of this finding may be found because very few studies have administered the AAI to a sample of people selected for having committed stalking crimes, whereas other self-report instruments have assessed actual adult relationships, so the results are not clearly and linearly comparable.

The majority of Ds subjects, along with the great presence of unresolved traumas in our sample, align with several studies about theories on widespread unresolved grief and abuse in subjects who perpetrate violence and stalking that lead to an intergenerational transmission of trauma (e.g., Holtzworth-Munroe et al., 1997; Langhinrichsen-Rohling & Rohling, 2000). From this perspective, the emotional deprivation theory proposed by Levinson and Fonagy (2004) provides a framework in which it is possible to read the scripts of our sample's dysfunctional psychological functioning. This theory explains how, in childhood, the absence of affection weakens children's first attachment relationships and leads them to protect themselves with avoidant or distancing strategies. However, this leaves them at the mercy of adverse situations and without any means to avoid delinquency and other environmental risk factors (Rutter, 1998). As a consequence, emotional deprivation may lead to a mentalization deficit (Frith & Frith, 1999), a key mediation mechanism between insecure attachment and stalkers' behavior. In other words, the inability to imagine others' mental states could remove the natural barrier that inhibits behavior that violates others' rights, making some people more likely to harm others (Celeghin et al., 2017).

Because it is important to plan specific treatments by accounting for the specific motivation that drives the stalker to engage in stalking behavior and a possible psychopathological picture of the molester, the IPA has underlined key concepts that could lead to maintain the implementation of maladaptive stalking behaviors and intrusive actions. Specifically, we outlined six narrative themes that can guide the development of efficient clinical protocols: (a) the perception of rejection as a main motivational factor, (b) the representation of the self as right and as a victim of others' behaviors, (c) a lack of impulse control, (d) the idealization of attachment figures, (e) intense separation anxiety, and (f) a personal theory about stalking. With the idea of thinking and a theory on rehabilitation consistent with the characteristics of stalkers based on the intrapsychic interpersonal methods and emotional characteristics highlighted in the stalkers and using these themes as key concepts, clinicians can assume the role of facilitators who support stalkers in orienting themselves toward greater self-awareness and encourage them to engage in deeper reflection about their and others' behaviors and intentions.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

Our research was limited by at least two primary and strictly related factors: the difficulty of recruiting subjects and the small sample size. The search for subjects required a great deal of time and several authorizations by legal authorities. These were sometimes denied due to the need to protect detainees from external intrusions into their private lives. In addition, the detained participants may have reacted differently to the interview procedures because of their need to be cautious about their declarations for fear of legal consequences. Even if they were assured that no legal consequences would result from our interviews, some individuals may have tended to provide socially acceptable and desirable responses rather than honest ones. In partial confirmation of this, the Ds SoM could be considered the most defensive toward external invasion. Therefore, the results we obtained from these male stalkers may not be fully representative of all stalkers in general, even if, as we discovered, accumulating data (in our case, descriptive) about single individuals associated with a determinate phenomenon can be useful. Future studies should focus on larger samples, perhaps by joining forces with other scholars to improve the accuracy and depth of quali-quantitative studies and the representativeness of the population.

Conclusion

In this work, our ultimate clinical aim was to tailor efficient interventions that account for factors such as personal history and emotional regulation in the detained stalker population. Findings from this research show that stalkers were motivated in their obsessional and intrusive behavior by the perception of rejection, the representation of the self as right, the lack of impulse control, the idealization of attachment figures, the anxiety for separation, and a personal theory about stalking. Before discussing which strategies and intervention plans can be used with detained stalkers, it is useful to note that no single strategy has proven most suitable for addressing this complex phenomenon; each stalking case must be thoroughly examined to outline a possible intervention that can be conducted effectively. Therefore, each situation requires ad hoc treatment that accounts for all variables involved in the phenomenon (Sgarbi, 2015).

Unfortunately, breaking the stalking behavior sequence is a complex and difficult process and is often not enough to protect victims. For this reason, it is extremely important to act to prevent the recurrence of these events, to reduce the risk that they may recur over time (Stefanelli, 2011). Specifically, with stalkers, it is necessary to take a clinical approach that helps them become more aware of the affective and emotional dynamics that drive them to act in a particular way.

This might be possible if the therapist concentrates on the patient's unsatisfied attachment needs during their development (Civilotti et al., 2019; Liotti & Farina, 2011). Furthermore, the opportunity to tolerate the stalker's deregulated effects, such as their offensive acts, confident in the possibility of surviving them, could represent a relational reparation that is, in itself, emotionally regulatory (Schore, 2003). As we have seen, people with enhanced emotional regulation are less inclined to react to losses, separations, and threats to the self in dysfunctional ways. Furthermore, reaching a high level of symbolic, rather than sensorimotor, representation of their own emotions, intentions, and thoughts could enhance the subjects' opportunity to grasp and understand those of other subjects. Therefore, improved reflective function might mean, for several subjects, less recidivism.

In conclusion, we would like to emphasize that improvements from many initiatives, are notable in the primary prevention of stalking at a societal level. The systems that care for the victims of stalking and violence are in a period of growth, perhaps thanks to increased sensitization to the topic (Acquadro Maran & Varetto, 2018). In any case, there is a significant lack of economic investment and social interest in the tertiary prevention of stalking (i.e., the prevention that comes from addressing perpetrators' motivations and needs). This derives from a perspective that is not excessively benevolent toward stalkers, but that is aimed at helping them and their victims build an internal stability that would not allow, or would put a stop to, detrimental circuits.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Funding

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