Is there a link between Neurodiversity and Stalking? A Systematic Review

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ABSTRACT:

The increasing conviction rates of stalking in the UK have prompted efforts to identify factors that may influence individuals to engage in such behaviour. Over two million people in England and Wales experience stalking every year, with estimated reoffending rates for stalking being between 25 and 55% (ONS, 2022; McEwan et al., 2017). Research has identified risk factors that may contribute towards stalking behaviours, which has included obsessive relational pursuit and online impulsivity (Post et al., 2014a; Rocheleau, 2019). This has resulted in researchers postulating a link between facets of neurodiversity and stalking behaviour (Freckelton, 2013).

The Systematic Review was performed according to the recommendations of the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA). Papers were screened for quality appraisal and risk of bias. The initial search yielded 3880 articles. 10 papers were deemed as meeting the inclusion criteria.

There is insufficient research quality regarding neurodiversity and stalking perpetration due to poor diagnostic reliability of neurodiversity and a lack of reliable tools being used in the research which do not meet the definitions of stalking. As such, the existing research about neurodiversity and stalking perpetration is inconclusive and predominantly unreliable. Tentative evidence indicated that people with neurodiversity were at greater risk of being victims of stalking and that for the minority of people with neurodiversity who engage in stalking the factors that contribute towards this mirror those of neurotypical individuals.

CUST_RESEARCH_LIMITATIONS/IMPLICATIONS__(LIMIT_100_WORDS) :No data available.

Overall, the factors contributing to stalking highlighted by the included studies, such as difficulties with communication, empathy, insight into social functioning, interpersonal competence, and ways of forming relationships with others, seem to map onto the deficits of neurotypical stalking perpetrators (Canter and Youngs, 2012; Lewis et al., 2001; McEwan et al., 2009; Mullen et al., 2006). However, tools that contextualise neurodiversity in the context of risk assessments for stalking may be helpful (Al-Attar, 2019; Al-Attar, 2021).

CUST_SOCIAL_IMPLICATIONS_(LIMIT_100_WORDS) :No data available.

Recommendations for further research are made to gain a robust understanding of any potential relationship between neurodiversity and stalking and in particular a risk of stalking victimisation.

Figure 1 – PRISMA Flowchart outlining the study selection process

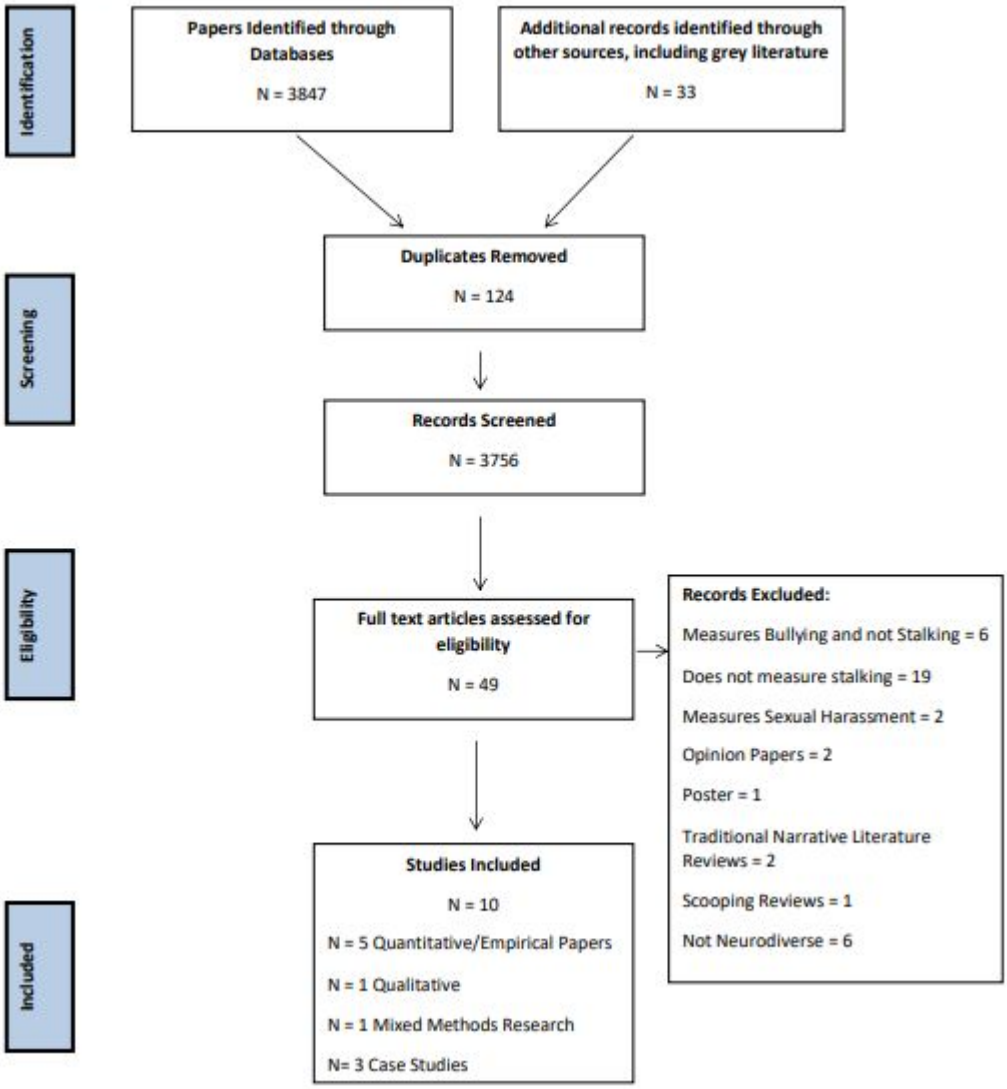

Table 1. Inclusion and Exclusion Criterion

	Inclusion	Exclusion
Population	Male and Female People with neurodiversity	Non-human People under the age of 10 (age of criminal responsibility in the UK)
Exposure	Stalking Cyberstalking	Focuses solely on bullying
Context/Language	English Worldwide Community and offending samples	Published in other languages
Outcomes	Frequency/Severity of behaviour Detection of vulnerability Reduction in Risk Improved intervention/support	Behaviour indicated that it could be considered a different type of offence
Type of publication	Peer reviewed Individual Studies identified from reviews Primary and Secondary Data	Literature reviews Book Chapters Opinion papers
Date restrictions	None	

Table 2 – Quality Ratings and Summary of Study Characteristics for included papers

ID	Author, Year and Title	Sample Size ASD = Autism (including traits) NT = neurotypical	Male/ Female	Sample Age	Method of measuring 'stalking'	Quality Rating (AA-E)	Convicted/ Arrested/ Apprehended for Stalking	Country
1	Stokes, M., Newton, N. and Kaur, A. (2007) 'Stalking, and social and romantic functioning among adolescents and adults with autism spectrum disorder.' *Journal of autism and developmental disorders, 37*(10), pp. 1969-1986.	N = 25 ASD N = 38 NT	Both	13-30	Courtship Behaviours Scale (CBS) self-report and parent report	D	No	Australia
2	Mogavero, M. C. and Hsu, K. H. (2020) 'Dating and courtship behaviours among those with autism spectrum disorder.' *Sexuality and Disability, 38*(2), pp. 355-364.	N = 46 ASD N = 88 NT	Both	Adults	Courtship Behaviour Scale (CBS)	D	No	Conducted online using Facebook users from North America, Europe and Australasia
3	Gibbs, V., Hudson, J. and Pellicano, E. (2020) 'The Extent and Nature of Autistic People's Violence Experiences During Adulthood: A Cross-sectional Study of Victimisation.' *Journal of autism and developmental disorders,* pp. 1-16.	N = 118 ASD adults who either self-reported an independent clinical diagnosis of an autism spectrum condition (N = 114) or self-identified as autistic but did not have a professional diagnosis (n = 18), and 128 NT.	Both	19 and over	Participants were asked to indicate using a "yes/no" format whether they had experienced • *stalking and harassment.*	D	No	Conducted Online. Participants were from Australia, United Kingdom, USA, New Zealand, Canada.
4	Ventura, F., Areias, G., Coroa, M., Araujo, A., Borges, J., Morais, S. and Madeira, N. (2022) 'Stalking behaviour and high-functioning autism spectrum disorders – a case report.' *The Journal of Forensic Psychiatry and Psychology, 33*(5), pp. 639-645.	N = 1 ASD	Male	Adult	Case study	E	Yes	Portugal
5	Hannah, L. A. and Stagg, S. D. (2016) 'Experiences of sex education and sexual	N = 20 ASD N = 20 NT	Both	18-25	Qualitative Interview	D	No	UK

	awareness in young adults with autism spectrum disorder.' *Journal of autism and developmental disorders, 46*(12), pp. 3678-3687.							
6	Mintah, K. (2014) *I cannot see it in their eyes: How autism symptoms hamper dating* (Doctoral dissertation, Carleton University).	N = 124 (mixed)	Both	Adult	Courtship Behaviour Scale (CBS)	D	No	Canada
7	Wheatley, R., Winder, B. and Kuss, D. (2021) 'It's so Hard to Get Out of that Bubble.' A Phenomenological Analysis with Men Who Have Stalked.' *Journal of Forensic Psychology Research and Practice, 21*(3), pp. 249-282.	N = 7 (mixed)	Male	Adult	Qualitative interview	E	Yes	UK
8	Shields, K. and Beversdorf, D. (2021) 'A dilemma for neurodiversity.' *Neuroethics, 14*(2), pp. 125-141.	N = 3 ASD	Both	Adult	Case Study	E	Yes	USA
9	Reyns, B. W. and Scherer, H. (2018) 'Stalking victimisation among college students: The role of disability within a lifestyle-routine activity framework.' *Crime and Delinquency, 64*(5), pp. 650-673.	N = 284 ADHD N = 43, 307 Total Sample	Both	18-25	Respondents were asked "within the last 12 months: were you a victim of stalking (e.g., waiting for you outside your classroom, residence, or other; repeated emails/phone calls)?" Any respondent who reported yes to this survey item was coded as stalking victim (0 = no; 1 = yes);	D	No	USA
10	Myles, B. S. and Simpson, R. L. (2002) 'Students with Asperger	N = 1 ASD	Male	Under 18	Case study	E	No	USA

	syndrome: Implications for counsellors.' *Counselling and Human Development, 34*(7), p. 1.							

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Keywords: Stalking; Autism; ADHD; Neurodiversity; Perpetration; Victimisation.

Abstract:

Purpose: The increasing conviction rates of stalking in the UK have prompted efforts to identify factors that may influence individuals to engage in such behaviour. Over two million people in England and Wales experience stalking every year, with estimated reoffending rates for stalking being between 25 and 55% (ONS, 2022; McEwan *et al.,* 2017). Research has identified risk factors that may contribute towards stalking behaviours, which has included obsessive relational pursuit and online impulsivity (Post *et al.,* 2014a; Rocheleau, 2019). This has resulted in researchers postulating a link between facets of neurodiversity and stalking behaviour (Freckelton, 2013).

Design/Methodology: The Systematic Review was performed according to the recommendations of the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA). Papers were screened for quality appraisal and risk of bias. The initial search yielded 3880 articles. 10 papers were deemed as meeting the inclusion criteria.

Findings: There is insufficient research quality regarding neurodiversity and stalking perpetration due to poor diagnostic reliability of neurodiversity and a lack of reliable tools being used in the research which do not meet the definitions of stalking. As such, the existing research about neurodiversity and stalking perpetration is inconclusive and predominantly unreliable. Tentative evidence indicated that people with neurodiversity were at greater risk of being victims of stalking and that for the minority of people with neurodiversity who engage in stalking the factors that contribute towards this mirror those of neurotypical individuals.

Practical Implications: Overall, the factors contributing to stalking highlighted by the included studies, such as difficulties with communication, empathy, insight into social functioning, interpersonal competence, and ways of forming relationships with others, seem to map onto the deficits of neurotypical stalking perpetrators (Canter and Youngs, 2012; Lewis *et al.,* 2001; Mullen *et al.,* 2006). However, tools that contextualise neurodiversity in the context of risk assessments for stalking may be helpful (Al-Attar, 2019; Al-Attar, 2021).

Originality: Recommendations for further research are made to gain a robust understanding of any potential relationship between neurodiversity and stalking and in particular a risk of stalking victimisation.

Introduction

What is Stalking?

Defining stalking unites three aspects: the frequency and duration of unsolicited intrusions; as well as the sense of fear experienced by the target (McEwan et al., 2020; Nobles et al., 2009). A period of two weeks is indicated to meaningfully differentiate self-limiting, shorter episodes of harassment from insistent patterns of stalking (Purcell *et al.,* 2004). Research findings indicate that individuals who display five or more unwanted intrusions are inclined to engage in recurrent stalking and harmful behaviour, such as threats (Thompson and Dennison, 2008). Hence, individuals who engage in a minimum of five unsolicited intrusions occurring over a minimum of two weeks that inflict a sense of fear or distress to the target may present a pattern of behaviour that defines stalking (McEwan *et al.,* 2020). This is known as the five plus two plus fear definition of stalking (McEwan *et al.,* 2020) which has been adopted within legislation whereby stalking and harassment are classified as offences as part of the Protection from Harassment Act 1997 (UK Public General Acts, 1997).

Prevalence of Stalking

Lifetime prevalence of stalking victimisation varies (McEwan and Pathe, 2014; Spitzberg and Cupach, 2014). Where the five plus two definition of stalking was used, the rate of stalking perpetration reached 22 per cent, with women being more likely to disclose stalking perpetration than men (McEwan *et al.,* 2020; Senkans *et al.,* 2017). Generally, episodes of stalking occur as a result of intimate relationships being terminated (Spitzberg and Cupach 2014; McEwan *et al.,* 2017). Cyber-stalking is argued to be fundamentally similar to in-person stalking in terms of the stalking process, the effects on victims, and the stalking process (Sheridan and Grant, 2007). However, a systematic review on cyberstalking concludes that the clarity on cyberstalking characterisation and prevalence is limited (Kaur *et al.,* 2021).

In the UK alone stalking and harassment was noted to account for a third of all police recordings in the year ending September 2023 (House of Commons, 2024). Furthermore, people who engage in stalking are noted to have high recidivism rates with 41% of offenders reoffending within 10 weeks (Bendlin *et al.,* 2020). In addition it is noted that stalking poses unique challenges for those seeking to assess risk because of the varied factors which contribute towards stalking and the heterogeneity of people who engage in this behaviour (McEwan *et al.,* 2018). It is therefore

recommended that whilst standardised risk assessment tools for stalking exist (e.g. the Stalking Risk Profile) specific factors relating to the individual being assessed should be included in the case formulation process as part of any risk assessment of stalking (McEwan *et al.,* 2018). Thus assessing the risk associated with stalking is imperative for practitioners as this can assist to inform treatment programmes and prevent reoffending. However, understanding the specific ways in which ND factors may contribute towards such risk assessment and formulation is currently unknown.

Factors contributing to stalking in research

Studies suggest that individuals who engage in stalking display: limited abilities to form and maintain appropriate relationships with others; difficulties with social skills; present as emotionally labile (Lewis *et al.,* 2001), have reduced social competence; and poor communication skills (Mullen et al., 2006). These factors cause difficulties in an individuals' ability to move on to new relationships, manage social isolation and verbally express emotions (Mullen et al., 2006) Underdeveloped receptive and expressive interpersonal communication skills have also been considered to stimulate stalking engagement (MacKenzie and James, 2011). In addition, due to difficulties in processing social cues, individuals who engage in stalking are suggested to be unable to identify the pursuit behaviour as frightening and unwanted (McEwan *et al.,* 2009). This may be in response to empathy deficits as the perpetrators of stalking impose unwanted feelings upon a victim without considering the adverse impact (Lewis *et al.,* 2001; Canter and Youngs, 2012).

Individuals who engage in stalking behaviours may also display high preoccupation with others in response to negative self-views, past emotionally neglectful parental experiences, and insecure attachment styles (Wheatley *et al.,* 2020b). Explorative studies reveal that people who have stalked describe ruminative thinking which is accompanied by preoccupation with the target (Davis *et al.,* 2012; Wheatley *et al.,* 2020b) whereby perpetrators of stalking are consumed by repetitive and obsessive thinking; which subsequently overwhelms their self-control ability and increase their susceptibility to impulsively intrude on the target in an attempt to manage strong emotional arousal (Wheatley, 2019).

The reduced ability of perpetrators to refrain from engaging in intrusive behaviours is also associated with strong emotional arousal (Wheatley *et al.,* 2020a), impulsivity and self-control (Davis *et al.*, 2012). As a result perpetrators of stalking may find it difficult to show sufficient self-regulation to restrain themselves from repeated intrusive behaviours in times of experiencing emotional arousal (Davis *et al.,* 2012).

Neurodiversity

Neurodiversity applies to people whose neurocognitive functioning falls outside the boundaries of typical neurological development, and highlights cognitive, affective, and perceptual differences (McGee, 2012). Neurotypical [NT] individuals represent a style of neurocognitive functioning that belongs to the dominant societal norms (Chapman, 2020). The most predominant representatives of neurodiversity consist of individuals who are characterised as autistic or on the autism spectrum (Den Houting, 2019). The neurodiversity paradigm also involves individuals with neurological variations such as ADHD (Dwyer, 2022).

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, Fifth Edition –Text Revision (APA, 2022), Autism Spectrum Disorder [299] is characterised by persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction across multiple contexts as well as restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests, or activities. In addition, the diagnosis should note whether the person has Autism Spectrum Disorder 'with or without accompanying intellectual impairment'. Historically a range of terms have been used to describe people with Autism, such as 'Autism Spectrum Disorder [ASD], 'Autism Spectrum Condition [ASC]', 'Aspergers' and 'High Functioning Autism'. These terms may be used interchangeably throughout this systematic review in line with the terms used in the studies identified.

Research has postulated that the core features of autism such as social naivety, reduced empathy, Theory of Mind [ToM] deficits, and special interests/obsessions may contribute towards offending behaviour (Melvin *et al,* 2017) in a minority of people (Al-Attar, 2020). However, it should be noted that people with autism are more likely to have contact with the CJS as a victim or witness of crime (Murphy, 2017).

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)

Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is a neurodevelopmental disorder characterized by a dysfunctional pattern of inattention, hyperactivity, or impulsivity, leading to negative outcomes in social, academic and occupational contexts throughout an individual's life (APA, 2022).

Brain studies exploring performance in people with ADHD found ADHD was associated with: favouring small rewards over large delayed rewards (Marx *et al.,* 2021); impulsive decision making (Patros *et al.,* 2016); poorer response inhibition, planning and organisation (Pievesky & McGrath, 2018); poorer abilities to problem solve and generate solutions (Ros & Graziano, 2018) as well as social information processing and responding to social cues.

Systematic reviews have found that people with ADHD are at an increased risk of difficulties socializing (Faraone et al, 2021) as well as rejection from peers (Strine *et al,* 2006; Ros & Graziano, 2018). Research has also shown that people with ADHD are 2.7 time more likely to be victims of violent crime (Christoffersen, 2019) and 65% more likely to be victims of intimate partner violence (McCauley *et al.,* 2015). However, research has also shown that people with ADHD are at an increased risk of engaging in offending (Mohr-Jensen *et al.,* 2019) across both males and females (Young *et al.,* 2015). However, ADHD in itself does not cause offending behaviour (Al-Attar, 2021), rather, certain aspects of ADHD may contribute to both risk and resilience factors for offending behaviour.

Neurodiversity, ASD and ADHD in offending and stalking

Previous systematic reviews have focused on other aspects of stalking (e.g., psychopathology and clinical features of stalking; Wheatley *et al.,* 2020; Linenberg, 2021) and psychosexual functioning and neurodiversity (e.g., Young and Cocallis, 2023) however these did not explore the links between neurodiversity and stalking. Research findings suggest that individuals with ASD displaying obsessive behaviours are likely to engage in problematic behaviours when such tendencies are aimed at behaviours that entail a sexual element (Allen *et al.,* 2008; Freckelton, 2013). Such behaviours may involve sexual attraction to an individual and preoccupation with their body, and escalate the risk of stalking behaviour engagement or unreciprocated advances (Higgs and Carter, 2015). In other publications, it is suggested that autism acts as a causal factor for stalking engagement (Post *et al.,* 2014a; Post *et al.,* 2014b). However, it is important to note that these are theoretical papers based on opinion and neurodiversity has also been noted to act as a responsivity factor as opposed to a risk factor for offending (Higgs and Carter, 2015). Therefore the links between neurodiversity and stalking remain unclear.

An overlap of autism and ADHD indicates that difficulties with social information processing are shared by these disorders (Heeramun *et al.*, 2017). Individuals' social perception is affected by social communication deficits irrespective of disorder (Baribeau *et al.,* 2015). Also, impulsivity in people with ADHD correlates strongly with repetitive behaviours in people with ASD (Ghirardi *et al.,* 2019). As impulsivity seem to reflect social impairments in individuals with ADHD, deficits in interpersonal functioning and social skills, such as empathy, are experienced by both people with ASD and ADHD (Antshel and Russo, 2019). Research findings propose that offending in individuals with autism may be attributed to deficits in social reciprocity (Allen *et al.,* 2008) whereby poor social-emotional reciprocity and lack of empathy act as influential factors that stimulate individuals with autism to engage in offending and display aggression (Murrie *et al.,* 2002; Ray *et al.,* 2004). Whereas

such factors along with impulsivity and obsessions appear to contribute to stalking in general population, it is understood that such factors are elevated in individuals with autism and ADHD (Mogavero, 2016; Mouridsen, 2012).

However, the literature related to ASD and offending is reported to predominantly consist of case studies, which causes its validity to be uncertain (Sevlever *et al.,* 2013). In addition, other studies indicate that individuals with ASD who have engaged in offending behaviours are significantly associated with comorbid factors including personality disorder and psychosis (Langstrom *et al.,* 2009; Heeramun *et al.,* 2017). Furthermore, high co-morbidity rates have been noted between ADHD and Oppositional Defiance Disorder [ODD], Conduct Disorder [CD], Anxiety Disorders and Mood Disorders (Gosh *et al.,* 2017). Children with comorbid CD and ADHD are also noted to have worse symptoms in terms of age of onset and persistence over time, which has been noted to be particularly worse for females than males and is associated with higher rates or emotional problems and rejection by peers (Ottosen *et al.,* 2019). As a result, neurodiversity as an independent risk factor for offending continues to present as uncertain (Langstrom *et al.,* 2009) and it is important that ASD and ADHD are considered in conjunction with other cognitive and psychological deficits in the context of offending (Ghirardi *et al.,* 2019; Mouridsen, 2012).

Thus, the purpose of this review is to examine the link between neurodiversity and stalking with the following research aims:

Aims of current study

1. What is the prevalence of Neurodiversity in people who have engaged in stalking behaviour?
2. What is the prevalence of Neurodiversity in people who have been victims of stalking behaviour?
3. What are the factors that take people with neurodiversity closer towards engaging in stalking behaviour?
4. Do people with neurodiversity present any different requirements in relation to risk assessment, intervention or support strategies in relation to stalking behaviours?

Method

This review was performed in line with the recommended guidelines of the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) and following the standards set out by the Centre for Evidence-Based Management (CEBMa; Barends *et al.,* 2017).

Search Strategy: The following databases were searched: Embase; Medline, EBSCO; OVID; SCOPUS; PsycINFO; Pubmed; ProQuest; and Google Scholar. Searches were limited to those published in

English. Keywords used in the search strategies were predominantly generated through the official terminology operated by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, Fifth Edition –Text Revision (APA, 2022) and CPS (2018). The search strategies included the following:

'stalk*' OR 'socially intrusive behav*' OR 'obsess*' OR 'harass*'

AND

'adhd' OR 'attention deficit hyperactivity disorder' OR 'attention deficit-hyperactivity disorder'

'stalk*' OR 'socially intrusive behav*' OR 'obsess*' OR 'harass*'

AND

'autism' OR 'asd' OR 'autism spectrum disorder' OR 'asperger's' OR 'asperger's syndrome' OR 'autistic disorder' OR 'aspergers'

'stalk*' OR 'socially intrusive behav*' OR 'obsess*' OR 'harass*'

AND

'Neurodiversity' OR 'neurodiverse' OR 'neurodiv*'

Inclusion Criteria

The criteria for inclusion used the PECO (Population, Exposure, Context/Language, Outcome). See Table 1.

INSERT Table 1

Quality appraisal:

Due to the mixed methodology between studies a range of appraisal tools were used: the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP); qualitative checklist (CASP, 2018); CASP cohort study checklist (CASP, 2018); and the Appraisal tool for Cross-Sectional Studies (AXIS) (Downes *et al.,* 2016). Appraisals were completed by the author and shared with a second reviewer to ensure quality in the assessments as recommended in the the Centre for Evidence-Based Management (CEBMa; Barends *et al.,* 2017).

Following the guidelines by Barends *et al.,* (2017) the screening of papers was established following a two-fold approach. First, all included studies were classified based on the six levels of appropriateness

(Shadish *et al.,* 2002; Petticrew and Roberts, 2008) that assess a study's validity. Levels range from "AA", representing the so-called "gold standard" (Barends *et al.,* 2017, p. 17) with systematic reviews or meta-analyses of randomized control trials, to the lowest level of appropriateness "E", representing case studies, case reports, and other anecdotal data. Secondly, methodological quality was assessed using the Cohort Study Checklist by the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP; 2018). The 12-item tool guides the assessor systematically through the appraisal, enabling critical reflection of each study's results. Items include the appraisal of the research question and the recruitment process, amongst other aspects. Depending on the tally of methodological weaknesses, the appraised studies were downgraded a certain number of levels (e.g. two weaknesses result in the downgrading of one level, three in two levels, etc.; Barends *et al.,* 2017).

All studies were retained in the review to reduce bias however the quality assessments allowed weighting to be given to the findings drawn from particular studies. Inter-rater reliability [IRR} between ratings for all papers was assessed using Cohen's Kappa (Hallgren, 2012) to be 0.9 (scores between 0.75-0.9 are classified as good) therefore IRR was rated as good.

Data extraction: Due to the number of included studies (*n*= 10), each one was assigned a reference number (e.g. [1]) that allowed easier identification throughout data extraction. These reference numbers can be found in Table 2 and will be used throughout the remainder of this review. All studies were reviewed several times; this ensured all relevant data to the research questions was extracted. This included data relating to the prevalence of stalking (victimisation and perpetration) in people with neurodiversity, factors associated with pathways towards stalking behaviour and factors identified as linking to risk, interventions or support strategies associated with stalking behaviour in people with neurodiversity.

Data Synthesis: The characteristics of the studies were tabulated to include examination of their content and any other relevant characteristics. The studies were then grouped based on characteristics using a matrix to determine similarities worthy of grouping. This was then used to synthesize the characteristics of the studies contributing to each comparison (e.g stalking perpetration, stalking victimisation etc). Studies addressed a variety of research questions, and employed a heterogeneous range of measurement approaches and analytic techniques. As a result, meta-analysis was not feasible. Hence, a structured reporting of the effects (rather than statistical synthesis) was adopted based on the Cochrane Guidance that if the data is heterogeneous and cannot be synthesised using mathematical procedures then a narrative synthesis should be adopted. This was conducted following the MECIR standards for reporting of reviews using narrative synthesis and the Guidance on the Conduct of Systematic Reviews in (Popay *et al.*, 2006).

INSERT TABLE 2.

Results

Description of the Included Studies

All potentially relevant articles were exported into EndNote (www.endnote.com). The title and abstract of articles were screened by the first and second authors to assess whether they were relevant for review. The initial search yielded 3847 articles with an additional 33 articles identified through other sources. 124 duplicates were removed leaving a total of 3756 papers which were reviewed for relevancy. 49 articles were fully read to assess if they met the inclusion criteria. Out of these, 39 papers were excluded and 10 papers were deemed as meeting the inclusion criteria (See Figure 1).

INSERT FIGURE 1

Description of the study characteristics

Ten studies met the criteria for inclusion: Five quantitative (cross-sectional designs); one qualitative study; one mixed methods research (both quantitative and qualitative); and three case studies. A total of seven studies included individuals with autism [2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 10]. Only one study included individuals with ADHD [9], and two other studies made reference to participants with both autism and ADHD [1, 6]. Only three of the included studies [4, 7, 8] included participants with a diagnosis of autism who met the criteria for the five plus two plus fear definition of stalking.

Quality Rating	Number of Papers
A	0
B	0
C	0
D	6
E	4

Key findings

All of the studies included male participants and seven of the studies included females. Data was obtained from Australasia (1, 2, 3), USA (2, 3, 8, 9, 10), Europe (2, 4), the UK (3, 5, 7) and Canada (3, 6). Sample sizes for the neurodiverse cohorts ranged from single case studies to N= 284. The largest sample size of neurotypical comparison participants was 43,307 (9) however this was significantly larger than the remaining NT comparison samples which ranged from N = 38 to N = 128 (1, 2, 3, 5, 6). A summary of the study characteristics can be seen in Table 2.

Question 1) What is the prevalence of neurodiversity in people who have engaged in stalking behaviour?

Prevalence

Eight papers included data that explored the link between neurodiversity in people and stalking engagement [1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10]. However, these papers provide limited insight as to whether stalking is more common by neurodiverse people than neurotypical people. Three papers were case studies, and thus, they did not compare neurodiversity in people who engage in stalking to the general population [4, 8, 9]. Two other papers actively selected individuals with autism as participants, lacked a randomised design, and thus, these papers were unable to be used as measures of prevalence for this theme [1, 2]. Study 6 revealed that, relative to the general population, the link between people with autism and stalking engagement was non-significant. The rest of the papers were qualitative in nature, used small sample sizes, and did not compare prevalence of stalking engagement between neurodiverse and non-neurodiverse individuals [5, 7]. Although, two participants out of seven self-reported ASD in paper 5, this study pointed out that despite the context of and the variance in the nature of their stalking, all participants' experiences of stalking engagement was convergent with narcissistic vulnerability and their need for validation rather than autism alone.

Other diagnoses

Across the studies included for this theme, three of these reported that participants had other diagnoses outside the domain of neurodiversity [1, 6, 7] borderline intellectual disability and learning disability. Depression and bipolar disorder accounted for just over half of the sample in study 6, being followed by anxiety disorder that accounted for less than half of the sample. Two people had comorbid ADHD [1], and in the other study just under a quarter of the sample of autism individuals had ADHD [6].

Question 2) What is the prevalence of neurodiversity in people who have been victims of stalking behaviour?

Prevalence

Two papers referred to the link between neurodiversity in people and stalking victimisation [3, 9]. Rates of stalking victimisation were rated as significantly higher for individuals with ADHD in a sample of college students aged 18-25 years old (9.77%) when compared to neurotypical individuals (5.19%) in a sample of 2652 people [9]. People with a self-reported clinical diagnosis of autism also reported significantly higher rates of stalking victimisation (58.5%) when compared to individuals without ASD

(27.3%) in a sample of 228 people [3]. However, this difference was only significant for females with autism as the study found no significant differences in stalking victimisation between men with and without ASD [3]. The study also noted that a co-occurring mental health condition, including anxiety disorder, PTSD, and mood disorder, was significantly more prevalent in individuals with autism than in people without [3]. Thus it is unclear to what extent neurodiversity alone may contribute towards stalking victimisation or to what extent this may be better explained by mental health conditions. From the findings of these papers, it seems that stalking victimisation is more prevalent in neurodiverse than neurotypical individuals [3, 9].

Question 3) What are the factors that take people with neurodiversity closer towards engaging in stalking behaviour?

As noted only three papers met the criteria for stalking which included people diagnosed with autism or ADHD [4, 8, 9]. This included a total of only three individuals with autism and one with ADHD. These studies did not specifically examine whether such pathways were significantly different for individuals with ASD when compared to individuals without ASD [4, 8, 9]. As such, the findings are not suitable for generalisation. This is also valid for the findings about the pathways to engaging in stalking for people with ASD in papers 5 and 7 due to a lack of comparison between individuals with and without ASD. A pathway to engaging in stalking for the people with ASD in the case studies consisted of repetitively phoning or sending excessive letters to the victim [4, 8]. Upholding strong beliefs that the victim reciprocated the perpetrator's feelings reinforced stalking engagement for the people with ASD in the case studies [4, 8]. Other pathways to engaging in stalking for the people with ASD in the case studies involved neglecting evident protests from the victim, acting outside the boundaries of social norms, walking and sitting with others without knowing them personally, and making threats to the victim [4, 8]. Stalking engagement pathways for the people with ASD in study 7 were unclear as the research design of study 7 provides little information as to what stalking engagement pathways specifically related to the people who self-reported ASD. However, it was noted that all participants in the study (N=7) had a unanimous negative view of themselves whilst offending including low self-worth.

Papers 1, 2, and 6 mainly measured inappropriate dating behaviours that only resembled some behavioural aspects of stalking ('stalking-like behaviours'), their findings may not be completely characteristic of direct stalking perpetration. As such, it is uncertain whether the inappropriate dating behaviours, which papers 1, 2, and 6 measured, are indicative of a full pattern of behaviour that is totally representative of stalking engagement. The research nature of case studies limits the papers'

findings about pathways to engaging in stalking for people with neurodiversity, which means that such findings in papers 4, 8, and 9 are treated in isolation.

Victims of stalking by people with autism were noted to be strangers [4] and a known individual (therapist) [8]. Victims in paper 7 were not identified specifically for the individuals with neurodiversity. Paper 10 involved 'stalking' behaviour towards a teacher and fellow pupils by a teenage male with autism but this behaviour lasted less than one week and hence did not meet the threshold criteria of five-plus two- plus fear definition of stalking. This is also the case for paper 5 where only two individuals with autism self-disclosed they had engaged in the 'stalking' of strangers but there was no clarity for how long this went on for an if it met the criteria for stalking. Study 1 reported a significant difference between individuals with and without autism in the type of target they pursued, with strangers being significantly more likely to be associated with individuals with autism. However, again the 'stalking' tool used did not measure the duration of this behaviour and if it met the criteria for the victim being fearful.

Question 4) Do people with neurodiversity present any different requirements in relation to risk assessments, interventions and support strategies for stalking?

Risk assessment

From the papers that referred to the link between neurodiversity and stalking, none of these reported findings on whether individuals with neurodiversity were more at risk of perpetrating stalking [1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10]. No suggestions or comments were made in relation to stalking risk assessment or the use of stalking risk assessment tools for people with neurodiversity from any of the papers.

Intervention and support strategies

Six papers displayed relevant findings as to whether people with neurodiversity presented different requirements in relation to interventions and support strategies [1, 4, 5, 6, 7, 10]. Two stalking perpetrators with autism benefitted from individual cognitive behavioural intervention and social skill instruction, with them showing improved social-cognitive functioning and an understanding that stalking behaviours were inappropriate [4, 10]. However, these were based on single case studies, and thus, these findings are considered unfit for generalisation due to a high risk of bias and subjectivity. In addition, these findings are similar to the study by Mullen *et al.,* (2006) which found that neurotypical stalking perpetrators benefited from cognitive behavioural interventions concentrated on attitudes towards, and beliefs about, the victim that sustained stalking, and social skills training aimed at improving self-efficacy and social competence.

A significant correlation was found between communication difficulties, autism and inappropriate dating behaviours associated with stalking [6]. The authors postulated this was due to delays in understanding social cues and misperceiving body language [6]. Samples of individuals with autism who were associated with behaviours suggestive of stalking were reported to experience difficulties in empathising with others' feelings, reading social cues, and social functioning [1, 5, 6]. However, participants in these studies did not have a formal diagnosis of 'autism' with a score on the AQ-50 (Baron-Cohen *et al.,* 2001) being used instead to distinguish between people with and without autism [6]. In addition, the study did not measure stalking directly as it only labelled the practice of some behaviours 'suggestive' of stalking. In addition, the interventions identified to target the factors in these papers [1, 5, 6] were noted to be those that enabling social learning and growth of pro-social skills [7] which mirror the research findings about interventions for stalking perpetrators without neurodiversity (MacKenzie and James, 2011) leading the authors to conclude that all the participants in their study presented similar interventional factors regardless of whether they had autism [7]. This is supported by existing research findings where interventions for people who engaged in stalking concentrated on victim empathy, social competence, and receptive and expressive interpersonal communication skills (MacKenzie and James, 2011; Mullen *et al.,* 2001).

Discussion and implications of current findings

As noted by Murphy (2017) the majority of people with autism lead law abiding and fulfilling lives and only a small minority may come into contact with the Criminal Justice System (CJS). However, it has been theoretically postulated that people with autism may be more likely to engage in stalking behaviours (Post *et al.,* 2014a; Post *et al.,* 2014b), and that people with ADHD may be at greater risk of engaging in offending due to higher levels of impulsivity and difficulties with social reciprocity. The purpose of this review was to evaluate the evidence for any link between neurodiversity and stalking.

Stalking Perpetration

The findings indicate there is a lack of published research that empirically examines the link between neurodiversity and stalking engagement. Furthermore, the identified research papers involve small samples of individuals with only 4 participants who had a formal diagnosis of neurodiversity who also met the criteria for stalking engagement using the five plus two plus fear criteria of stalking. As such, the current findings provide little basis for generalisation. In addition, there was a lack of research on ADHD within the context of stalking amongst the included papers.

Based on the findings, no significant differences can be concluded in stalking engagement between neurodiverse and neurotypical individuals. The prevalence of neurodiversity in people who have

engaged in stalking behaviour remains widely unclear, with some indication that this is not significantly different when compared to the general population. Such findings are consistent with the Sevlever *et al.,* (2013) study which suggests that the literature on prevalence of neurodiversity in people who have engaged in offending is inconclusive and provides a sense of uncertainty. The current findings challenge hypotheses and narratives that in relation to general population, stalking engagement commonly occurs in individuals with ASD.

In addition, the summary of findings also suggests that for the case studies of people with neurodiversity who had engaged in stalking, their needs mirrored those of neurotypical participants. Thus, whilst some people with autism may engage in stalking behaviours it cannot be concluded that the reasons for this differ to people without autism. This also supports the findings of other research which suggests that autism, by itself, does not adequately explain why someone may engage in offending (Al-Attar, 2021).

Stalking victimisation

Preliminary findings from this review suggest that stalking victimisation may be more prevalent in neurodiverse than neurotypical individuals. This is consistent with previous literature which has suggested an increased risk of victimisation in people with autism (Murphy, 2017). However, this study also found that co-occurring mental health conditions were also noted to be significantly more prevalent in this group and hence no clear conclusions can be drawn about the link between neurodiversity and stalking victimisation alone. Therefore future research would benefit from exploring the ways in which people with neurodiversity may be at greater risk of stalking victimisation and the mechanisms that underpin this, including the interplay with comorbid mental health difficulties.

Constraints

It is important to note that inferences drawn from the findings of the included studies about neurodiversity and stalking engagement may be distorted due to some of the studies using self-reported engagement in stalking. This is important because research has shown that people may over-report engaging in 'stalking' behaviour and identify themselves as 'stalkers' when their behaviour would not in fact constitute stalking (Howard *et al.,* 2019). Hence, it is important to differentiate self-reported 'stalking' narratives using surveys/interviews from more formal definitions of stalking behaviour (Worthington, 2023). Labelling people as engaging in 'stalking' behaviour could pose serious implications in terms of the development of their self-concept and developmental pathway, particularly if their behaviour does not meet the threshold for stalking.

In addition, some of the studies included in this review consisted of people who were classified as having neurodiversity based on the use of screening tools such as the Autism Quotient-50 (Baron-Cohen *et al.,* 2001) [6]. However, this is a self-report measure for autism symptom severity that is no longer consistent with the set of impairments introduced in DSM-5 (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). This is supported by research findings suggesting that using the Autism Quotient self-report measure tool in samples of individuals without autism may provide erroneous readings of autism (Ashwood *et al.,* 2016; Sasson and Bottema-Beutel, 2022). In addition, the majority of individuals in the sample of participants in study 6 who were identified as showing ASD through the Autism Quotient-50 did not self-report a neurodiverse condition.

Several of the included studies included participants who were deemed neurodiverse but also reported co-occurring conditions including depression, anxiety, and learning needs. Despite this, there was little investigation as to whether these comorbid conditions contributed to stalking engagement. The remainder of the included studies did not explore the presence of other potential comorbid conditions. This is important as it is indicated that there is an overlap in manifesting criteria between personality disorder and ASD (Lugnegard et al., 2012). Although, such conditions may intersect in their presentation, their causal implications are different, with personality disorder being revealed to act as a predictor to stalking perpetration (McEwan et al., 2017).

Across the only studies that included samples of individuals with and without neurodiversity, the Courting Behaviours Scale (Stokes et al., 2007) was employed to measure self-reported frequencies of behaviours associated with 'stalking'. Therefore, these studies did not measure stalking perpetration in line with its formal definition, which involves the operationalisation of the five plus two definition of stalking (McEwan *et al.,* 2020). The reliance on the Courting Behaviours Scale may skew the findings in relation to victim types due to such scale investigating behaviours, which are labelled as stalking, only in the context of relationships. In addition, in the UK if this behaviour was occurring in a relationship it would not be classified as stalking but coercive control (Worthington, 2023). Furthermore, the majority of the studies neglected to measure whether the stalking perpetration in their samples induced substantial distress to the victim, which is an elementary aspect of the five plus two definition of stalking. This affects the validity of how stalking was measured and how stalking perpetration was inferred by the included studies and may conflate the findings on stalking perpetration.

What can be concluded about neurodiversity and stalking?

Whilst it cannot be concluded that having autism or ADHD places someone at greater risk of engaging in stalking perpetration, tentative evidence suggests neurodiversity may place someone at greater risk of stalking victimisation.

For the minority of people with autism who may engage in stalking perpetration the research suggests that assessing their knowledge and insight into social and romantic relationships may be helpful. Overall, the factors contributing to stalking highlighted by the included studies, such as difficulties with communication, empathy, insight into social functioning, interpersonal competence, and ways of forming relationships with others, seem to map onto the deficits of neurotypical stalking perpetrators (Canter and Youngs, 2012; Lewis *et al.,* 2001; Mullen *et al.,* 2006). However, tools that contextualise neurodiversity in the context of risk assessments for stalking may be helpful (Al-Attar, 2019; Al-Attar, 2021).

Implications for Practice and Future Recommendations

- Future research would benefit from using reliable methods of assessing stalking victimisation and stalking perpetration in clients with neurodiversity. This should include the use of measures such as the SAI-V/SAI-P (McEwan, 2020) which capture the five-plus two- plus fear criteria of stalking as well as potential differences between online and in person stalking.
- Future research would also benefit from adopting more formal methods of identifying participants with a diagnosis of neurodiversity as opposed to the use of screening tools. These should also take into account co-occurring diagnoses (e.g. Autism and ADHD) as well as comorbid mental health and personality difficulties.
- The use of large scale mixed methods studies which adhere to the aforementioned recommendations would also be useful to further explore any potential link between neurodiversity and stalking. For example, this could include quantitative studies using larger sample sizes to establish any potential links with ND which also control for other factors which may contribute to stalking vulnerability such as mental health conditions and attachment in relationships. Exploring specific traits which may increase stalking perpetration vulnerability (such as rumination, social skills and obsessive-intrusion) from a dimensional perspective may also assist to better differentiate individual aspects of vulnerability which may be more amenable to specific interventions rather than categorical approaches to stalking and neurodiversity. These could also be used to inform risk assessment tools for stalking.
- Qualitative studies exploring any potential links between neurodiversity and stalking behaviours would also provide a more rich and detailed understanding of the ways in which aspects of neurodiversity may make an individual vulnerable to stalking and the complex

mechanisms which underpin this. Such studies could assist to inform intervention and risk assessment approaches.

- Practitioners working with clients with neurodiversity who are at risk of stalking perpetration should adopt clinical formulations on the risk and function of this behaviour by considering in what way facets of neurodiversity may contribute to 'push' and 'pull' factors that shape an individual's pathway to offending (Al-Attar, 2018). This could include supporting standardised stalking risk assessment tools with additional tools such as the Framework for the Assessment of Risk and Protection in Offenders with Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder [FARAH] and Framework for the Assessment of Risk and Protection in Offenders with Autism Spectrum [FARAS].

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