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**To cite this article:** Nikki Rawdon, Luke P. Vinter, Clare Allely & Rachael Wheatley (09 Apr 2024): Exploring the experiences of an autistic male convicted of stalking, The Journal of Forensic Psychiatry & Psychology, DOI: [10.1080/14789949.2024.2339537](https://doi.org/10.1080/14789949.2024.2339537)

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/14789949.2024.2339537>



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Published online: 09 Apr 2024.



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# Exploring the experiences of an autistic male convicted of stalking

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## ABSTRACT

Despite an increasing number of studies which examine the interplay between autism and offending mechanisms, there has been a lack of research investigating the interplay between autism and stalking. It was anticipated that findings from this investigation would inform future interventions with individuals with autism who stalk. This secondary data analysis research used a qualitative case study approach to explore the experiences of an individual with a High Functioning Autism (HFA) diagnosis, who had been convicted of stalking. Interview data was analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis to gain a rich understanding of stalking behaviour from the perspective of the individual and to identify the key issues associated with Criminal Justice Service interventions. The following superordinate themes were identified; *'What she means to me'*, *'Problematic, but unstoppable'* and *'Life after prison'*. A key implication of the findings was that autistic traits can play a contextual role within stalking behaviour. Future recommendations of a specifically tailored treatment approach recognising and considering autism-related responsivity issues are discussed.

**ARTICLE HISTORY** Received 6 February 2024; Accepted 1 April 2024

**KEYWORDS** Stalking; autism; neurodiversity; criminal justice system

## Introduction

In the existing literature, there have been a variety of definitions proposed for what constitutes stalking, which is problematic legislatively as well as for advancing empirical understanding through measuring stalking as a phenomenon (see McEwan et al., 2020). Despite variance across jurisdictions and empirical literature, there are three general commonalities used which are helpful in identifying stalking as opposed to other offence types, which are as follows: (a) the pattern and nature of the unwanted behaviour (conduct element); (b) the intent of the perpetrator (mental element); and (c)

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some requirement for a negative impact on the target of the stalking (impact, or harm, element) (McEwan et al., 2020, see p. 2). Several stalking typologies have been proposed over the years. Of these, Racine and Billick (2014) identified three of the most common stalking typologies: (i) Zona's Stalker-Victim Types (Zona et al., 1993), (ii) Mullen's Stalker Typology (Mullen et al., 1999) and (iii) the RECON Typology of Stalking (Mohandie et al., 2006). Mullen's typology classification system for stalking cases has become a popular system both within academic literature and within clinical practice, incorporated into the Stalking Risk Profile assessment tool (MacKenzie et al., 2009). Mullen et al. (1999) initially developed this typology based on a review of 145 individuals who stalk and classified individuals based on their motivations, victimology and stalking behaviours. From this review, they identified five overarching stalking types: (i) intimacy seeker, (ii) incompetent suitor, (iii) rejected, (iv) resentful, and (v) predatory. Of note, the incompetent suitor type describes individuals who pursue people to whom they are attracted, in a manner that causes distress and often fear, and victims are usually strangers or casual contacts. Incompetent suitors are typically motivated by the desire to make contact, usually seeking a date; however, social skill deficits often result in approaches being clumsy, intrusive and unsuccessful in achieving their aims. The lack of social skills derives from the individuals' own vulnerabilities (Segrin & Flora, 2000; Segrin et al., 2016), such as learning difficulties and challenges, autism and particular personality styles. Prior to research completed by Wheatley et al. (2021), which provided the secondary data for this project, there had been no published qualitative research studies undertaken with a stalking population. Focus on stalking research has typically centred around the nature and motivations of stalking-related behaviours and the impact of this on victims (e.g. Acquadro Maran & Varetto, 2018; Melton, 2007; Mullen et al., 2006). However, there has been a growing academic and practitioner interest in the cognitive characteristics of the stalking offending population to improve rehabilitative responses, particularly in relation to autism (Mercer & Allely, 2020; Post, Haymes, et al., 2014; Stokes et al., 2007). Despite an increasing number of studies which examine the interplay between autism and offending mechanisms (e.g. Allen et al., 2008; de la Cuesta, 2010; King & Murphy, 2014; Pearce & Berney, 2016), there has been a lack of research investigating the interplay between autism and stalking.

Autism is a heterogeneous, lifelong, neurodevelopmental condition, which affects how people perceive and interact with the world (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Evidence suggests that autism is prevalent in 1–2% of the general population (Brugha et al., 2011; Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022). Diagnosis is based on early emerging difficulties associated with social communication and interaction, in addition to restricted and repetitive patterns of behaviour, interest and thought

(American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Manifestation of these varies greatly with age and ability. To encapsulate this diversity, the 'Autism Spectrum Disorder' (ASD) diagnosis was introduced in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5, American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Lord et al., 2018). The change to a single spectrum condition diagnosis represented a move away from an earlier system of several discrete diagnostic classifications of autism, which were listed as Pervasive Developmental Disorders in the DSM-IV-TR (APA, 2000). However, whilst there has been a shift towards the single spectrum condition understanding and diagnosis of autism, many individuals in the autism community have continued to favour the use of the previous labels; in particular, Asperger's Syndrome (AS) and High Functioning Autism (HFA) (referred to collectively as AS-HFA). AS in particular came to be regarded as a more 'positive' diagnosis, with less social stigma attached to it (Powell & Acker, 2016).

The human desire for connection to others, and requiring social skill and understanding, is pretty universal. Romantic relationship experience among autistic individuals is a relevant yet understudied area of research (Strunz et al., 2017). As social skills and the ability to take the perspective of others are important for initiating and maintaining intimate relationships (Byers et al., 2013), autistic individuals, who may have deficits in these abilities, often experience difficulties in understanding and developing romantic relationships. Although desiring a relationship, more than half of the participants without a romantic partner in the Strunz et al. (2017) study of individuals, with high functioning autism and romantic relationships, shared that they were afraid of not fulfilling a partner's demands, did not know how to find a partner and/or did not know how a relationship works. They also noted finding contact with others too exhausting. This suggests that a romantic relationship, even if desired, might overextend what autistic individuals are able to cope with.

Mercer and Allely (2020) searched five bibliographic databases to identify studies that explored autism in relation to stalking and harassment. The Stokes et al. (2007) paper was the only published empirical study identified. Stokes et al. (2007) found that autistic individuals were more likely to engage in inappropriate courting behaviours (e.g. touching the person of interest inappropriately; believing that the target must reciprocate their feelings; showing obsessional interest; making inappropriate comments; monitoring the person's activities; following them, making threats against the person). Stokes et al. (2007) found that autistic individuals found it difficult to understand why the individuals they were pursuing were not responding in the way that they wanted and did not understand why what they were doing was wrong. Additionally, Stokes et al. found that the autistic individuals focussed their attention upon celebrities, strangers, colleagues, and ex-partners, and pursued their target longer than controls. Whilst Stokes et al.'s work offered

some insight into the possible interplay between autism and stalking behaviours, it is clear from Mercer and Allely's review that more contemporary empirical research is needed to better understand this interplay.

From the literature (and anecdotal experience) that has been carried out, there are certain features of autism that can provide the context of vulnerability to engaging in stalking behaviours. These include: issues with empathy and awareness of social norms; restrictive preoccupations and interests; an inability to understand the viewpoint of others (impaired Theory-of-Mind, ToM); an inability to attend to or recognise others' social cues (e.g. being impaired in their ability to pick up social cues from the individual which shows their discomfort/distress in response to their unwanted pursuits); lack of appropriate skills and knowledge and developmental lag (see Allely, 2022). Specifically, with respect to issues with empathy and awareness of social norm, some autistic individuals may experience difficulty understanding that the strategies they use in order to pursue relationships are inappropriate and might even be distressing to the person of interest. Some of the features of autism which may contribute to this is their lack of awareness and understanding of social norms. These factors may explain why some autistic individuals are unable to accept rejection by the person in whom they are interested. These factors may also explain why they may persist in their pursuits for much longer periods compared to their neurotypical peers (Stokes et al., 2007). They may be impaired in their ability to appreciate or understand that the majority of people in society would consider their obsessive focus or fixations on others as intrusive (Attwood, 2007; Hagland & Webb, 2009 as cited in Post et al., 2014). With regards to lack of appropriate skills and knowledge, some autistic individuals may lack the appropriate skills and knowledge which would enable them to successfully initiate such romantic relationships (Stokes & Kaur, 2005). Therefore, in their attempts to initiate interpersonal relationships, some autistic individuals may present naively in their courtship behaviours, and it may be considered inappropriate and intrusive and may be construed as stalking behaviours (Stokes & Newton, 2004). This issue of lack of appropriate skills and knowledge may be further exacerbated by the developmental lag. Studies have shown that when the effect of age was controlled, compared to their neurotypical peers, autistic individuals reported a significantly lower level of romantic functioning (Stokes et al., 2007).

Recently, Ventura et al. (2022) reported the case of a 40-year-old high functioning autistic male patient who was accused of stalking behaviour. Ventura and colleagues described that the male, in an inadequate attempt and desire for attachment and social relations, for several months he repeatedly called people he randomly selected from the telephone directory, which he had memorised from public phones. When he called people and engaged in these random phone conversations, he considered there to be reciprocity

(‘over-evaluating platonic interactions’) and mutual interests between him and his victim. He failed to understand that his behaviour was illegal and that he was causing his victims psychological harm. The authors described him as having no apparent remorse for his actions. Critically, the male in this case study believed that his actions was ‘a straightforward path to make friends’ and thought there would be mutual interest when approaching others by stalking them’ (pp. 2).

Beyond the stalking-specific literature, autism is not considered a risk factor for offending more generally (Bjørkly, 2009; de la Cuesta, 2010; Hippler et al., 2010; King & Murphy, 2014; Mouridsen et al., 2008; Murphy, 2010; Rutten et al., 2017). In fact, there are some studies which have found that autistic individuals may be even less likely to offend compared to those without autism. The vast majority of autistic individuals are very law-abiding (e.g. Mouridsen et al., 2008; Cederlund et al., 2008). A growing body of research suggests that autistic individuals are less likely to commit particular types of offending behaviour including probation violations and property offences (e.g. Cheely et al., 2012; Kumagami & Matsuura, 2009). Importantly, autistic individuals are more likely to be the victims of crime rather than the perpetrator. There exists a disproportionately higher risk of autistic individuals experiencing abuse and victimisation (Brown-Lavoie et al., 2014; Sevlever et al., 2013) as well as interpersonal violence victimisation (e.g. child maltreatment, intimate partner violence, adolescent dating violence, bullying) (Brown-Lavoie et al., 2014; Cappadocia et al., 2012; Mandell et al., 2005; Weiss & Fardella, 2018).

However, it has been recognised that in cases where autistic individuals do perpetrate crime, their autism can often provide context of vulnerability for their offending (Al-Attar, 2020; Allely & Creaby-Attwood, 2016; Allely, 2022; Browning & Caulfield, 2011). For instance, in research on autism and terrorism, Al-Attar (2020) highlighted how autism and associated traits can play contributory roles in risk, as well as provide important opportunities in the formation of protective factors that can reduce risk. Similarly, other research has noted the contributory role that autism can play with regards to perpetration of sexual crime (de la Cuesta, 2010; Payne et al., 2020). To date, there has been a lack of research investigating the interplay between autism and stalking, hence the necessity of the current research and the invaluable insight that could be gleaned to inform specifically tailored treatment approaches recognising and considering autism-related responsivity issues.

From the perspective of this paper, the aim is to increase professional knowledge to assist with improving treatment considerations and planning for autistic clients who also pose a risk of engaging in stalking, by gaining a rich understanding of stalking behaviour from the perspective of one individual. The paper highlights how he made sense of his offending behaviours, his experiences of the criminal justice system, his understanding of his

neurodiversity and how he felt it was impacting his ability to form fulfilling relationships. These are key insights that can inform future Criminal Justice System interventions with autistic individuals who stalk.

In authoring this paper, specific consideration was given to the language adopted to describe those who engage in the criminal actions constituting stalking and those diagnosed or suspected to have traits of autism. Stigmatising labels are often used within everyday forensic practice by practitioners without full consideration of the impact (Willis, 2018), and references such as 'offender' fuses the offending behaviour into the individual's identity, thus becoming a barrier to rehabilitation attempts (Inzlicht et al., 2011). Consequently, the language adopted herein is reflective of a conscious effort of respectful reporting, and thus references will be made to individuals who have engaged in stalking and to autistic individuals. This approach in communication aligns with desistance literature and shifts from negative labelling based on previous behaviour and the consequences that labelling may bring (McNeill et al., 2012).

Given the dearth of research investigating the lived experience of those who stalk, and particularly autistic individuals that stalk, the current investigation aimed to capture, interpret and present this experience in order to assist those in practice, as well as suggesting useful future research directions to ensure our society is responding to this phenomenon with insight. The aim of this study was to provide a richer understanding of an autistic individual's experiences of engaging in stalking behaviours.

## **Methodology**

### ***Research design***

This research is a case study. In psychology, case studies are often confined to the study of a particular individual. The information gathered in a case study is mainly biographical and relates to events in the individual's past (i.e. retrospective), as well as to significant events which are currently occurring in everyday life (Brown, 2008). Although the use of one case study limits generalisability, case studies have been shown to help explain the complexities of real-life situations, which may not always be captured as effectively and even missed through experimental or more nomothetically oriented studies (Zainal, 2007). It is important to acknowledge that in the current study it is not necessarily the intention to generalise the findings to others but more to inform the practice and approaches to beginning to better understand this offending population. For example, the 'inevitability of reoffending', a theme drawn from this study, highlights the potential consequences should this immediate need for autistic responsive treatment

continue to remain unmet, for both Andrew and other autistic individuals under the care of the criminal justice system.

### ***Participant***

Pseudonyms have been used throughout this report, to refer to the participant, Andrew, and the victim, Claire, whom he consistently refers to, to safeguard their confidentiality. From the case interview transcript, Andrew describes himself as a 27-year-old, white, British male. Andrew self-reported being diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome in childhood and reported having periodic difficulties with managing depression throughout his adult life. Historically, a diagnosis of AS was assigned to autistic individuals who were considered to exhibit comparably fewer difficulties or delays associated with speech, learning and/or daily functioning, compared to other types of autistic individuals (National Autistic Society, 2022). Individuals with a HFA diagnosis were considered to be similar to those with AS, but exhibit more profound developmental issues in their early development (de Giambattista et al., 2019; Mattila et al., 2011). Nevertheless, individuals who were assigned AS-HFA diagnoses were both considered to experience difficulties with intuiting and understanding other people's feelings or points of view, which makes their social interactions challenging (Carpenter et al., 2009). Whilst the participant in the present case study self-disclosed diagnosis for AS, the broader terms 'autism' and 'autistic' will be used herein, to reflect contemporary clinical conceptualisations of autism (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; World Health Organisation [WHO], 2019), and the expressed views of the autistic community (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2021; Kenny et al., 2016).

At the time of study, Andrew was in prison awaiting sentencing after being convicted of stalking. Andrew's victim, Claire, was a fellow secondary school student and barely a casual acquaintance, whom he began to stalk during his time at school. He persisted with this behaviour for approximately 10 years since it began in secondary school until his subsequent conviction and imprisonment and time of this research.

### ***Data collection***

The secondary data used to conduct a rich and in-depth analysis originated from an interview transcript for a single participant from a broader study which sampled men convicted of stalking offences within English prisons and explored experiences of adult males convicted of stalking (Wheatley et al., 2021). The original study used a repertory grid method to elicit narratives on how participants perceived themselves and others within their social/relational world, and this technique prompted later discussion on what triggered and maintained their own stalking behaviours and what could have helped



them to desist. The data for the particular participant in focus within this current study had been analysed previously by the original researcher alongside other participant transcripts, however, due to the sample size, had not been reported on fully within published work. Therefore, the rich data pertaining to this participant had remained under-utilised, and a singular in-depth analysis of this transcript was both warranted and requested.

An ethical application to retrieve and analyse the secondary data was approved by the Ministry of Justice National Research Committee (NRC), who considered the original research application in relation to the use of data in this way. The NRC had also previously provided research approval for the original study in addition to university ethics approval at that time. Themes generation auditing and analytical supervision was provided by someone other than the original researcher to protect independence in research conduct.

### **Ethics**

It would not have been possible to seek re-consent for this current study. Given that the lead researcher in the original study is an interested party in the current project and the overarching research question, and methods of analysis were the same, consent sought in the original project was accepted to be sufficient by the NRC (ID: 2021–155). The participant was not identifiable from transcript information as they had been assigned unique identifiers, and re-anonymity was ensured using pseudonyms. Quotes were carefully chosen to highlight only the sense-making, and any locations, dates, specific incidents, or personal information that could possibly identify either the participant or the victim were omitted. The only information disclosed was the participant's age at the time of the interview.

The nature of the information and its potential impact on the reader, particularly for those who have direct experience of stalking, has been carefully considered. The quotes herein have been considered necessary to promote the understanding required to make advancements in practice that will directly benefit those at risk of engaging in stalking behaviours and to prevent victims.

### **Analysis**

The case transcript was analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA, Smith et al., 2009). IPA is underpinned by both phenomenology and idiography, which, together, emphasise the need to engage in in-depth, detailed analyses of particular cases to capture participants' subjective interpretations of their lived experiences and how they make sense of those experiences (Smith, 2011, 2022) – as such, IPA is well suited to single-case analyses. In this research,

IPA enabled a detailed idiographic exploration of the participant's personal experience, focusing on the individual's unique personal perception or account of an event, and allowed the individual to be an expert of their own lifeworld (Smith & Osborn, 2007). This was important in this research, as it offered means for the research team, as neurotypical individuals, to get usefully close to capturing and conveying an autistic participant's unique subjective understanding of their experiences and sense-making in relation to their stalking behaviours. Similar phenomenologically oriented analytical approaches have been successfully utilised in contemporary research to analyse the lived experiences of autistic individuals in forensic contexts (Newman et al., 2015, Vinter et al., 2023).

The IPA analytic procedure was informed Smith's (2011) guidelines, to ensure quality and rigour. In the first instance, the case transcript was read several times. This allowed the researcher to become immersed in and familiar with the data, to enable an in-depth analysis. After initial familiarisation, annotations were made throughout the transcript, adding exploratory comments (i.e. codes) that noted initial thoughts about the content at a descriptive-surface level, language use or other linguistic features, and more conceptual interrogative comments (Smith, 2011). The annotated transcript was then re-read, and initial themes were noted. These initial themes were further reviewed and developed into superordinate and subordinate themes through the following: abstraction (putting like with like and developing a new name for the cluster), subsumption (noticing development of a super-ordinate theme as it draws other related themes towards it), polarisation (examining the transcript for oppositional relationships), contextualisation (identifying the contextual or narrative elements within the analysis), numeration (the frequency with which a theme is supported), and function (in relation to the language used; how the participant responded in order to get meaning beyond the content).

### **Validity**

An audit of these themes was then undertaken with an identified specialist in the research field of autism in forensic contexts. Reflective discussions in supervision were used to understand researcher bias and attend to the analytical process with rigour, both aimed to improve the research quality. Finally, superordinate and subordinate themes were assigned succinct labels, which captured the essence of each theme.

### **Results and analysis**

The IPA identified three superordinate themes; 'What she means to me', 'Problematic, but unstoppable' and 'Life after prison' which overarched several subordinate themes (see Table 1). A key implication of the findings was

**Table 1.** Superordinate and subordinate themes.

Superordinate themes	Subordinate themes
1. What she means to me	1.1. "She's special" 1.2. "Unindulged obsession" 1.3. "If I don't exist to her my life has no validity"
2. Problematic, but unstoppable	2.1. "Stalking is a big problem for me" 2.2. Community interventions are a chocolate fireguard.
3. Life after prison	3.1. The difficulty of letting her go 3.2. The inevitability of reoffending

that autistic traits can play a contextual role within stalking behaviour. Future recommendations of a specifically tailored treatment approach recognising and considering autism-related responsivity issues are discussed.

### ***What she means to me***

This theme was interpreted as the richest superordinate theme and explored Andrew's sense-making of his stalking behaviours in relation to the meaning he attributed to Claire, as his victim.

Andrew expressed a longstanding admiration for Claire, which had predated his stalking behaviours. However, Andrew identified an incident, during his time at school that had served as the trigger for his stalking. In brief, Andrew described how Claire had made a friendly approach toward him at a school event, to which he gave a 'rude' response; which he attributed to the difficulties his autism created for him in social situations. Andrew felt that this was a lost opportunity for both social acceptance amongst his peers and a potential relationship with a popular girl he admired. He described experiencing crippling disappointment and rumination at the event. This experience served to intensify his admiration for Claire and his fantasy of a relationship, which he believed contributed to his later stalking behaviours.

In making sense of his feelings towards Claire, Andrew referred to his longstanding admiration of Claire, the intensely obsessional nature of his feelings toward her, and the meaning or role he sees for himself in her life. He described how he used homicidal fantasies to orchestrate a reality that allowed him to become a significant part of her life, even if this meant him 'ending her life.'

### ***"She's special"***

When expressing his longstanding admiration for Claire, Andrew described how he has idolised her since their time at school together. Throughout his interview, he seemed to adulate his victim's positive qualities, with limited to no recognition of any negative qualities she may possess:

She was one of the good girls. Prim and proper, but she was lovely. Mature for her age, nurturing, maternal, she's unique. She's a special person, not like other

girls who are self-obsessed, she's rare, she's a high achiever, she was head girl. She really stood out to me.

The data analysis revealed a long-lasting impact one event had for Andrew. Andrew's description of Claire's approach at a school event to initiate a conversation with him presented as very important to him and the data analysis sense making is, that approach significantly increased Andrew's self-worth in the moment and became something he wanted more of. What appears present, from a phenomenological perspective, is a sense of preoccupied attachment (Bowlby, 1980), whereby a person's expectations for care and attentiveness from others, aligns closely with their sense of self-worth (Pistole, 1995). Claire's acknowledgement of Andrew gave him self-worth and a level of self-acceptance he may not have experienced before. Various studies have empirically linked an insecure (particularly preoccupied) attachment style with individuals who stalk (e.g. Lewis et al., 2001; MacKenzie et al., 2008). This analysis also shows support for the basic hypotheses of Relational Goal Pursuit (RGP) theory (Cupach & Spitzberg, 2000), but more generally links between predisposing psychosocial vulnerabilities and stalking. RGP theory focuses on stalking as the pursuit of a romantic relationship, whereby the relationship is the 'goal' of the stalking related behaviour (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007). The importance of attaining this relational goal for individuals can vary to the extent that they have linked the goal of the desired relationship with other goals, such as the need for self-worth (Cupach & Spitzberg, 2004). For Andrew, fully capturing the feeling of self-worth he obtained from Claire could only be achieved and maintained if he were in a relationship with her. The goal of the relationship was then further strengthened by his intense idolisation of her. Andrew directly connects his '*social insecurities*' to his autism and his belief that his rude response to Claire ruined '*an opportunity for friendship*' with a '*pretty girl.*' Analysis of sense-making considered that autistic people often have difficulty 'reading' other people and expressing their own emotions. This can make it extremely hard for them to navigate the social world (National Autistic Society, 2022; Uljarevic & Hamilton, 2013). This explains why Andrew did not consider how he could approach Claire directly to initiate another social interaction that could have created another opportunity for him.

The ability to understand how others think and feel when this differs from their own perspective is reliant on 'theory of mind' (Premack & Woodruff, 1978). This ability facilitates self-awareness, the ability to read others' agendas, an appreciation for the impact of one's behaviour on others, and empathy. It also assists the individual to monitor how they are perceived and appraised by others, to adjust their behaviour to social norms and relational expectations. Impairments in this ability in some autistic individuals may hinder social communication and interaction skills (Baron-Cohen, 1999).

Andrew referred to himself as '*socially insecure*'. Analysis considered that Andrew engaged in stalking behaviours to get close to Claire to recreate the positive impact she had on his self-worth and as protection from the lack of social skills that he believed ruined his chances initially (*'I've never actively pursued romance, I wouldn't know how to'*). Although, at the surface, Andrew's insight into his stalking behaviours is congruous with the Incompetent Suitor typology (Mullen et al., 1999), one obvious deviation is that of Andrew's persistence. As noted by Mullen and colleagues, this type of stalking typically ceases after a relatively brief time, presumably because there are few gratifications to sustain the behaviour and often after they are warned off the behaviour by authorities. By contrast, Andrew's stalking behaviours evolved over 10 years. Why Andrew persisted in this case is perhaps more directly related to his psychosocial vulnerabilities. The potential interplay of Andrew's relationship goal and his tendency to form restricted interests due to his autism is further explored within this paper.

### ***"Unindulged obsession"***

This subordinate theme centred around the nature and intensity of Andrew's obsessional thinking in relation to Claire, and how he seemed to contextualise his obsessions by relating them to his autism. Andrew considered his autism as playing a contributory role.

It has been an obsession that's stayed with me from school. The thought of what might have happened, may have kept me obsessed for all this time. She's in my mind every second of everyday

Andrew directly connected his obsessional thinking and related stalking behaviours to his autism. He explained that being autistic meant that he was prone to forming obsessions and fixations towards other things, which he had been able to indulge in the past, resulting in them becoming '*passing phases*.' By contrast, he described Claire as an '*unindulged obsession*'. He had not been able to actualise his obsession in the same way he had with other things in the past, therefore his fixation toward her did not subside.

Andrew's interpretation of the links between his autism, obsessional thinking and stalking behaviour does fit with what has been postulated in existing literature. Specifically, it has been suggested autism-related obsessive tendencies or restricted interests can become potentially problematic and contribute towards offending, where they have a sexual component, such as a sexual attraction to a person, fixation on body parts, or obsession with pornography (Allen et al., 2008; Barry-Walsh & Mullen, 2004; Freckelton, 2011; Haskins & Silva, 2006; Higgs & Carter, 2015). Moreover, for many autistic individuals, obsessions, repetitive behaviours, and routines that might otherwise appear overly rigid or unhealthy to neurotypical individuals can offer a source of comfort and

self-regulation, as well as offer relief from anxiety (Rodgers et al., 2012). In Andrew's case, it could be argued that Claire and the fantasy of being in a relationship with her became a restricted interest, which provided Andrew with a sense of self-worth. Additionally, the related stalking behaviours may have been temporarily rewarding for Andrew, 'I was in her life.' Positive reinforcement theory (Skinner, 1958) suggests a response or behaviour is strengthened by rewards, leading to the repetition of desired behaviour, and in this case, even when the reward is feelings related to hope, and hierarchically, self-worth. This intermittent reinforcement process seemed enough to sustain the stalking behaviour despite acknowledgment that a relationship was not possible, and the obsession was not fully indulged.

### ***"If I don't exist to her my life has no validity"***

Andrew seemed to predicate his self-worth upon being part of Claire's life. During his interview, Andrew described the extremes to which he held this belief, ranging from pursuing this through proportionately minor intrusions on her life, up to violent fantasies of how he could ensure his place in her life story.

My absolute nightmare would be for her to not even know I existed . . . If I don't exist to her my life has no validity.

In the data extracts mentioned above, Andrew conveys the importance that he places on Claire's acknowledgment of him and the sense of dread he feels at the prospect of remaining unacknowledged. Andrew's references to 'validity' in the extract above suggested that he believes in an intrinsic link between being in Claire's life and his own feelings of self-worth. As such, her rejection and exclusion of him from her life are experienced as direct threats to his self-worth.

For Andrew, these thought processes seemed to escalate, intensify, and contribute towards more violent thoughts about Claire. Thoughts, such as 'she's too good for me', appear to cause extreme emotional distress and lead on to 'heinous violent thoughts.' Andrew made sense of this later in the transcript by reflecting that his violent thoughts are about 'punishing her for me not being good enough [for her].' The data analysis conceptualises that Andrew may be able to recognise that not being able to have a relationship with Claire is linked to a direct threat to his sense of worth, and that the violent fantasies (as a form of experiential avoidance) (see Chawla & Ostafin, 2007), serve to protect himself from or avoid accepting the associated inner distress and instead take a more powerful position. In contemplating carrying out his violent fantasies, Andrew explains the function, which directly relates to him avoiding feeling like he was nothing to Claire (the ultimate rejection).

I've played a part in her life, I've authored the end of her life – it's made me of some significance in her life story rather than a complete nonentity.

Andrew describes experiencing extreme emotional distress at times when he accepts that he means nothing to Claire, which indicates a high level of rejection sensitivity. A growing body of research suggests that rejection sensitivity may be linked to autism and the associated difficulties with interpersonal communication and social connection (Keenan et al., 2018; Lord et al., 2021; Rothman et al., 2022). Rejection sensitivity can cause an intense emotional response when the person is rejected or perceives themselves as being rejected. Whether the rejection is real or perceived, the intensity of this emotional response may cause the person to focus more than necessary on the rejection and have a hard time moving on and connecting with others in the future (Keenan et al., 2018). Andrew described others viewing him as the '*school weirdo*' which suggests he has already experienced rejection and this may be something he is continuing to avoid. From a psychological viewpoint, violent fantasies provide a wide variety of psychological functions, including, normative means of coping with aggression, anger, and sexual arousal; pathological replacement of reality and interpersonal connections; and imaginary practices of intended actions, whether harmful or not (Gellerman & Suddath, 2005; Gilbert & Daffern, 2017). They may have provided Andrew with a means to express the anger, distress and despair related to the unindulged obsession, the rejection and the impact this was having on his sense of self-worth. It resonates with psychological processes such as experiential avoidance (avoiding healthier processing of what rejection means to him, leading him away from harmful thoughts and behaviours). Experiential avoidance theory (Hayes et al., 1996, 2001) that underlies Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (Hayes et al., 1999) has been described in an empirical review by Chawla and Ostafin (2007) as a process that involves the unwillingness to stay in contact with our inner, private experiences (difficult or painful thoughts, feelings, memories, narratives etc.), and which can lead to the development of other problems and related distress. In Andrew's case it can be conceived that his inability to healthily process the rejection and self-worth injury leads him to indulge in violent fantasies and continued stalking to show his presence in Claire's life, even when he is aware they may never commence a relationship.

### ***Problematic, but unstoppable***

This theme provided insight into Andrew's understanding of his stalking behaviours and how, or whether, he could desist from stalking. Specifically, the theme explores how Andrew regards the strength of his urge to engage

in stalking behaviours, and the sense of futility he attributes to more formal interventions to address his stalking behaviours.

### *“Stalking is a big problem for me”*

Andrew described his stalking behaviours as an *‘ongoing problem’* and this theme encapsulates how Andrew makes sense of why his stalking behaviours became problematic by directly connecting this to his mental health. Andrew experienced that *‘depression intensifies [his] obsession’*, describing that although taking prescribed medication for his depression, there were times when they were less effective, and when he felt there was *‘no logic to keep thoughts from turning into behaviour’*. There was a sense that he was *‘overcome’* with the urges to make contact with Claire, believing that having her in his life would *‘fix’* him. He describes this as *‘self-torture.’* For Andrew, there is no solution to this problem outside of a relationship with Claire, other than medication, as illustrated here:

I honestly think if they changed my medication straight away rather than ten weeks down the line I might not be sitting here.

Rigid, inflexible thinking is a common characteristic of autistic individuals, and therefore individuals may have trouble problem-solving or generating more than one solution to a problem (Lord et al., 2018). In Andrew’s case, it is possible that this more rigid, inflexible thinking style has resulted in a black-and-white understanding of his stalking behaviour, and him seeing a limited range of solutions (i.e. to be medicated or to be in a relationship with Claire).

To add to this, rumination on more obsessional thoughts (specifically, not being able to have his desired relationship with Claire) also seems to play a perpetuating role in Andrew’s understanding of his stalking behaviours. This is understandable, as repetitive cognition, including rumination, is more common in autistic individuals, as is depression (Keenan et al., 2018). Rumination has also been found to correlate with depression more generally, in both typically developing individuals and autistic individuals (Kenny et al., 2016).

Applying RGP theory to Andrew, there is evidence of a problematic interplay between Andrew’s tendency to ruminate and what appears to be engagement in *‘goal-linking’* (Cupach & Spitzberg, 2000; McIntosh & Martin, 1992). Goal-linking occurs when an individual perceives that the achievement of one goal (e.g. self-worth) is contingent upon the achievement of another goal (e.g. a particular romantic relationship). Once goal linking occurs, the importance of the relational goal becomes exaggerated, and abandonment of that relational goal when faced with failure becomes less likely (Cupach & Spitzberg, 2004). In Andrew’s case, his self-worth appears to be linked to his relational goal (i.e. his desire to be in a relationship with Claire). Rumination on not being able to obtain this



goal appears to intensify his depression, which in turn promotes persistence in relational goal pursuit.

### ***Community interventions are a chocolate fireguard***

This subordinate theme captures Andrew's experiences of police interventions. These had the opposite intended effect on him, prompting the use of the chocolate fireguard analogy to support the understanding of how ineffective these interventions were for Andrew and his interpretation of them as a challenge to overcome. In the following data extract, Andrew expressed his feelings towards warnings that he had received from the police:

I wasn't taking warnings from the police seriously. After being arrested by police for stalking behaviour and released without charge I still kept driving past the property.

This extract encapsulates Andrew's feelings of indifference towards police interventions, and the sense of futility he associates with them as a means to stop his stalking behaviours. The phrase Andrew used when discussing police reprisal was '*nothing can stop me*,' and he suggested that his obsession-fuelled urge to pursue Claire through stalking superseded any concern about police intervention.

Making sense of why Andrew continued to persist at the point where others fitting the incompetent suitor typology are more likely to desist (Mullen et al., 2009), an interplay between Andrew's selective attention driven by his goal-directed behaviour (Bunge & Souza, 2010) and his vulnerability to forming restricted interests associated with his autism may be relevant. For Andrew, relationship rejection is the ultimate threat to him achieving self-worth. As rumination and negative affect persist, various processes of rationalisation may emerge for him as he struggles with balancing a goal that is important yet unsatisfied. Such rationalisation may further deteriorate his already comprised executive cognitive functioning and his idealising of Claire and unrealistic belief in his ability to achieve a relationship with her may further fuel his obsession in response to threat (Cupach & Spitzberg, 2000; Spitzberg & Cupach, 2001, 2002).

An area of interest within this theme is Andrew's experience of the interactions he has with police officers, and how he felt that these have occasionally reinforced his stalking behaviours. He referred to these interactions as '*friendly chats*', which resulted in him '*being let off again*.' He described one incident where an officer had told him Claire was '*concerned for him and wanted to safeguard him*' whereby he concluded '*she wants to get me help, she cares about me*', which provided the validation he was seeking.

Andrew makes statements such as '*she's every right not to want me in her life*' and labels his demand of her as '*narcissistic entitlement*' although he appears unable to apply this awareness to support his desistence even

when being asked directly to stop. Referring again to the theory of mind (Baron-Cohen, 1999), a psychological interpretation may be that despite Andrew's acknowledgements, due to his autism he may have limited empathy for Claire (Decety & Jackson, 2006; Harmsen, 2019; Uljarevic & Hamilton, 2013). However, critics highlight the oversimplifying of empathy as a general one-dimensional skill and notes how there may be subtypes of empathy. Therefore, some autistic individuals may struggle with some elements of empathy or emotion recognition, but not predominantly (Brewer & Murphy, 2016; Fletcher-Watson & Happé, 2019). For Andrew, the empathy expressed for Claire is not a deterrent for desistance. Empathy is a term which refers to an individual's affective response to the experiences of another individual, as well as the understanding of another's mental state (Smith, 2006) including their desires, beliefs, or intentions. Empathy has two key types, namely, emotional (sometimes referred to as affective) empathy and cognitive empathy (Blair, 2005). Emotional empathy refers to the sharing of another's emotion or experiencing an affective response to another individual's emotional state (Smith, 2006). Cognitive empathy is defined as the understanding of another's feelings – including having the ability to take the perspective of another individual (Blair, 2005). Individuals are often impaired in their cognitive empathy but have spared or a surfeit in emotional empathy. This means that what other people are feeling and thinking in response to actions or behaviours need to be explained and once it is, the individual is able to emotionally resonate with that other person's feeling and subjective experience. This is the complete opposite of someone who has psychopathy traits or who has excellent cognitive empathy, which is why they are so good at manipulating others as they have the cognitive ability to understand what the other person will feel and how they will react if they say or do certain actions. It is suggested clinically that Andrew is impaired in his cognitive perspective-taking but not impaired in his emotional perspective taking.

Another interpretation is that Andrew perhaps felt the police viewed him as a victim of his own behaviour, thus inadvertently reinforcing his belief that he could not be stopped. Andrew stated that the police were '*concerned for his welfare*' and wanted to '*get him help*'. Confirmation that the police were discussing him with Claire, became another avenue for him to gain validation. In addition, Andrew acknowledged that seeing Claire and her family change their routines following police advice was also validation for him:

Their avoidance of me validates a role for me in their lives.

Andrew's experiences and sense making of his interactions with police highlight an important consideration that needs to be made regarding appropriate communication and consistently robust stalking intervention strategies for individuals who engage in stalking, regardless of how they appear and present to the police.

According to a 2017 report by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS), offences of stalking and harassment were not being investigated by police consistently or effectively, and forces were failing to protect victims. This report led to a positive step change in the police's national response to stalking. The College of Policing published new training for police forces on how to respond to new reports of stalking, and guidance for investigating stalking cases is due to be published this year. Currently, there is a lack of specific training on the complexities presented by autistic individuals who engage in stalking, and for what works in helping them to desist at the earliest opportunity.

### ***Life after prison***

This theme centred around Andrew's experiences of being unable to engage in stalking behaviours during his time in prison, and how he envisaged life will be after prison. More specifically, Andrew characterised prison as a temporary respite from stalking, and discussed what this meant for his potential recidivism risk in future

### ***The difficulty of letting her go***

Reflecting on his present-day thoughts and feelings whilst in prison, Andrew referred to being in a '*healthy frame of mind*', even when he is still thinking about Claire, and that this may represent a solution to the stalking problem. He elaborated on this by outlining that in spite of thinking about Claire, if he can recreate and maintain this '*healthy frame of mind*' upon release, he may not need to make direct contact with her and may be able to get on with his own life (e.g. holding down a job).

However, Andrew caveated this 'solution' by stating that this was contingent on him being able to continue with those stalking behaviours that he believes do not '*bother her*'. Furthermore, contrary evidence to his proposed 'solution' became evident when Andrew suggested that being permitted direct contact with Claire during his prison sentence may help him:

I haven't heard from her, so without that I don't think I can really understand what I've done unless I was to meet the victim, which I very much doubt will happen unless there's a restorative justice thing?

In this extract, Andrew appears to try and rationalise his contact with Claire by framing it as a form of '*restorative justice*'. However, he also suggested that being able to meet Claire and have that '*opportunity to see her flaws*', would help him "get over the obsession by breaking the fantasy that she was '*perfect*'.

Whilst there is a degree of resonance with restorative justice ideas in Andrew's proposition here (i.e. facing his victim), his subsequent points

about using a meeting to 'get over' his obsession and 'breaking the fantasy' strays from a restorative justice perspective. Interpreted in the context of his broader interview transcript, it is possible that Andrew was probably focussing on what may 'help' indulge his obsession, and he perhaps naively thought this would allow this phase to pass. Alternatively, he may simply be proposing a means of attaining an intense, albeit temporary, gratification, under the guise of 'restorative justice'; perhaps to achieve the social function of minimising the harm to the interviewer.

Ultimately, accepting that Claire should not be part of his life is at no point considered a viable option for Andrew. This suggests that Andrew's pursuit of his relational goal has persisted, even into prison, where he has not been exposed to external stimulus such as being able to access her social media accounts and has been unable to physically pursue Claire. The reinforcement of this goal may be being maintained to a lesser intensity by him continuing to think about Claire. Any further, more direct contact with Claire, for example, in person surveillance or monitoring social media would likely fuel the obsession and continue to increase the pursuit (Meloy, 1996), as illustrated in the case transcript. Intermittent reinforcement theory (Ferster & Skinner, 1957) suggests that basic schedules of reinforcement generate characteristic patterns of behaviour. For Andrew, satisfying interactions (intermittent reinforcement) may present in exposure to or contact with Claire, and this reward can result in strong positive behavioural conditioning (a good feeling), in Andrew's case the reinforcement of his self-worth. Being mindful of the strength of intermittent reinforcement schedules would suggest that professionals working with Andrew should be working to deter him from attempts at re-establishing contact (Kivisto et al., 2015). The practical application of this is complex, with problematic implications for Andrew's risk and desistance post-release at stake, and suggestive of a robust, idiographic rehabilitative approach being necessary.

### ***The inevitability of reoffending***

This theme captured Andrew's experience of prison, which he described as a positive, and his views on how his prison experience will, or will not, have an impact on him engaging in stalking behaviours in the future. Moreover, it explores how Andrew's broader understanding of stalking more generally may have implications for his likelihood of reoffending in the future.

Andrew described prison as a positive experience, 'I've coped really well, I've adjusted to prison life.' Data analysis interprets this experience by drawing attention to autistic individuals having a heightened need for predictability, consistency, routine, order, and rigid adherence to rules. Well-being may be enhanced when the individual's life and the world around them is predictable and follows an order, sameness, and consistency (Al-Attar, 2020). The interruption to his former unrestricted routine and stalking behaviour, and the

'self-torture' this caused for him is likely to have had a positive impact. Although Andrew may still be experiencing obsessional thinking towards Claire, prison has provided a 'circuit-breaker' to the possible occurrence of further problematic behaviours by removing the option of gaining proximity to Claire. This may be what Andrew meant when he stated that prison had '*done me the world of good*' (due to him awaiting sentencing he would not have been offered any therapeutic intervention support at this stage). Andrew recognised the seriousness of the criminal conviction and future repercussions he was legally facing, and this may further highlight the importance of prevention awareness and the need for a better understanding of how some restricted interests can become illegal.

I'll be taking it more seriously now 'cos obviously there will be a court order in place.

Interpreted at face value, extracts like the one mentioned above suggests positive moves towards desistance upon release, in response to criminal justice intervention. However, this was not reflected across Andrew's entire interview, and contradictory views were expressed throughout the transcript. For example, '*I won't be going pursuing her, not anytime soon*' conflicted with other extracts like '*Obviously, inevitably I am going to get depressed again*' whereby mental health services will '*only let me down*'. These contradictions suggest that Andrew is aware that his need for Claire is still present and as a result may be predicting the recurrence of problematic behaviours.

This sense of inevitability of reoffending was further evidenced through Andrew's expressed interest in general stalking behaviour:

I've read it's like murder in slow motion, it's like a prelude to murder and it is.

This is a striking statement for Andrew to make, particularly given his disclosure of violent fantasies involving murdering Claire as a way of conveying to the police how desperate he was for help. It suggests that Andrew's understanding of stalking strays beyond an inevitability of perpetual engagement with stalking behaviour, but also includes an inevitable escalation of those behaviours into murder. On the one hand, Andrew may be drawing on his own personal experience of having homicidal fantasies. Monckton-Smith (2020) completed a study into women who had been killed by abusive partners/ex-partners which contributed to the construction of a homicide timeline. Where Andrew may fit into this context is the change in his thinking, by fantasising about homicide as a way of moving on from Claire. However, this consideration must be made with caution as this research was based on men who had been in an intimate relationship with the partner they ultimately murdered and does not consider responsivity needs such as autism. Studies of autism and homicidal ideation highlight the necessity of caution when professionals consider autism in their differential diagnosis (Frizzell

et al., 2019) and to explore underlying factors within the context of autism (Palermo & Bogaerts, 2017).

Andrew's statement could also represent a cry for help. Throughout the transcript, Andrew repeatedly referred to both Claire and the police wanting to 'safeguard him,' something he presented as being touched by but offered no indication of whether this happened to him or not. Andrew also openly shared how he felt 'failed' by mental health services. Perhaps, his statement is an expression of the desperation he feels and the fear of what could happen, but not necessarily what he wants to happen.

Autism can be associated with difficulties intuiting and understanding what is appropriate to say, or not say, during social interactions. Day-to-day social interactions can be challenging and stressful, the tendency to talk a lot about one's own interests without social awareness, and the tendency to copy and mimic others and rote learn social scripts to relate socially and form social identity/friendships are aspects of autistic social communication and interaction (Al-Attar, 2020). In this instance, it may be that Andrew was alluding to a continuation and even escalation of his risk, without the social awareness of the potential consequences making such statements could incur. One interpretation is that he may be simply indulging within a subtopic of his own restricted interest (stalking behaviour in general as opposed to his own stalking behaviour) and/or may be mimicking a conversational style he feels would help him relate to or appear interesting to the researcher.

An alternative interpretation is that Andrew was genuinely expressing his understanding of stalking, and how he anticipates his own stalking behaviours could develop upon release from prison. If this is the case, then this could have extremely salient implications for risk and intervention need. Ultimately, this illustrates the need for further guidance when working with autistic individuals in this context, to unpick autism-related issues from genuine offending-relevant risk and to determine the most appropriate course of intervention (if necessary).

## Discussion

Findings highlighted that behaviours which are usually associated with stalking were relevant to Andrew, and there was also a clear contributory role in some of his autism traits, which this paper explored in depth. The aim of this paper was to provide a richer understanding of an autistic individual's experiences of engaging in stalking behaviours, and to highlight the utility of such case study analytical approaches to achieve this. Whilst we appreciate that some autistic people can experience difficulties in contemplating emotions and states of mind previously experienced, IPA is nonetheless a very fitting methodology for exploring the experiences

and lifeworld of autistic people (in both forensic and non-forensic contexts). It is also important that we do not conflate autism and intellectual disabilities, whilst these often co-occur, the individual in our study was autistic but did not exhibit any intellectual disability. For a highly diverse condition like autism, characterised by a distinct and unique experience and outlook on the world compared to neurotypical individuals, IPA's phenomenological and idiographic emphases are extremely fitting for exploring an autistic individual's experiences and sense-making in relation to their stalking behaviours. In this research, it offered means for our research team, as largely neurotypical individuals to get usefully close to capturing and conveying the participant's subjective understanding of their experiences and behaviours. Similar phenomenological approaches have been utilised in other contemporary qualitative research with autistic people in forensic contexts. For example, Vinter et al. (2023) used phenomenologically informed thematic analysis to explore autistic people's experiences of prison and prison-based interventions to address sexual offending, and Newman et al. (2015) utilised a hermeneutic phenomenological analysis to explore autistic individuals' lived experiences of incarceration.

Andrew linked his autism to several aspects of his stalking behaviour such as the associated social skills deficits for creating romantic relationships, the powerful impact he felt Claire had on his sense of self-worth, and the subsequent restricted interest in pursuing this validation, and furthermore, his rigid belief system that validation could only be achieved through Claire. The function of his stalking behaviours were therefore to maintain a connection that protected him from the fuller experience of rejection, acknowledging that he was *'punishing her for [him] not being good enough for her'*, acknowledging a disdain for his social inadequacies and a need for help in desisting. Whilst there is no evidence to suggest that autism is a risk factor for any type of offending (National Autistic Society; Murphy, 2010), the assertion that an individual's autism may play a contributory role in someone's offending was evidenced through this study. In this sense, features of autism may shape experience, functioning and behaviour that may, in some instances, exacerbate an individual's vulnerability to engage in stalking behaviour, as opposed to cause the vulnerability (Al-Attar, 2020). Inversely, it is possible that features of autism may equally contextualise resilience, in this same way, and it is therefore important that this consideration informs potential treatment. Andrew reported being open and interested in gaining a better understanding of his behaviours, *'I like learning about myself, if I can understand it then it's ok, I can do something.'*

Andrew's stalking motivation appeared to mostly fit the incompetent suitor typology as described by Mullen et al. (1999), and there exists an overlap of the core clinical features of autism and this typology (Stokes &

Newton, 2004). The deviation in the observed persistence and longer periods of the stalking behaviours among autistic individuals who fall under the incompetent suitor typology suggests the need for autism-specific considerations for both prevention and treatment (McEwan & Strand, 2013). Analysis of Andrew's case provided a deeper understanding of the potential interplay between an individual's autistic traits and their stalking behaviours. Specifically, in Andrew's case, how limited interpersonal skills, and a tendency to form restricted interests can contextualise an autistic individual's stalking behaviours. Therefore, treatment approaches for autistic individuals who engage in stalking need to be fundamentally contextual by addressing the interplay of autistic traits, while being responsive to learning needs and behavioural change abilities (also see Mercer & Allely, 2020). Such a contextual role may also differ from individual to individual, particularly considering the highly heterogeneous nature of autism. Therefore, it is imperative that an individualised, rich, and narrative case formulation approach is used to identify if and how facets of autism contribute to the manifested behaviours (see Al-Attar, 2018).

### ***Potential limitations***

A limitation to these findings was the use of secondary data, which had been collected as part of a different (although related) research project, rather than the lead researcher interacting with participants directly (Grinyer, 2009). Although the core purpose of the research is the same as the original study which explored what drives men to engage in stalking behaviours, this research focused specifically on exploring the interplay between autism and stalking. As Andrew in the initial interview had openly shared such experiences along with his personal insight into the role, he felt his autism played, additional questions were not required to elicit the rich information originally offered in the initial transcript. As such, this presented an opportunity to derive greater utility, insight and impact from data collected. It maximised the value of any (public) investment in data collection, it reduced the burden on the participant, provided greater transparency of research procedures and integrity of research work (Morrow et al., 2014).

### ***Legal implications and recommendations***

Recently, Berryessa (2021) emphasised that the potential connection between involvement in the criminal justice system, both related to offending and behaviour observed in court, and autistic traits, that may be overlooked during convoluted and lengthy legal processes. When an autistic individual is charged with an offence it is important that assessment and consideration is made of whether certain features of autism may have



contributed to, or provided the context of vulnerability to, engaging in offending behaviour (Allely, 2022; Freckelton, 2011, 2013a, 2013b). The findings from this case study of Andrew in the present paper further highlight the importance of doing this. By exploring Andrew's case, we have obtained a deeper understanding of the potential interplay between his autistic traits and his stalking behaviours. For instance, how his impaired interpersonal skills and a tendency to form restricted interests provided the context of vulnerability to his stalking behaviours. It is this particular interplay that should be assessed and taken into consideration during court proceedings and the sentencing stage to ensure a fair trial. Others have also recommended that the presentation of diagnostic and psychiatric information about autism should be provided in court (e.g. Grant et al., 2018; Woodbury-Smith & Dein, 2014). To ensure an appropriate evaluation of the autistic individuals and a fair trial, testimony from an expert witness on the diagnostic and psychiatric features of autism may be crucial (Freckelton, 2012; Freckelton & List, 2009). The preconceived notions or misconceptions surrounding autism that judges and jurors can be usefully addressed in the testimony of the expert witness. Additionally, such information would provide the court with accurate information about how autism can impact behaviour (see Sturges & Nuñez, 2021), both during court proceedings and in relation to the offending behaviour (Allely, 2022; Berryessa, 2017; Freckelton, 2012).

We are not suggesting that having a diagnosis of autism automatically equates to a lack of intent to commit an offence and should be a 'get out of jail free' card. However, given that autism does directly effect an individual's mind and how the mind perceives and interprets things (Foster, 2015), relevant and crucial evidence about the defendant's diagnosis of autism should be provided to assist the jury in making an informed decision (e.g. whether the defendant had the subjective intent to commit the crime) (Foster, 2015). Indeed, there is increasing recognition that the culpability of autistic individuals who commit an offence (in particular, high functioning autistic individuals) is not equal to those who offend who do not have an autism diagnosis (Freckelton & List, 2009). For instance, some autistic individuals are impaired in their ability to understand the consequences of their behaviours or actions and, in many cases, to such an extent that they should not be considered morally (or criminally) responsible for their actions (Barry-Walsh & Mullen, 2004; Schwartz-Watts, 2005). As previously argued by Freckelton (2013b) it is dependent on the specifics and circumstances of alleged criminal conduct as well as whether the 'individual's personal experience of autism symptomatology is such as materially to impact adversely upon rational thinking processes or genuinely to generate what would otherwise be unaccountable perceptions of others' conduct or intentions' (Freckelton,

2013b, p. 431). Given the heterogeneity of autism (each autistic individual has their own unique profile of both strengths and weakness) a flexible, case-by-case approach with no hard and fixed rules about what is required is crucial (Allely, 2022; Cooper & Allely, 2017).

### ***Future research directions***

Research and recent court decisions have indicated that judges and jurors frequently do not have the knowledge or background to enable them to effectively assess an individual with autism. Symptoms or features of autism may have provided the context of vulnerability to engaging in their offending behaviour (Berryessa, 2014; Freckelton & List, 2009) which has a negative implication with regards to the fairness of decisions, which are made on procedural issues (Berryessa, 2017; Freckelton, 2013b, 2013b). Future research is needed to explore, both case studies and larger scale empirical studies, the interplay between autism and offending, in particular, stalking behaviours. To date, there is little which has explored stalking behaviours in autistic individuals. This needs to be urgently addressed as such research would help direct the defence teams of a defendant with autism (when appropriate) who was charged with stalking to ensure they received a fair trial as well as ensuring appropriate and effective intervention. Anecdotally, legal professionals and forensic psychologists and psychiatrists have noted that there appears to be a significant amount being charged for stalking behaviours, which further supports the need for a greater understanding of the interplay between autism and stalking behaviours.

There is also a need for further in-depth research which investigates the different types and motivations of stalking behaviour perpetrated by autistic individuals as this will also help contribute to a better understanding of what treatments/interventions may be more suitable for certain stalking types and for autistic individuals (Mercer & Allely, 2020). Research-informed and co-produced case formulations are likely to improve outcomes, which remains to be investigated with this population and offence type.

### **Conclusion**

To date, there has been relatively little research exploring autism and stalking behaviour. In this case study paper, we explored an autistic individual's experiences of engaging in stalking behaviours. Findings from this case study highlighted that behaviours, which are usually associated with stalking were relevant to Andrew, and there was also a clear contributory role in some of his autistic traits (e.g. limited interpersonal skills).

## Practitioner points

- Treatment approaches for autistic individuals who engage in stalking need to be fundamentally contextual by addressing the interplay of autistic traits, while being responsive to learning needs and behavioural change abilities (3.8 BPS Practice Guidelines Third Edition, 2017).
- Formulate a deeper understanding of the potential interplay between an individual's autistic traits and their stalking behaviours. For instance, how impaired interpersonal skills and a tendency to form restricted interests provides the context of vulnerability to stalking (3.8 BPS Practice Guidelines Third Edition, 2017).

## Acknowledgements

We would like to acknowledge Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Services, Psychology Services Group, for their support in undertaking this research study.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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## Declarations

The authors have no relevant financial, non-financial nor competing interests to disclose.

Two authors were employed by Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Services at the time of this study, which was carried out as part of their employment.

This study was undertaken with the support of Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Services and received Research ethics approval from the National Research Committee.

Consent from participants was not received to share raw data, hence this has not been made available.

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