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Female survivors' experiences of authorities' actions in cases of partner stalking

Stalking behavior is perceived and defined differently in different countries (Sheridan, Blaauw & Davies, 2003). Stalking is generally defined as an intentional pattern of repeated intrusive and intimidating behaviors that cause, or can be regarded by any reasonable person as causing, the target to feel harassed, threatened and afraid (Miller, 2012).

A meta-analysis of 175 studies with data on 122 207 individuals found that between 60 and 80% of victims are females (Spitzberg, & Cupach, 2007). Of these studies, 70% were conducted in the US, 8% in the UK and Ireland, 8% in Australia, 5% in Canada, and 2% in other European countries. In most stalking cases, the stalker and victim know each other (Sheridan et al., 2003), most frequently as a previous intimate partner (Melton, 2000; Sheridan et al., 2003; Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007) but also, for example, as a co-worker or neighbor (Zona, Palarea & Lane, 1998). While stalking is often combined with physical and domestic violence (Melton, 2000), stalkers also commonly use more insidious means, including what may appear as normal and quite harmless behaviors, that the victim experiences as threatening (Sheridan et al., 2003). Stalking is not a single act but rather a combination of many unpleasant events that have taken place over a long period and have had a significant impact on the victim's life.

A significant correlation has been found between a stalker's history of violence and violent stalking behavior (Palarea, Zona, Lane & Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 1999) as well as between threats made by a stalker and the use of physical violence (Björklund, 2010; Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007). Intimate partner stalkers tend to be more violent than stalkers who have not abused their partner within the intimate relationship, and intimate partner stalking has been considered a risk for femicide (McFarlane, Campbell, Wilt, Sachs & Ulrich, 1999). Acts of stalking and violence are also more likely to occur if the stalker has

demonstrated control behavior earlier during the relationship (Ornstein & Rickne, 2013); that is, stalking can be a continuation of coercive control, a form of domestic abuse.

Partner stalking often begins when a relationship ends: a feeling of losing control and being rejected can lead to anger and terrorizing of the ex-partner (Nicastro, Cousins & Spitzberg, 2000). Thus, the reason for partner stalking usually seems to be an inability to accept the end of the relationship (Hall, 1998). Partner stalking clearly differs from other forms of stalking: it is a form of partner violence in which having a relationship history with and intimate knowledge of the victim enables the stalker to deploy specific strategies to harm the victim (Logan & Walker, 2010; Logan & Walker, 2009).

Stalking can include behaviors, such as physical violence (Cupach & Spitzberg, 2004), that severely threaten the victim's life (Sheridan et al., 2003). Victims have reported feeling threatened as the most common symptom of being stalked (Nicastro, Cousins & Spitzberg, 2000). Living in constant fear, experiencing loss of control over one's own life, and feeling that the future is unpredictable can cause the victim serious harm (Hall, 1998; Logan & Walker, 2009; Cupach & Spitzberg, 2004; Sheridan, et al., 2003; Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007). Many victims experience distress and confusion (Logan & Walker, 2010; Pathé, Mullen & Purcell, 2001). Furthermore, feelings of powerlessness, withdrawal, fear and self-blame are common, and many victims have symptoms of anxiety (Pathé, Mullen & Purcell, 2001; Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007). In many cases, the stalking experience leads to post-traumatic stress disorder (Pathé, Mullen & Purcell, 2001).

Stalkers can employ various digital tactics, such as spying on their victim via a computer, mobile phone apps or other devices (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007). Stalking is often invisible and therefore hard for people other than the victim to recognize (Nikupeteri, 2016). It may manifest as behavior that third parties do not consider harmful while remaining extremely unpleasant for the victim (Sheridan et al., 2003). Victims of partner stalking often report

experiencing incidents that other people find hard to believe, such as ex-partners breaking into their home and moving things from one room to another simply to frighten the victim (Hall, 1998). Intimate partner stalkers are more likely than other stalker sub-types to threaten their victims and carry out threats (Logan & Walker, 2009). They behave in more treacherous ways and seem to adopt riskier behavior than other stalkers, such as more often making physical contact with their victims and committing violence against them (Palarea, Zona, Lane & Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 1999; Sheridan & Davies, 2001).

Actions taken by the authorities

Stalking was first defined as a crime in 1990, in California (Sheridan et al., 2003; Zona et al., 1998). In Finland, stalking was not criminalized until 2014 and training for authorities on stalking is largely non-existent. Despite legislation, presenting proof and hard evidence of stalking in court has turned out to be very challenging for police officers (Lynch & Logan, 2015). Other barriers to charging suspected stalkers were prosecutors who do not take stalking seriously, uncooperative victims (e.g., unwilling to see the perpetrator arrested), inadequate documentation (e.g., events not logged by victims), and seemingly legitimate explanations offered for their behavior by perpetrators.

The early identification of stalking is key to preventing its escalation. Several studies indicate that civil authorities fail to understand the nature of stalking and its harmful effects on victims (Brewster, 2001; Logan & Walker, 2010; Melton, 2000). Stalking does not seem to be taken seriously, especially by the police and the justice system (Brewster, 2001; Melton, 2000; Nikupeteri, 2016, Taylor-Dunn et al., 2018). Health care professionals, in turn, have been found to have an important role not only in supporting victims directly, but also in referring them to other agencies (Galeazzi, et al., 2009). Both lawyers and mental health professionals have received very high ratings from victims both for perceived support and for the seriousness accorded to their predicament when surveyed six months after the commencement of stalking.

Authorities often lack information on victims' real experiences and the crucial need for planning their safety at the beginning of a stalking investigation (Logan & Walker, 2010). If the goal in stalking cases is seen as resolving interpersonal problems, the dyadic nature of stalking can lead outsiders to blame the victim for provoking the stalker. (Ewan, Pathe & Ogloff, 2011). In such cases, victims may fail to receive the police support and protection they need (Geistman, 2009).

Victims often have low expectations of the police before getting help and feelings of frustration after contacting them (Brewster, 2001). Victims tend to perceive the police as ignorant and report receiving contradictory advice from the authorities. Victims may also see the advice given, especially by the police, as punishment for causing the situation and as violating their human rights. In many cases, for example, the police have recommended relocation to the victim as a solution to the stalking problem. Victims of stalking are considered one of the most unjustly treated victim groups (Spence-Diehl, 2003). While some victims have expressed satisfaction with the justice system, most report lack of helpfulness (Baum, Catalano, Rand & Rose, 2009) and sympathy (Brewster, 1999). Although stalking in abusive relationships is rarely limited to the period after a couple separates, one study found that the police identified almost none of the pre-separation stalking (Stark, 2007). The police also tend to focus exclusively on physical violence, neglecting other types of abuse (Robinson, Myhill & Wire, 2016).

How the police recognize and respond to stalking may stem from the general attitudes to stalking prevalent in the community, such as underestimating, justifying and normalizing it (McKeon, McEwan & Luebbers, 2015). Men are generally more likely to excuse stalking and blame victims for the situation (Lambert, Smith, Geistman, Cluse-Tolar & Jiang, 2013; McKeon, McEwan & Luebbers, 2015) and the majority of police officers are male (Geistman, 2009). Reluctance on the part of the police to investigate allegations of stalking is not unusual.

Moreover, if they do, the means they adopt are often ineffective (Baum et al., 2009). Victim service representatives are perceived as more sensitive than the police to the severity of stalking (Logan & Walker, 2010).

Defining stalking has been found to have many problematic aspects that complicate police work (Lynch & Logan, 2015). One severe and widely noted aspect of stalking is lack of proof. This induces uncertainty in authorities about whether their suspicions are justified, in turn raising their threshold to act (Ellonen, 2010).

The research literature often neglects the diversity of stalking behavior, viewing it as a simpler phenomenon than it really is (Logan & Walker, 2009). This in turn could hinder authorities from seeing stalking as a behavioral pattern rather than a single act. The need for education targeted at recognizing and finding ways to put an end to stalking has been strongly emphasized (Lynch & Logan, 2015; McKeon et al., 2015). The significance of stalking and other crimes of coercive control becomes greater when they are woven into a larger pattern of entrapment (Stark, 2007).

Intensive interventions and ensuring victim safety are important for preventing long-lasting disorders and helping victims to recover from the stalking experience (Mullen et al., 2009; Pathé et al., 2001). Understanding the nature of stalking and its effects, helping victims to find hope, and building a confidential dyadic relationship are the key elements when seeking to assist victims (Pathé et al., 2001). Victims must be given knowledge about the typical symptoms caused by stalking and made to understand that they are not responsible for the situation (Pathé et al., 2001).

The purpose of our study was to further knowledge about the victims of partner stalking and their experiences of help received from civil authorities, such as health professionals and criminal justice personnel, that could serve in developing interventions to help future victims survive stalking experiences. Our study is based on peer support group data on the experiences

of partner-stalking victims and is, to the best of our knowledge, the first research effort on this topic, not only in Finland but also internationally.

Our research question was: How do victims of partner stalking experience the actions of civil authorities and the investigation process?

Methods

This study is a part of the Finnish VARJO project, carried out during 2012-2016. The project's aim was to strengthen the safety of families suffering from violent post-separation partner stalking, improve precautionary work and create possibilities for supporting victims' functioning through peer support and help in their recovery from the stalking experience. The project target group included the immediate victims of stalking, family members (e.g. children) and stalkers.

Data

The VARJO project and Women's Line collaborated in setting up a national support group for women experiencing partner stalking after their relationship had ended. Women's Line is an NGO offering services for women suffering from abuse, threats or fear. This was the first internet-organized support group for stalked women in Finland. Our study utilized these internet-based conversations between female victims of partner stalking. All the perpetrators were male ex-partners. Both the VARJO project and Women's Line, gave ethical approval for the study. The participants consented to use of their anonymized contributions.

The support group's participants' conversations were actively guided by two Women's Line employees, known as attendants. One was a psychologist and the other a social psychologist. Their purpose was to welcome all participants into the group and support them in their difficult life situations. Ensuring the safety of the group was an important consideration when advertising the group, choosing and instructing the participants, and directing the group's activities. Of the fourteen women who initially signed up for the group, eight gave their

informed consent to participate in the research. The data mostly comprise the experiences of the six most active participants in the forum.

During the five-week life of the support group, it was possible to post contributions 24 hours a day. The topics for discussion were introduced by the attendants or by the participants themselves. By the end of the forum, the attendants and participants had discussed topics on 11 themes related to stalking experiences. Participants' stalking experiences were diverse, including digital stalking and using contact with children and judicial processes as stalking tools.

Although most of the experiences reported by the participants in this study concern post-separation stalking, we use the term partner stalking, as in many cases the stalking had already begun during the couple relationship. Several participants had experienced both mental and physical violence. Although some of the victims were further advanced in the recovery process than others and were thus able to give tips and support to other participants, stalking had not been relegated to the past for any of them.

Analysis

We chose qualitative content analysis as our research method, as it enables systematic description of the content of textual data by reducing the number of thematic categories (Schreier, 2012). We began our analysis by reading through all the data and extracting central themes. On several occasions, regardless of the current topic of the conversation, the participants mentioned actions taken by the authorities. This theme was obviously important for the victims, and hence we decided to start by exploring their perceptions of the actions of civil authorities and the investigation process.

In the categorization process, the data are reduced to main thematic categories and subcategories (Schreier, 2012). We re-read the material searching for victims' comments on the authorities' actions and, at the same time, formed rudimentary categories of their experiences.

After starting out with a larger number of categories, we ended up with four main categories that included all the relevant data. All the classification and coding work was conducted manually from Finnish text. The extracts cited here were translated into English by the present authors and revised by an English native speaker.

Initially, our purpose was to treat the civil authorities as a single homogeneous group. However, we noticed that the women's experiences differed depending on whether they were speaking about the police and legal system, their own lawyers, health care, child protection services or school personnel. Hence, we decided to examine the victims' experiences of each of these authorities separately. Often, however, the women did not specify the type of authority they were talking about, and thus we created a separate category for comments of this kind.

Results

We have modified some of the excerpts to ensure participant anonymity. Deleted text is marked as follows: (...).

We identified four main thematic categories describing how the female victims of partner stalking experienced the actions taken by the authorities and the investigation process. These categories were divided into 2 or 3 subcategories.

- 1) Problems in dealing with stalking
 - a. Difficulties in recognizing stalking
 - b. Evading responsibility
 - c. Lack of suitable support
- 2) Dissatisfaction with the investigation process
 - a. Problems in progressing the investigation
 - b. Criticism of the justice system
- 3) Trust in the authorities
 - a. Praise

- b. Opening the victim's eyes
 - c. Receiving understanding and support
- 4) Expectations of future actions by the authorities
- a. Negative expectations
 - b. Positive expectations

Problems in Dealing with Stalking

The forum participants emphasized that the authorities seem to have difficulties in dealing with stalking. Four participants had experiences in this category. The authorities in question either did not recognize their cases as stalking or, if they did, the victims did not receive adequate support.

Most of the negative experiences in this category concerned child protection personnel. Four participants referred to the problems child protection services seemed to have in dealing with stalking. Two participants criticized the attitude of the police and two condemned the approach taken by health personnel. One participant was critical of her lawyer and another emphasized that the authorities lacked skills in dealing with stalking.

Difficulties in recognizing stalking. Three participants had experiences indicating that many authorities still do not recognize stalking per se. Stalking was sometimes misinterpreted: for example, the authorities simply saw the situation as a couple arguing with each other.

Extract 1

“I feel so let down by the unprofessional behavior of the authorities that my inner voice plays down my experiences. Whenever I've spoken about the experiences we've had, they always try to normalize them or then I have been the irritating ex who tells boring stories and even talks about stalking. (...) So they tried to put us in the category of a quarrelsome couple, which was bizarre.”

Participants also noted that authorities sometimes fail to recognize who is the perpetrator and who is the victim. The male perpetrator was often so friendly towards the authorities that they chose to believe him rather than the female victim. Stalkers also told lies about their ex-partners, leading the authorities to question the victim's psychological health and ability to be a mother. On several occasions the authorities treated women as if they were the guilty party and were doing something wrong.

Extract 2

“I don't understand how the authorities don't see who the real manipulator is.”

Extract 3

“When I think of my earlier experiences of the child protection services, health care, etc., they have judged me as deluded, revengeful, a bitter woman who is violent with her kids.”

Evading responsibilities. Two participants mentioned authorities who did not take their responsibilities seriously when told about the stalking. They felt that while the authorities somehow seemed to understand that a problem existed, they did nothing about it. It was as if they “washed their hands” of the situation, “turned their back” on the victim's distress or “neglected their duties”, either because they were unwilling to help the victim or were too afraid to face the stalker.

Extract 4

“My ex even got his colleagues at work to praise him despite striking my youngest child in front of them. Everything was presented in a better light and the child protection services was not notified because my ex had been so repentant.”

Extract 5

“The child protection services were briefly present because of the abuse but then they concluded that I didn’t need their help. They were threatened by my enraged ex and after that they were no longer willing to help.”

Lack of suitable support. In this subcategory, the authorities seemed to understand that the situation involved stalking but they did not give victims the support they needed. While the victim was recognized as a victim of stalking, the authorities handled the situation in a way that caused the victim to feel uncomfortable rather than relieved. Even when the authorities took action against the stalker, they did not treat the victim in the comforting and understanding way she expected. Occasionally the victim was not properly informed about progress in the case or the decisions made by the authorities, knowledge which would have been crucial for her well-being.

Extract 6

“I realize that I’m exhausted by this threatening situation as well as the fact that as a mom I have to make such difficult decisions on my own without having any guarantee of how the authorities will act in the end!”

One participant mentioned receiving some support from the authorities but not of the kind she would have needed. The victim did not like the way the authorities handled the situation: she received instructions from the authorities, but no one asked her what she needed or wanted to be done. This violated her human right to be heard and decide for herself.

Extract 7

“I feel as though I have been acting like a robot ever since the child protection services got involved.”

Furthermore, victims did not always know where they could get help. One participant was frustrated because she was concerned for her children but had no idea which authorities or which organization to turn to. Because the victim lacked knowledge about who could help her, she did not receive the support she needed.

Extract 8

“Again, today I was searching for authorities who could advise us. It’s surprising that when the violence concerns children, there are no authorities who are willing to help. There is no organization with the expertise to handle child protection cases.”

This subcategory also included statements in which victims expressed dissatisfaction with the actions of the authorities without being specific. These victims either mentioned having been traumatized by the way the authorities approached them or, without any further explanation, simply referred to having numerous bitter experiences in their dealings with them. Thus, while these women did not directly state that they were or were not seen as victims of stalking, we included them in this category as they clearly did not receive the support they desperately needed.

Extract 9

“The actions of the authorities have traumatized me even further and as a result it is difficult for me to trust anyone anymore, but that’s another story.”

Dissatisfaction with the investigation process

Four participants expressed dissatisfaction with the investigation into stalking. Some were dissatisfied with the way the investigation proceeded while others criticized the Finnish justice system in general. Of the different authorities, the police and judicial authorities were the most widely criticized. All four participants in this category reported having negative experiences regarding the action taken by the police and judicial representatives in the

investigation process. One participant also criticized the child protection personnel. Another participant complained about the health service personnel, and yet another was dissatisfied with her lawyer's actions in the investigation process.

Problems in progressing the investigation. Three participants mentioned problems with the progress of the investigation. The investigation was slow to start, and these victims did not always receive enough information about it and how it was to proceed. Furthermore, co-operation between the different authorities participating in the investigation process did not run smoothly.

Extract 10

“I haven't gotten any information from the police about when the investigation will begin or whether it ever will. The child protection services can't apparently do anything before the police have told them how they will proceed. And if the police don't inform them by Thursday next week, I'll be forced to decide by myself how to arrange my children's visits.”

Some participants also mentioned that the investigation had not proceeded in the way they had hoped. One said that by allowing her children to say certain things without realizing the consequences, she had accidentally compromised the investigation. In some cases, the investigation failed in the victim's eyes because the authorities or her lawyer had compromised the investigation with their actions.

Extract 11

“I am deeply disappointed with the custody hearing. My lawyer didn't handle the case as he should have done, and this led to the judge deciding that joint custody be upheld. I didn't get a chance to present the evidence I already had because my lawyer had totally ruined the case.”

Criticism of the justice system. Four participants criticized the Finnish judicial system for protecting the perpetrator rather than the victim. Encountering problems in building one's case led to feelings of powerlessness and frustration. A common shared experience in this subcategory was the requirement that the victim gather an array of evidence to prove stalking, whereas male stalkers did not seem to need much evidence to be believed when accusing their victims. Moreover, gathering proof was experienced as psychically challenging in these circumstances.

Extract 12

“It's strange that he is free to accuse me for all sorts of reasons without proper proof while I have to gather a lot of evidence to support my case.”

One participant described how she felt powerless when forced to listen to false accusations against her without being given a chance to properly defend herself:

Extract 13

“In court, I had to listen all sorts of smears and downright lies about myself. The worst part is that you can't defend yourself in court and the process follows a fixed path and if you forget to say something it is already too late.”

Another participant also brought up her experiences of the inability of the judicial system to protect victims from stalkers:

Extract 14

“All my ex currently does is continuously sue me over our children. It's a form of legal harassment and stalking. I have been quite angry that the judicial system is completely incapable of protecting me from this unnecessary litigation.”

Trust in the authorities

Six participants mentioned experiencing encouraging comments, eye-opening interventions or feelings of being understood by the authorities in the process of dealing with stalking. In some cases, however, this happened only after many negative meetings with the authorities or after moving to a new locality.

Most of the positive experiences concerned health services personnel: five of the six participants mentioned being understood and encouraged by their psychologists, occupational health nurses or other health personnel. Three also reported good experiences regarding their lawyers. Two spoke of being treated well by the police and justice personnel and one by the child protection services. One participant recalled positive memories of support from her school on several occasions. Two mentioned being well-treated by the authorities without specifying which authorities they were talking about.

Praise. Three participants had received praiseworthy comments from the authorities. Though praise may seem a rather minor gesture, it had a significant effect on these victims' ability to cope. It made them feel better about themselves, caused them to congratulate themselves on their survival and helped them to keep going regardless of their difficult life situations.

Extract 15

“Considering everything, the words I most appreciated possibly came from my occupational health nurse, who said that she admires me; I have been brave and strong. She admires me for having had the courage to act and not having stayed trapped in that situation anymore.”

Opening the victim's eyes. Two victims had not quite understood that their situation involved stalking. Only after the authorities had opened their eyes by intervening in the

situation did they begin to understand the seriousness of what had recently happened to them. In these cases, the victims felt that intervention by the authorities had been key in helping them to realize the gravity of the situation.

Extract 16

“I know the feeling when you’ve convinced yourself that something bad can’t possibly happen to you anymore and then you realize that the situation really is serious after all. I needed advice and interference from the authorities to understand that.”

Receiving understanding and support. Five participants claimed that some authorities had understood and believed them when they reported being stalked. This led to efforts by the authorities to help them and put an end to the stalking by, for example, imposing a restraining order or pressing charges on the stalker. For these victims, it was of paramount importance that the authorities recognized the situation for what it was, i.e., serious and harmful for them. They felt gratitude and relief when this happened, partly because such a response is rare in stalking cases.

Extract 17

“(…) I have a wonderful doctor, who understands my situation and recommended therapy, which I’m currently having.”

Extract 18

“Now that I’ve moved I have finally gotten the support and help which I would have expected earlier. Things are clicking into place and the authorities are acting the way they are supposed to.”

Expectations of future actions by the authorities

This category concerns participants' predictions of how the authorities are likely to deal with their stalking cases or how co-operation between the victim and the authorities is likely to develop. Four people, instead of reflecting on their past experiences, commented on how they expected the authorities to act in the future. Most of these comments indicated mistrust of the authorities: for example, the belief that the authorities would not take appropriate action to help them or that they would take the stalker's side. However, one participant expressed her confidence in the authorities and seemed to believe that they would also help her in the future.

One participant was cynical about future police actions and two expressed concern about child protection services. Two reported having negative expectations of the authorities' future actions, while one felt reassured, although she did not name the authority in question.

Negative expectations. Four participants did not expect the authorities to believe them when they reported being stalked or to handle their situation appropriately. These expectations could be explained by their numerous negative experiences of the authorities' past responses.

Extract 19

“At the same time, because I am terrified that no one is going to believe me I'm acting as though I were lying, even when I'm telling the truth.”

Positive expectations. One person stated that she trusted the authorities to handle her situation appropriately. This was because the authorities had immediately believed her when she had told them about the stalking, and they had taken steps to ensure her safety.

Extract 20

“I feel confident about the authorities at the moment. As soon as we broke up, I asked the police for advice about what to do. Now that there are thousands of messages which include a number of threats, the authorities are trying to protect us to prevent familicide.”

Discussion

This study aimed to further knowledge on victims' experiences of the actions of civil authorities and the investigation process in cases of partner stalking. Analysis of our data yielded four main categories of female victims' experiences of the actions taken by different civil authorities to their stalking and to its investigation. These categories were authorities' problems in dealing with stalking, dissatisfaction with the investigation process, trust in the authorities, and expectations of the future actions of the authorities.

In many of the present cases, stalking was not recognized and/or the female victim not believed. Our results support those of earlier studies in that many authorities did not seem to understand the real nature of stalking and failed to take the victim seriously (Brewster, 2001; Logan & Walker, 2010; Melton, 2000) It is important that when victims approach authorities their subjective reality is acknowledged (Nikupeteri, 2016). In the present data, their experiences were very often played down and they received little or no support from the authorities, and thus their safety and well-being were put at risk. Due to such dismissive responses, some victims even began to question the seriousness of their situation. Understanding the coercive nature of partner stalking is a key issue, as noted by Stark (2007).

Participants also talked about authorities evading their responsibilities. Authorities who recognize that the stalking is taking place but who are unwilling or lack the courage to do anything to help the victim are severely neglecting their responsibilities. As some of the participants described it, the experience of not getting any help from the very people the victim assumed she could turn to and rely on may be even more traumatic than the terrifying act of stalking itself. The failure of authorities to recognize stalking is alarming: if they do not intervene, the harassment will continue and the victim left to suffer the harmful consequences alone. Moreover, victims treated in this way are unlikely to turn to the authorities in the future, even when in desperate need of help. Most of these female victims predicted that the authorities

would probably neither believe nor support them. Low expectations and mistrust of authorities has been reported earlier (Brewster, 2001).

In some cases, the participant was identified as a victim of partner stalking and the authorities intervened, yet the support she received somehow made her feel uncomfortable. The support was either inadequate or inappropriate. For example, the victim's right to make decisions for herself was not always respected. Moreover, victims of partner stalking also expect open-mindedness, warmth, understanding and advice concerning the ordeal they have been going through.

The fact that authorities are unable to recognize stalking and thus fail to fulfil their responsibilities and provide the victim with the support she needs potentially results from inexperience or inadequate training in this area. If professionals have not previously encountered cases of stalking, they may not, as pointed out by Lynch and Logan (2015), recognize the phenomenon and hence disregard the most important evidence of its existence. The male stalker may also intentionally deceive them by distorting reality and making the female victim appear to be the perpetrator. It has been shown that men are more likely to excuse stalking and blame the victim for being stalked whereas women tend to take stalking cases more seriously (Lambert et al., 2013; McKeon et al., 2015). The fact that most police officers are men might partly explain why it is difficult for them to view stalking from the victim's perspective. In turn, most health-care professionals are women, which might be one reason why they are more likely to understand the ordeal of victims and take stalking seriously.

In this study, many stalking situations were understood as attempts to resolve interpersonal problems and thus dyadic in nature, and the victim was also seen as to blame for the conflict. It is common for a stalker to manipulate the authorities with the aim of being perceived as the "good" party (Nikupeteri, 2016). This again highlights professionals' insufficient understanding of the various aspects of stalking. However, it is extremely important

for people to realize that violence and stalking are not part of a normal relationship and that the responsibility for these types of abuse is not shared by both parties but lies solely with the perpetrator. Because stalkers are skilled at making their victims appear to be the guilty party or to have many personal issues, it is important that professionals are taught to expect such behaviors and know how to deal with them (Nikupeteri, 2016; Spence-Diehl, 2003). Authorities also need to listen to the victim. Specifically, they need to ask the victim directly what kind of support she needs in the situation and to take her answers into account when planning how to proceed with her case.

Some participants criticized the investigation process: in some cases, the investigation was slow to start, and it was unclear to the victims how it was to proceed. A few participants also criticized the Finnish justice system, claiming that it protects the perpetrator rather than the victim. Lync and Logan (2015) found that police officers who had never charged stalking viewed stalking as less dangerous, believed that officers do not need to file reports on accusations of stalking, and perceived all barriers related to charging stalking as more challenging than officers who had previously charged stalking. Specialized training and experience in stalking should improve police officers' ability to effectively build a stalking case while protecting the victim.

Occasionally, authorities were perceived as active helpers who praised and encouraged the victims and took the lead in handling the situation. One person stated that she trusted the authorities to handle the stalking situation well. This attitude of trust was based on good experiences with the authorities, who had believed and helped her from the moment she told them about being stalked. However, it should be noted that many women claimed to have had number of negative experiences with authorities before they were taken seriously. For some victims, relocating resulted in a significant change in their life, as in their new area they finally got the support from the authorities they had always hoped for.

A noteworthy finding is that most of the negative experiences reported by the present sample of victims concerned the actions of the police and other representatives of the criminal justice system and child protection services, whereas most of the good experiences concerned health care providers, such as psychologists and doctors. Moreover, one participant gave her school a lot of positive feedback. These results support earlier findings of dissatisfaction with the attitude and actions of the police and justice system personnel by victims of stalking (Brewster, 2001; Geistman, 2009; Melton, 2000; Nikupeteri, 2016) and that criminal justice representatives take stalking less seriously than victim service representatives (Logan & Walker, 2010). These results suggest that health care services and teachers may be more sensitive to the situation and better able to recognize stalking than the police or child protection services. Health care professionals might also have a better understanding of their clients' symptoms and the likely reasons behind them and thus be better able to see the bigger picture.

It would also be important to develop ways of helping stalkers change their behavior, as the legislative and social means tried so far have turned out to be inadequate (Nikupeteri, 2016). Domestic Violence Perpetrator Programs (DVPPs) may be effective in preventing post-separation stalking behaviors from developing (Stark, 2007). DVPPs are implemented to reduce reoffending in people identified as having committed some form of domestic violence. The aim is to alter perpetrators' attitudes and behaviors. Moreover, because stalking often requires the mobilization of multiple helping agencies, the development of effective interventions aiming at its prevention requires a public health approach where several agencies, such as healthcare, social care and criminal justice services, along with other stakeholders work together.

Limitations of the study

We used content analysis as our research method, as this enabled us to identify the main themes of interest present in the data (Krippendorff, 2013). The fact that the data comprised

victims' spontaneous conversation enabled us to identify the experiences of stalking that had been the most meaningful for them without restricting their topics. Given that research is always affected by the researcher's own interpretation of the data (Williams, 2007), we sought to increase the reliability of our study by maintaining open, continuing dialogue on the data.

Although we think that the victims' spontaneous conversation was valuable in identifying their most meaningful experiences, the possibility remains that something important was left unsaid. Furthermore, when discussing their experiences, there may have been issues that the victims did not explicitly comment on, as these had already been extensively discussed by the other participants. If the participants had been given controlled questions, more mention of such topics might have been made.

The meaning of some comments was unclear, rendering them difficult to categorize. This underlines the difficulty that there is no unambiguous way to interpret data of this kind (Peshkin, 2000). We did not, however, encounter similar challenges in identifying the main categories, which we consider to be more crucial for this study.

Researcher sympathy for the victims of stalking had to be kept in mind when interpreting their experiences of the actions, or lack thereof, taken by the authorities. We were aware throughout of the risk of bias favoring the victims over the authorities. We were also alerted to this by the positive remarks, noted and categorized, made by some victims about their experiences.

Conclusions

The results of this study indicate that civil authorities continue to have problems in dealing with stalking. Most of the negative experiences reported by the present sample of female victims concerned the police, other representatives of the criminal justice system, and child protection services, whereas most of the good experiences concerned health care providers. Early identification of stalking is key to preventing its escalation. Thus, to recognize

the phenomenon, validate victims' experiences and needs, ensure safety, and develop clear procedures when encountering its victims, the different civil authorities need to be better educated about stalking and victim support. Recognizing post-separation stalking by former intimate partners as a continuation of coercive control, a form of domestic abuse is essential.

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Key messages:

- Authorities continue to have problems in dealing with stalking
- Authorities need to be better educated about stalking and victim support
- Stalking by former intimate partners is a continuation of coercive control

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