

The Phenomenology of Group Stalking ('Gang-Stalking'): A Content Analysis of Subjective Experiences

Lorraine Sheridan, David V. James, and Jayden Roth

Additional article information

Abstract

Epidemiological data suggest that as many as 0.66% of adult women and 0.17% of adult men in the western world may suffer the subjective experience of being group-stalked ('gang stalked') at some point in their lives. Yet the gang stalking experience has been subject to little scientific study. This paper reports an attempt to elicit the core phenomena involved in gang-stalking by allowing them to emerge de novo through the qualitative analysis of accounts of individuals who describe being gang-stalked. Fifty descriptions of gang-stalking that satisfied study inclusion criteria were identified from the internet and subjected to content analysis. Twenty-four core phenomena were elicited, together with 11 principal sequelae of the experience of being gang-stalked. These were then divided into groups, producing a framework for the phenomena of the gang-stalking experience. The results were compared with frequencies of the same categories of experience then extracted from the original data of the only previous study on gang-stalking phenomena. Whilst the methodology of the current study was more rigorous, the core phenomena were similar in each. The current study confirmed the seriousness of the sequelae of the gang-stalking experience. These support the need for further exploration of the phenomenon, for which this study forms a basis.

Keywords: phenomenology, stalking, gang-stalking, group stalking, prevalence, psychological sequelae

1. Introduction

Stalking denotes a pattern of repeated, unwanted intrusion by one person into the life of another in a manner that causes distress, disruption, or fear [1,2]. The concept of stalking was introduced in the late 1980s to describe a form of interpersonal aggression that, although common through the ages, had come to be socially unacceptable in the western world after the recognition of equal rights for women and the prosecution of domestic violence. To that extent, stalking is a social construct that arose in a particular social and cultural context [3].

Since the turn of the millennium, another term linked to stalking has gained currency in the media and on the world wide web—that of 'group' or 'gang' stalking. Stalking generally involves a single stalker who may occasionally recruit others into stalking by proxy, their involvement usually being unwitting [4]. By contrast, reports of group or gang-stalking describe stalking by multiple individuals who engage in a shared endeavour with a group purpose. For research purposes, the number is taken as three or more, although in many instances those suffering from the phenomenon have reported the involvement of far greater numbers [5].

Being stalked by individuals is a relatively common experience in the western world. The prevalence in different studies varies according to the definition used, the methodology

employed, and the population or sub-population sampled. But even the most conservative estimates suggest that 8% of women and 2% of men are stalked at some point in their lives [6,7], and other studies from a range of western countries have found rates that were twice as high [8,9,10,11,12,13,14,15]. By contrast, indications as to the prevalence of gang-stalking experiences are few in number. In an anonymous questionnaire that was completed online by 1040 self-defined adult victims of stalking [5], 12.3% of respondents reported group or gang-stalking. A US Department of Justice prevalence study, which used a tight definition of stalking that required the victim to experience fear, found that 6.8% reported stalking by three or more people, and were “unable to identify a single offender” or “could not identify an offender who was singularly responsible” [16]. The US study also examined cases where the behavioural part of their definition of stalking was satisfied, but not the fear component. When these cases were added to those defined as stalking, the total figure for those reporting an inability to identify a single offender or offender who was singularly responsible was 12.5% [17], which is similar to that found in the questionnaire study. The gang-stalking phenomenon would thus appear to be relatively common. Yet, we could find only one empirical study of group or gang-stalking in the published literature [5]. By contrast, a Google search for “gang-stalking” conducted on 5 February 2020 produced 7,550,000 ‘hits’.

Stalking by individuals has been found to result in high rates both of psychological distress and lasting psychiatric morbidity, in particular post-traumatic symptomatology and depression [1,4,10,18,19,20]. The one study to examine the psychological sequelae of the experience of being gang stalked found that individuals who had been group or gang stalked scored significantly higher on ratings of depressive symptoms, post-traumatic symptomatology and adverse impact on social and occupational functioning than those who were individually stalked [5]. The only other published study of gang-stalking samples that we could locate detailed four cases reported by the media of men who had engaged in extreme violence as a response to the perception that they were the target of gang stalkers [21]. Both Sheridan and James [5] and Sarteschi [21] concluded that the subjects of their studies were suffering or had suffered from severe psychological distress in the context of their subjective gang-stalking experiences.

Despite the experience of gang-stalking being so widely reported and the evidence of its harmful effects on individuals and on society at large, there is a dearth of research into its nature and into the components that constitute the experience. Sheridan and James’ study [5] appears to be the only one to have investigated this central feature of this subject. As with most studies of victim experiences, their study was based upon questionnaire data from self-selected respondents. Whilst the questionnaire included free-text items for describing subjective experiences, its bulk text comprised a collection of information on specific pre-defined data points. Those concerning the types of intrusive behaviour and experiences that constitute stalking were taken from Spitzberg’s [22] meta-analysis, which extracted data for this part of his project from 43 studies. The focus of both the separate studies and of the meta-analysis was on the phenomenon of being stalked by a single individual. As such, Sheridan and James’ study in effect imposed a classification of phenomena on the questionnaire respondents and, as such, may potentially have excluded experiences amongst gang-stalked respondents that did not fit into the standard pattern reported by those stalked by individuals.

In order to overcome this problem, we decided to conduct a study of the experiences of those reporting gang-stalking that would allow the components of their experience to emerge de novo from their detailed accounts, rather being shoe-horned into a preconceived framework. This follows the phenomenological approach expounded by Mullen [23] in which subjective phenomena are approached through a descriptive phenomenology, free of the restraints of existing classification systems. The main aim of the study was to identify the phenomena that constitute the subjective experience of gang-stalking, free from assumptions based on the cases of those stalked by individuals. A second aim was to allow the emergence of the psychological and behavioural sequelae of gang stalking deemed most worthy of reporting by those describing their gang-stalking experiences, and which therefore were likely to be the most concerning to them. A subsidiary aim was to establish whether the experiences of the group selected for this study differed from those of the sample acquired by Sheridan and James [5] from a questionnaire survey, or whether the two were part of the same phenomenon.

2. Method

The study involved a mixed qualitative and quantitative design using content analysis with a sample of self-published accounts of gang-stalking extracted from the Internet. This research was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of Curtin University (RDHS-79-16).

2.1. Selection of Sample

A sample of 50 written accounts was considered sufficient to capture the overall essence of participant experiences while also giving the data to have adequate quantifiable merit [24]. Self-published accounts of gang-stalking were selected from within websites and web forums on the internet via purposive convenience sampling using Google searches of websites, blogs, and forums with the search terms “gang-stalking”, “group stalking”, “gang-stalking stories”, “victims of gang-stalking”, “targeted individual”, “TI”, and various combinations thereof (“targeted individual”, or TI, is a term by which some people reporting gang-stalking refer to themselves). More than 20 million hits were revealed in the initial search. Fifty personal accounts of gang-stalking were identified for use in the study by following the first 250 relevant links. All links were investigated, whatever their type (personal webpages, dedicated sites, Facebook pages, etc.). Only accounts including explicit statements pertaining to personal experiences as a victim of gang-stalking (e.g., “I am being gang-stalked”; “I am a targeted individual”) were considered eligible for inclusion in the study. Accounts were required to exceed a minimum length of 250 words to ensure that there was sufficiently detailed material to analyse [25]. Accounts were not included where there were indications that the writer was below the age of 18. Only material in the English language was included in the study. Two researchers examined each personal account, and cases were only included in the study where there was agreement between the two that they met the above-stated inclusion criteria. The first 50 cases to meet the inclusion criteria were adopted. Saturation of information was deemed to be met following analysis of 40 cases. This was indicated by no new categories emerging from the data. Where applicable, participants were de-identified by having their associated identifiable information removed from their self-published accounts prior to analysis.

2.2. Content Analysis

In order to gain insight into the subjective experiences of self-defined victims of gang-stalking, a content analysis was conducted [26]. Content analysis is a research method that provides a systematic and objective means to make valid inferences from verbal, visual, or written data in order to describe and quantify specific phenomena [27] (p. 314). It provides a systematic and objective means of making informed inferences from data via the use of categories, a category being a group of content that shares a commonality. Content analysis allows for a broad range of categories to be generated to reflect participant responses. It does not require that all data be coded, particularly when there is high inter-rater agreement on the categories generated [27].

No categories were established a priori. In order to generate the initial categories, two of the authors separately coded 10 gang-stalking accounts. Following this, we collaborated to generate a list of categories to which subsequent participant experiences would be allocated. This was an iterative process, with categories subject to refinement throughout the remaining analyses. Inter-rater agreement (absolute agreement) was at more than 95% across the categories generated, with consensus reached on disagreements via discussion. Validity was tested by checking the categories back against the original text to ensure that clear examples from each category could be identified in the original text.

Content analysis may encompass both a qualitative and a quantitative methodology [28]. Once the categories were established in the present work, they were expressed using both percentages and actual numbers. This allowed us to describe what the study population had written, and to describe what was both visible and obvious within the accounts [28]. Again, two of the authors performed these analyses separately. Inter-rater agreement (absolute agreement) was at 97% and, for the small number of disagreements, consensus was again reached via discussion. After the coding, some standard descriptive data were also gathered (length of stalking, reasons for gang-stalking).

2.3. Statistical Analysis

Comparisons of the categories generated through the content analysis in the current study were compared with data collected via a survey method [5]. Respondents to the Sheridan and James survey had provided qualitative responses to a series of questions about stalking victimisation. These responses were collated for each self-identified gang-stalking victim (N = 128) then checked against the categories created in the current study to produce values for their presence in each category. Two independent contributors undertook this task of establishing ratings, and inter-rater agreement was determined to be more than 95% across the categories generated. For the small number of disagreements, consensus was reached via discussion. The data from this study and those generated from the sample of Sheridan and James (2015) were entered into an SPSS database (version 25, IBM Corp., Armonk, NY, USA). The presence or absence of specific categories of subjective experiences were compared between the two samples, with chi-square analyses with a Yates correction being used to test for statistical significance and Cramér's V used as an effect size measure.

3. Results

3.1. Length of Stalking

None of the writers of the narratives described their experiences as having ended. All 50 authors stated or implied that they had been gang stalked for lengthy periods of time (e.g., one mentioned being seen by seven psychologists during the period of being targeted, another described having been targeted whilst living in three different countries). The shortest case was described as having begun “in the last few months” and the longest as continuing for “more than 22 years”.

3.2. Reasons for the Gang-Stalking

The narratives were examined to establish whether the perceived reasons for being targeted by gang stalkers could be identified. Reasons were found in 20 of the 50 accounts. In all 20 cases, no named person was believed to be targeting the victim. Representative examples of the reasons given for the gang-stalking were as follows:

“Why? To drive people to meet-up groups or a psychiatrist so they can be medicated and/or get more federal grants for more mental health instead of training a real police force. Post Traumatic Stress Disorder is a big seller in the area.”

“It is a brainwashing military experiment. Post 9/11, they isolate certain people to stop them acting against government.”

“It is part of an overt agenda to create and test mind control. They are creating weaponry tested on us.”

“I began driving a friend around to make his pot sales and I started noticing we would get tailed from time to time. I knew this friend had connects in weird places (he knows members of Anonymous, he knows people who work at the Pentagon). I also did a lot of research and was very vocal about being anti-government and anti-corporation. This is what got me targeted. If you are vocal about your positions, then you will eventually run across a civilian spy who will pass the information to their superiors, who will continue to pass the information up the chain of command. Once you're on their list, your life can become a living hell.”

“I am watched for 30 years after they put in the implants to see what the implants did to me.”

“Because I refused to join their devil cult and become an operative, I became a victim. My invitation to join came at an early stage via voice-to-skull.”

3.3. Categories of Experience of Gang-Stalking

Twenty-four categories of experience were identified in the 50 accounts of self-identified victims of gang-stalking. These are set out in Table 1, together with the proportions describing them. Given that the purpose of the study was to elucidate the phenomena constituting subjects' experiences of being gang stalked, each category is illustrated in the table using descriptions from the case accounts. Spelling errors in the accounts have been corrected to aid comprehension. The most frequently experienced categories concerned being physically

followed and/or surveilled (94%) or being the target of a conspiracy (80%). Two-thirds claimed that they were subject to “physical interference, intimidation, and harassment”.

Table 1

Table 1

Content analysis of self-defined gang-stalking victims' accounts according to their subjective experiences.

The categories arrived at fall into six distinct groups. (The numbers refer to the items/examples in Table 1).

i) Those that involve an invasive attack on the subject's body

Being remotely controlled/mind control (7); physical ailments as a direct result of gang stalking (10); voice-to-skull transmission (18); and control and surveillance devices implanted into body (20).

ii) Those involving an exterior attack on the person of the subject or their senses

Physical, interference, intimidation and harassment (3); targeted by noise (6); and physical attacks (21).

iii) Physical interference with the individual's personal environment or possessions

Physical surveillance/being followed (1); electronic surveillance (5); subject to electronic hacking (8); subject to clandestine, unauthorised entry to home (13); vandalism/theft of property (14); and family and friends also targeted (17).

iv) Assault on reputation

Targeted by slander/gossip (11).

v) Individuals or agencies involved in perpetrating or collaborating with the gang-stalking

Police as part of the conspiracy (15); neighbours as part of the conspiracy (16); family/friends as part of the conspiracy (19); producing 'evidence' of gang-stalking fails to persuade authorities to intervene (22); and medical practitioners as part of the conspiracy (23).

vi) Items concerning interpretation of the meaning of gang-stalking

Victim of a conspiracy (by multiple agencies) (2); establishment cover-up (4); victimised as part of a global phenomenon (9); reinterpretation of past events in the light of the gang stalking experiences (12); and complained they didn't know why they were being stalked (24).

3.4. Number of Categories Experienced

None of the authors of the narratives described experiences belonging to more than 20 of the 24 categories listed in Table 1. Of the authors, 14% described experiences from 15–20 categories (with 6% of the population describing experiences from within 20 categories), 27% described experiences from 11 to 15 categories, 30% described experiences from six to 10 of the categories, 26% said they experienced between two and five of the categories, and 4% of the authors of the narratives described experiences from within just one of the categories.

3.5. Sequelae of Gang-Stalking

The most commonly observed category of the reported effects of gang-stalking on individuals was psychological damage (42%), followed by isolation and loneliness (34%), and a determination to fight back (32%) (Table 2).

Table 2

Table 2

Content analysis of self-defined gang stalking victims' accounts of the sequelae of their experiences.

The categories fell into three groups (numbers refer to items/examples in Table 2).

i) Psychological/physical effects

Psychological damage (1); isolation and loneliness (2); resentment/distress at being treated as crazy or paranoid (4); physical ailments as a result of stress caused by gang-stalking (8); and feelings of hopelessness (11).

ii) Practical effects/losses

Changed lifestyle (6); financial losses (7); efforts to escape from gang-stalkers (10).

iii) Fighting back

Determination to fight back (3); found support from other gang-stalking victims through the internet (5); and development of hatred/violent tendencies (9).

3.6. Number of Sequelae Experienced

Only 14% of authors of the narratives did not mention any sequelae. The largest proportion (66%) scored positive for experiences of one to five categories. The remaining 20% endorsed nine or 10 categories. None endorsed all 11.

3.7. Comparison between This Study and Cases from Sheridan and James (2015)

Comparison of Phenomena

Table 3 compares the two samples, specifically the categories of experience produced through content analysis in the current study and the same categories applied to materials from the 128 cases in the Sheridan and James [5] questionnaire study. This comprised free text, ranging in length from 187 to 3712 words (median 571, mean 627). The categories of phenomena identified in the current study were found to have been experienced by cases in the earlier study. The tables show that, in addition, despite the differences in methodology between the two studies, there were no significant differences between the proportions of self-defined gang-stalking victims reporting phenomena in 16 (66%) of the 24 gang-stalking experience categories. Significant differences in eight items all concerned greater proportions of particular phenomena being experienced by cases from the current study sample. These comprised four forms of reported direct physical interference (physical interference, intimidation and harassment; vandalism/theft of personal property; physical attacks; and family and friends of victim also targeted) and four categories concerning interpretation of the wider meaning of

events (victim of a conspiracy (by multiple agencies); establishment cover-up; victimised as part of a global phenomenon; reinterpretation of past events in the light of the gang-stalking experiences).

Table 3

Table 3

Comparisons between content analyses of internet and questionnaire samples on phenomena constituting the experiences of being gang-stalked.

The numbers of categories experienced were calculated for both samples. Counts were merged into four groups (1–5, 6–10, 11–15, and 16–24 of the experience types). No significant difference was found between the two study samples in chi-square testing.

3.8. Comparison of Sequelae

The same categories of sequelae were found in cases from the earlier study [4] as in the current study (see Table 4). Comparing the frequency of the categories relating to sequelae between the two groups, there were no significant differences for six of the 11 categories (55%). A significantly greater proportion of cases from the current study sample described experiences from the following five categories: isolation and loneliness; determination to fight back; resentment/distress at being treated as crazy or paranoid; found support from other gang-stalking victims through the internet; and financial losses.

Table 4

Table 4

Comparisons between content analyses of internet and questionnaire data on sequelae of being gang-stalked.

The numbers of categories of sequelae experienced were calculated for each sample and merged into three groups for analysis (0–3, 4–7, and 8–11 types of sequelae). There was no significant difference between the two study samples in chi-square testing.

4. Discussion

Given that the available evidence suggests that 12% of stalking reports involve gang-stalking and that, at a conservative estimate, 8% of women and 2% of men report being stalked at some point in their lives, it would appear that the subjective experience of being gang-stalked could affect around 0.66% of adult women and 0.17% of adult men in the western world at some point in their lives. It might be assumed that something that affects the lives of so many people would have been the subject of extensive research. However, this is not the case.

This is the first study to examine the phenomena of the gang-stalking experiences using a methodology that allows categories to emerge *de novo* from subjective descriptions. The only other empirical study of gang-stalking phenomena, of which we are aware, required subjects to fit their own experiences into categories derived from earlier studies of those stalked by individuals [5]. The categories of experience arrived at through the content analysis in the current study are therefore the clearest available expositions of the core phenomena of gang-stalking. The categories are unlikely to be exhaustive, given that they are based upon the

phenomena that the individual subjects chose to report. However, they are likely to constitute those concepts that the individuals considered the most important. As well as extracting categories from the data, this study also grouped data into types, offering the first empirical attempt at a phenomenology of the gang-stalking experience.

Inevitably, this exercise is subject to the limitations of its methodology. The study concerned 50 descriptions of gang-stalking experiences taken from the internet. Yet, whilst not being an ideal source of data, this is one of the few sources available through which the gang-stalking phenomenon can be studied. Data from the internet is convenient and readily available, both to the current authors and others who might wish to replicate this study. Exploratory studies of this type are of value as there is currently little information available to guide agencies that encounter individuals presenting with these complaints. Such qualitative analyses of online forum content have been used previously in studies seeking to characterise perceptions and experiences within populations and topics that are not well understood [29,30]. The study of gang-stalking experiences must inevitably adopt an exploratory approach, given the lack of published studies in this area. As for the sample itself, the study cases were selected as the first 50 internet searches to satisfy the inclusion criteria, which was approximate to a random sample of such descriptions from the internet, although potential priority effects of the algorithm used within the search-engine cannot be excluded. It could be postulated, however, that the internet itself may act to shape experiences of gang-stalking phenomena, given that it is the principal source of information for sufferers and it may constitute a “closed ideology echo chamber” [31] where they find one another’s beliefs validated and reinforced. The possibility also exists that the results returned by the Google search may have been influenced by previous searches conducted on the computer in question. However, given the nature of the search (looking for descriptive accounts), the authors consider that this was more likely to have tightened the specificity of the search than to have introduced bias into its results.

The validity of the gang-stalking phenomena extracted from the current study sample is supported by the comparison with earlier results obtained from a self-selected sample using a questionnaire methodology [5]. Qualitative survey responses from Sheridan and James’ [24] study were classified as part of the current exercise into the categories produced by the present study and compared. Chi-square analysis showed more similarities than differences between the two samples, and all categories generated by the present study were endorsed by respondents to the Sheridan and James’ [5] questionnaire. In effect, the two studies produced descriptions of the same core themes.

Examination of the sequelae of being gang-stalked also produced similar categories to the study by Sheridan and James [5], supporting the conclusion that the two studies were examining similar phenomena. The earlier study comprised a more-detailed and substantial exploration of the effects of being gang-stalked, given that it used a battery of specific questions as well as a PTSD rating scale to explore experiences. Whereas this was a weaker methodology in terms of eliciting the phenomena that constitute the gang-stalking experience, it is a superior methodology when examining symptoms and consequences where the subject matter (in particular psychological state) is appropriately explored through standardised questions. It is

clear from both studies that gang-stalking has a serious deleterious effect upon individuals' well-being.

A factor that stands out in the current study concerns the aggression with which sufferers responded to their experiences (see Table 2). Of respondents, 32% described experiences falling into the category "determined to fight back", while 16% made statements that fell into the category "development of hatred/violent tendencies". Examples include: "We can either go out on our feet or our knees and I plan to sell myself for as high a price as I can reap from them"; "I may have to kill them before they kill me"; and "I think the only way forward is to get some weapons and act". Violence in those who have complained of gang-stalking is not unknown. Sarteschi [21] described the cases of four men who believed that they were so-called "targeted individuals" and that the organised efforts of those who targeted them constituted "gang-stalking". Collectively, the four men killed 28 people and injured 12 more. Sarteschi points to a need for intervention to prevent violent responses, and notes that the men whose cases were detailed in her study had engaged in significant efforts to make others aware of their perceived victimisation, these efforts taking the form of manifestos, videos and audio recordings, and social media posts. The violence perpetrated by these men was motivated by self-defence (in the form of a pre-emptive strike) and a need to alert the world at large to the dangers posed by gang-stalking. Serious violence appears to be rare in those experiencing gang-stalking phenomena. However, it is of note that the experiences grouped above under "invasive attack on the subject's body" constitute examples of threat-control-override symptoms, which have been linked with an increased risk of violence [32,33]. It is also noted that the experiences and quotes above would satisfy criteria for the red-flag violence risk items of "homicidal ideation" and "high-risk phenomena" in the stalking and threat risk assessment guides the Stalking Risk Profile [34] and the Communications Threat Assessment Protocol [35].

5. Conclusions

The experience of being gang-stalked appears to be a widespread phenomenon that has been subject to little scientific examination. The current study provides a preliminary description of the phenomena involved that was produced by a methodology that did not incorporate pre-conceived assumptions. This provides a foundation upon which further research could be built. It also serves to confirm the harmful effects of the gang-stalking experience upon sufferers, first set out in the only other study available [5]. These findings constitute a potent reason why gang-stalking should be regarded as an important subject for study.

Whilst it was important to adopt a methodology that allowed the phenomena constituting the experience of gang-stalking to emerge de novo, it would now be appropriate to conduct studies of cases based upon specific questions in order to gain a clearer idea of the proportion of sufferers who experience each category of phenomenon, as the main categories have now been elucidated and the core phenomena described. This is because higher proportions are likely to be elicited through direct questioning than were found by studying internet descriptions. Finally, whilst this study has described the core phenomena of the gang-stalking experience, the question remains as to whether gang-stalking is a single phenomenon or represents several overlapping phenomena, each with its own defining pattern of experiences.

Author Contributions

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