

Post break-up stalking: Police-officers' perceptions

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Abstract

Stalking is characterized by persistent unwanted behaviors and can disrupt the lives of victims. Its prevalence has been increasing with time. Due to the recent criminalization of stalking in Portugal and its being an understudied phenomenon, the objective of this study is to assess the perceptions of police officers ($n = 1212$) about stalking post intimate relationship breakup. We developed an adaptation of the questionnaire "Reasonable Perceptions of Stalking", using vignettes that describe stalking scenarios with the manipulation of severity, and victim and perpetrator sex. The main effects of severity, as well as the victim and the perpetrator's sex, were significant intrasubject variables in the perceptions of stalking and its severity, criminality, victim alert, fear of violence, victim-blaming, and the need for intervention. Participants' sex, previous training, and personal and/or professional experience with stalking were also significant variables concerning participants' perceptions. Our findings show that gender stereotypes are still perpetuated and have important implications for police officer training and intervention.

KEYWORDS

intimate relationship, police officers, post-break-up, reasonable perceptions, stalking

1 | INTRODUCTION

Stalking is a form of interpersonal violence (Ferreira et al., 2018), conceptualized as a pattern of persistent behaviors, which can comprise repeated attempts of unwanted communication and intrusive pursuit (Kamphuis et al., 2005;

Matos et al., 2012; Mullen et al., 1999). Technology can facilitate these stalking behaviors, either online or through messages or calls, leading to new challenges in the criminal justice system (Powell & Henry, 2018).

Stalking situations can incite psychological distress (Galeazzi et al., 2009), distrust, and fear (Mullen et al., 2001) in the victims. In a Portuguese study (Matos, Grangeia, et al., 2019), higher levels of stalking impact on the victims were associated with being a woman, the perpetrator being an ex-intimate partner, higher levels of fear, higher duration, and diversity of stalking behaviors (Matos, Grangeia, et al., 2019). Also, Portuguese men who were victims of stalking reported a greater negative impact in their lives, namely on intimate relationships and psychological health (Matos, Matias, & Gonçalves, 2019). However, only 25.4% sought help. Social awareness and scientific research about stalking in Portugal have constituted an essential step toward the recognition of its victims (Matos et al., 2012). Through this social and scientific awareness, political and juridical contexts also began to recognize this stalking phenomenon, starting with the development of specialized training.

Even so, legal systems from different countries have been slow to recognize the seriousness of the problem (De Fazio, 2011; Ferreira et al., 2018). In Portugal, stalking was only criminalized in 2015, as a crime against personal liberty (Decree-Law No. 48/95 of 15 of March from The Ministry of Justice, 1995), is described in article 154-A as: "Those who repeatedly persecute or harass another person, by any means, directly or indirectly, in a manner to provoke fear or restlessness or to harm their freedom of determination, may be punished with a prison sentence that can reach 3 years or a financial penalty". This text aims to reflect an understanding of the specific, complex, and multifaceted nature of the phenomenon, establishing itself as a legal instrument with greater ecological validity and including the possibility of adding proportional accessory penalties to the main penalty, namely prohibition from the victim and obligation to participate in specific prevention programs for such behaviors. Contrary to what has occurred in other countries, the victim's fear response or claim that a situation was perceived as being frightening by a "reasonable person" is not considered to be a defining criterion for the criminal act (Ferreira et al., 2018).

Despite the progress achieved both in the scientific and legal fields (through victimization studies and the criminalization of behavior, respectively), research on perceptions of stalking is even rare in continental European countries (Villacampa & Pujols, 2019), namely in Portugal. A body of research has examined the influence of various personal and situational characteristics on perceptions of stalking. Perception studies of stalking based on case scenarios can enhance the understanding of the phenomenon and the factors associated with its (non)recognition. For example, concerning gender, research has shown that women are less likely than men to endorse stalking stereotypes and myths (Scott, 2020). For example, empirical data established that women were more likely than men to believe behavior constituted stalking (e.g., Finnegan & Timmons Fritz, 2012; Scott et al., 2015) and warranted police intervention (Scott et al., 2015).

This knowledge is particularly important for police officers as they are, frequently, the frontline responders to combat the problem. Their capacity to effectively respond to the victim's needs will strongly influence the evolution of the case, both in terms of risk and impact (Villacampa & Salat, 2019). On the other hand, for police officers, it may also not be easy to ensure an operationalized interpretation of the law, to determine all the risk factors present in each case, and the best management strategies for dealing with them. Literature has come to identify several factors to assess stalking severity, and more and more authors have been advocating the adoption of specialist programs, such as the *Problem Behavior Program* (PBP), as a means to overcome the difficulties that still exist in police services provided in stalking cases (cf., MacKenzie & James, 2011).

Despite the diversity of stalking contexts (e.g., Matos & Ferreira, 2018), in our point of view, it is particularly urgent to assess police officers about post-breakup stalking given its frequency and, above all, the greater risks it entails. Specifically, the available literature is consensual in pointing out this scenario as the one with the greatest risk of violence, but also of persistence, recidivism, and psycho-emotional damage to victims (Kropp et al., 2011; Logan & Walker, 2009; McEwan et al., 2011; Sheridan & Roberts, 2011).

1.1 | Stalking (inter)national dimension

This section reviews the prevalence of stalking victimization, both internationally and in Portugal. Many studies on stalking have been conducted since the late 1990s (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007), promoting a more rigorous knowledge of the phenomenon. One of the first and most referenced studies on stalking victimization was conducted with a representative sample of the North American population ($N = 16,000$) by Tjaden and Thoennes (1998). The survey findings showed that 8% of women and 2% of men had been stalked at some point in their lives. Subsequently, several other victimization surveys were conducted, although these were limited to three regions of the globe: Oceania, North America, and Europe (cf., Grangeia & Matos, 2010). In a meta-analysis of 175 surveys on the phenomenon (122,207 individuals from different populations), Spitzberg and Cupach (2007) found that 2%–13% of men and 8%–32% of women had been victims of stalking at some point in their lives.

Globally, these important data evidenced and reinforced that women face a higher probability of suffering stalking when compared to men (representing 60%–80% of the victims) and gave empirical support for its conceptualization as a gendered phenomenon. In this line, a more recent survey by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA, 2014), conducted with a sample of 42,000 women from the 28 member-states of the European Union, concluded that 18% had experienced stalking at least once since they were 15 years old, and 5% had that experience within the 12 months before the survey. Furthermore, from their study recently conducted in Spain with a sample of 1162 university students, Villacampa and Pujols (2017) concluded that women not only report a higher rate of stalking victimization than men (44% vs. 33%) but also self-identify as victims more easily than men. In another study with a subsample only the self-identified stalking victims, these authors also concluded that fear and embarrassment and/or shame were more frequently reported by women than men (Villacampa & Pujols, 2017).

Although most stalkers are men and their victims are women, some evidence suggests that stalking can also be perpetrated by women (Meloy et al., 2011) and/or occur in the context of same-sex relationships, whether of an intimate nature or not (e.g., Strand & McEwan, 2011). Sheridan, Scott, and Campbell (2016) found that individuals identifying as LGBTIQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, or Queer) reported experiencing more stalking victimization and more severe behaviors than individuals identifying as heterosexual. The only predictor of participants reporting having been victims of stalking was sexual orientation. Strand and McEwan (2011) determined that 65% of perpetrators within a different sex group had a previous intimate relationship with their victim, compared to 32% within the same sex group.

In a Portuguese study, 19.5% of participants had been victims of stalking (Matos, Grangeia, et al., 2019). This prevalence was twice as high for women (25%) in comparison to men (13.3%). Regarding the relationship, 71.9% of the victims reported that the perpetrator was an acquaintance, and 31.7% reported that they were partners or ex-partners. The most common stalking behaviors were communication attempts, being in places where the victim was likely to go, and following the victim. In this study, threats occurred in 26.3% of the cases, and physical and/or sexual violence in 7.2%.

Between 2015 and 2019, Portuguese victim support agencies reported 2329 cases of stalking, showing a tendency to increase annually (APAV, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020). It was also noted that 88.9% of the victims were female and the perpetrator was often an ex-partner (21.9%) or ex-boyfriend (26%, APAV, 2018).

1.2 | Perception of stalking situations

In this section, we systematize results related to violence perception studies, namely those that have been most studied among criminal justice professionals. Then, we specifically summarize the main conclusions gathered from stalking perception studies.

According to Sorenson and Taylor (2005), the factors that may influence judgments about situations of violence can be grouped into three categories: characteristics of the people involved, of the incident, and those making judgments about the violence. Factors that have been most studied as influencing the perception of criminal justice

professionals are the perpetrator's and victim's sex (e.g., Finnegan et al., 2018), and the previous relationship between the victim and perpetrator (e.g., Scott et al., 2013; Sheridan, Scott, & Nixon, 2016).

Research has shown differing results about participants' sex, as some studies did not find that this variable influenced the perception of stalking (Phillips et al., 2004), while others showed that female participants, when compared to male participants, were more likely to perceive the behavior as stalking and to identify the need for intervention (Scott et al., 2015).

Regarding the victim's and perpetrator's sex, some studies did not find these factors to have a significant influence on the perception of stalking (Phillips et al., 2004; Sheridan et al., 2003) or its severity (Finnegan et al., 2018; Sheridan et al., 2003). However, participants perceive more fear for the victim (Finnegan et al., 2018; Scott et al., 2015; Scott & Tse, 2011) and the need for intervention (Scott & Tse, 2011; Sheridan et al., 2003) when the perpetrator is a man and the victim a woman. In contrast, when the perpetrator was a woman and the victim a man, male participants were less likely to perceive the situation as fear-provoking (Hills & Taplin, 1998).

Gavin and Scott (2016) examined judgments made by university students about stalking situations. In their deliberations, these students came up with various arguments to justify the perpetrators' behavior, especially when they were male (e.g., potential alcohol use, normalization of this behavior within heterosexual relationships, mental instability). Nevertheless, when the perpetrator was a woman, even if extenuating factors arose, she was still held accountable for their behavior. As for the victims, men tended to be perceived as less responsible, while women were partially held accountable for the situation. Even so, the men were criticized because they were supposed to be able to defend themselves and because the behavior of female perpetrators was trivialized.

Sheridan et al. (2014) categorized four sex dyads, so the victim and perpetrator could both be either a man or a woman. Male perpetrators were more likely to resort to electronic communication, threaten sexual violence, inflict serious injuries, and persecute women who were their ex-intimate partners. Men who stalked women were also more likely to become violent, even though the dyad where both the perpetrator and victim were men was the least violent. This study notes that there were more similarities than differences between dyads and that the observed differences occurred due to gender stereotypes.

Regarding the victim and perpetrator's previous relationship, when the perpetrator was a stranger (in contrast to an acquaintance or an ex-partner), police officers were less likely to blame the victim (Scott et al., 2013). If a previous intimate relationship existed, the community, in general (Villacampa & Pujols, 2019), and police officers, in particular, perceived the situation as less serious than when the stalker was a stranger or an acquaintance of the victim (Sheridan, Scott, & Nixon, 2016). Empirical data and the analysis of several cases have shown that police officers tend to underestimate the risk of ex-intimate stalking behaviors. However, perpetrators who had a previous intimate relationship with the victim tend to act more diversely and severely (White et al., 2020), be more violent (Phillips et al., 2004; Sheridan & Davies, 2001), and resist legal intervention (Sheridan, Scott, & Nixon, 2016).

Concerning the severity of stalking behaviors, research has shown that the conduct is more likely to be considered serious when stalking scenarios contained explicit evidence of intent to cause fear or harm and more persistent behavior (Dennison, 2007; Scott et al., 2014).

Police officers with special training in risk assessment, child protection, domestic violence, and stalking were less prone to biases regarding the previous relationship between the victim and perpetrator, showing only biases about the perception of alarm or threat, considering these to be greater when the perpetrator was a stranger (Scott et al., 2013). Police officers should receive training on stalking, so as not to underestimate situations regardless of the relationship between the victim and perpetrator (Scott et al., 2010) and to be more aware of the risks associated with this phenomenon. Ngo (2019) stated that police officers' training should promote the idea that crime is not to be defined only by the perpetrators' behavior but also by the impact it has on its victims. However, studies have found that previous experience investigating stalking cases or length of service did not affect police officers' perception of stalking vignettes (Scott et al., 2013; Sheridan, Scott, & Nixon, 2016).

On the other hand, research suggests that prior stalking victimization has little or no impact on perceptions of stalking, although the available data in this regard were collected with samples of university students (cf., Lambert

et al., 2013; Phillips et al., 2004) and not of professionals, namely police officers. Even so, Yanowitz (2006) found that men who had personally experienced or knew someone who had experienced stalking victimization were more likely to perceive intrusive behaviors as stalking when compared with men who had personal experience or who did not know someone who had been a victim of stalking.

In a study carried out in Belgium, Italy, and Slovenia, victims of stalking ranked the police as the worst resource regarding the support received and their perceived inability to take the victim seriously (Galeazzi et al., 2009). In Spain, in a study carried out through semistructured interviews, victims explained they wanted to stop stalking and would prefer protection of themselves rather than assessed of punishment from the stalker (Villacampa & Salat, 2019). In Portugal, female victims considered police support helpful, while male victims described it as mostly unhelpful (Matos, Grangeia, et al., 2019).

There are no known published studies in Portugal that assess the perceptions of police officers about stalking. Considering the research reviewed, we established as our objective to assess police officers' perceptions of stalking, considering its recent criminalization in Portugal, as well as to identify the individual and situational factors that influenced those perceptions. We therefore formulated the following hypotheses:

1. Police officers can identify stalking;
2. Victims and perpetrators sex influences the identification of stalking and the perception of its seriousness;
3. The identification of stalking and the perception of its seriousness are lower if the victim and perpetrator are of the same sex;
4. The severity of stalking situations influences its identification of stalking and perception of seriousness;
5. The participants sex influences the identification of stalking and the perception of its seriousness;
6. Previous professional experience with stalking cases influences the identification of stalking and the perception of its seriousness;
7. Personal experience with stalking cases influences the identification of stalking and the perception of its seriousness;
8. Previous training about stalking influences the identification of stalking and the perception of its seriousness.

2 | METHOD

2.1 | Participants

The sample was gathered through a nonrandomized convenience sample method, from February 3 to March 21, 2020. Since the criminalization of stalking in Portugal occurred in August 2015, the collection of this sample took place five and a half years after that important milestone. The sample included 1212 participants from Portuguese Police Departments, 88.43% of whom were men ($n = 1071$) and 11.56% women ($n = 140$). Their ages were between 21 and 61 years ($M = 43.49$, $SD = 8.99$) and they had, on average, 20.58 years of professional experience in law enforcement ($SD = 9.15$). Further sociodemographic data are shown in Table 1.

2.2 | Measures

For this study, we adapted the Portuguese version of the 'Reasonable' Perceptions on Stalking Questionnaire, originally developed by Scott and Sheridan (1999; translated and adapted by the Research Group on Stalking in Portugal [G.I.S.P.], University of Minho, 2009). This questionnaire aims to assess perceptions of stalking scenarios through various vignettes. Originally, these vignettes manipulate the severity of the behavior and the relationship between the victim and perpetrator. Considering our objective of evaluating the influence of victim and perpetrator's sex on

TABLE 1 Participants' sociodemographic data

Variables	Categories	M (SD: Min; Max)/% (n)
Sex	Male	88.44 (1071)
	Female	11.56 (140)
Age		43.49 (8.99; 21; 61)
Nationality	Portuguese	99.50 (1193)
	Foreigner	0.50 (6)
Marital status	Single	16.08 (193)
	Married	61.33 (736)
	Marital Union	13.00 (156)
	Divorced/Separated	8.50 (102)
	Widowed	1.08 (13)
Education level	Basic education	8.11 (98)
	High school	68.73 (831)
	Undergraduate	13.40 (162)
	Bachelor	0.91 (11)
	Masters	8.60 (104)
	Doctorate	0.17 (2)
	Postdoctoral	0.08 (1)
Education	Law	8.99 (109)
	Psychology	1.57 (19)
	Education	5.20 (63)
	Criminology	7.59 (92)
	Military/Police science	15.02 (182)
	Other	20.38 (247)
	High school	11.06 (134)
	No information	30.20 (366)
Professional experience (years)		20.58 (9.16; 0.5; 41)

stalking perceptions, we adapted the vignettes to manipulate the variable within the context of post-intimate relationship breakup stalking. The ex-couple could be of a different or the same sex. We decided to keep the manipulation of the perpetrator's behavior severity.

We thus developed 12 vignettes, focusing on intimate relationship breakup situations that include three levels of severity and four different ex-couples: Ricardo and Simão; Maria and Vitória; Pedro and Tatiana; Catarina and João (Table 2). The actor's sex will be hereby presented in the same order (victim-perpetrator): M—Male; F—Female.

Scenarios' severities were manipulated through several components and behaviors that we used to define the level of severity. With each level of severity (low, moderate, high), there was an increase in the time that had passed since the breakup; an increase in the frequency and number of times the perpetrator would try to contact the victim through the victim's workplace since their breakup; the number of presents and letters the perpetrator would send; how often the perpetrator would meet the victim where the victim used to have lunch; and the number of times and situations in which the perpetrator approaches the victim.

In low-severity scenarios, the relationship between the victim and perpetrator had ended "6 months ago", during which the perpetrator had attempted to contact the victim at their workplace three times and would leave the victim messages inviting them out when the victim would not answer the calls. These scenarios also described that

TABLE 2 Developed scenario's design

Scenarios	Severity	Sex
A	Low	MM
B	Moderate	
C	High	
D	Low	FF
E	Moderate	
F	High	
G	Low	MF
H	Moderate	
I	High	
J	Low	FM
K	Moderate	
L	High	

the perpetrator would send flowers or a photo to the victim's workplace, accompanied by a message in which the perpetrator expressed their love. The perpetrator would also occasionally be at the place where the victim usually had lunch during the week, sometimes approaching the victim when they were alone, questioning them on why they would not go out with the perpetrator.

In moderate-severity scenarios, the relationship had ended "a year ago", increasing the duration of the behaviors. During that year, the perpetrator had attempted to contact the victim at their workplace "at least once a week", leaving messages inviting them out when the victim would not answer the phone calls—increasing the frequency of contact attempts. The number of flowers/photos that the perpetrator sent also increased from one to "various", and the message that accompanied the gifts now included a warning that the perpetrator would not give up easily. In this severity, it was added that the perpetrator had begun contacting the victim's friends and family through social media—showing an increase in behavior diversity. This time, the perpetrator always approached the victim when at the place they usually had lunch. The victim also added that they thought they saw the perpetrator walking on the street where they live "two nights during the past week".

Finally, in high severity scenarios, the relationship was described as having ended years ago. The perpetrator had attempted to contact the victim every day at their workplace, leaving messages warning them that they "should not ignore [the perpetrator]" and that if the perpetrator could not have them, the perpetrator would make sure no one would. Besides the flowers/photos sent, the perpetrator in these scenarios also sent messages through social media to the victim, warning them that "sooner or later" they would belong to the perpetrator again. The perpetrator contacted the victim's friends and family "almost every day" through their phones and social media. At this level of severity, when the perpetrator found the victim where they usually had lunch, the perpetrator always approached them, warning them that it is not safe to be alone", especially at night". The victim also added that they think they saw the perpetrator "four nights the past week, standing in front of their house" and that they had received letters in their mailbox containing various photographs of them (the victim).

Each vignette was accompanied by seven questions. The questions' answers were presented on a Likert Scale, from zero to 10:

1. Stalking: "How much do you consider that [the perpetrator]'s behavior constitutes stalking?" ("Not stalking at all" to "Definitely stalking");
2. Severity: "If you consider this a case of stalking, how severe do you think it is?"
3. ("Not severe at all" to "Extremely severe");

4. Crime: "How much do you consider that [the perpetrator]'s behavior should be considered a crime?" ("Not at all necessary" to "Extremely necessary");
5. Alarm: "Do you think that [the perpetrator]'s behavior will provoke a feeling of alarm on [the victim]?" ("Definitely not" to "Definitely");
6. Violence: "Do you think that [the victim], considering [the perpetrator]'s behavior, could fear that they [the perpetrator] will become violent?" ("Definitely not" to "Definitely");
7. Responsibility: "To what extent is [the victim] responsible for encouraging [the perpetrator]'s behavior?" ("Not at all responsible" to "Extremely responsible");
8. Criminal justice: "Do you think the criminal justice system must intervene to solve this case?" ("Definitely not" to "Definitely").

At the end of the vignettes, the participants were to answer some questions about their personal and professional experience with stalking situations, as well as previous training (formal or informal) they had had about stalking if any.

2.3 | Procedures

This study was approved by the Social and Human Sciences Subcommittee of The Ethics Committee of The University of Minho (CEICSH 072/2019). The questionnaire was adapted, as previously mentioned. We sent requests to the Portuguese Police Forces (Policia de Seguranca Pubblica and Guarda Nacional Republicana), for the distribution of the questionnaires to their officers, with an explanation of our objectives and proceedings, as well as the informed consent to be presented to the participants. After we received the needed authorizations, the questionnaire was distributed internally through the institutions' emails, so that police officers would be able to participate voluntarily. The email contained a link, and a description of the study's objectives, ethical principles, and informed consent. After clearly consenting, the participants were presented with a sociodemographic questionnaire, followed by randomized vignettes.

2.4 | Data analysis strategy

We used the *Statistical Package for the Social Sciences* (SPSS, version 26 for Windows) to analyze the data. We observed the variable effect of "Victim and perpetrator sex" (VPS effect) and "Severity" (SV effect) through repeated measures analysis of variance (ANOVA). Using repeated measures ANOVA, we also compared these effects between subjects, considering participants' variables (e.g., sex, previous professional or personal experience, and training about stalking). For this analysis, we verified the sphericity assumption through Mauchly's Test. When this assumption was not met ($p < 0.050$), we used Greenhouse-Geisser correction. Likewise, if this correction was not assured ($\epsilon > 0.750$), we used the Huynh-Feldt correction. When conducting post hoc tests to observe the differences elicited by variable effects, we compared the scenarios pairwise, through Sidak's correction for multiple comparisons.

3 | RESULTS

In the set of scenarios, the answer to item one had a mean of 6.66 (SD = 1.58), item two had a mean of 6.22 (SD = 1.72), item three had a mean of 5.67 (SD = 1.93), item four had a mean of 6.36 (SD = 1.61), item five had a mean of 6.06 (SD = 1.66), item six had a mean of 2.00 (SD = 0.09), and item seven had a mean of 5.30 (SD = 1.93). The answers' means for each scenario can be found in Table 3. Participants' perceptions seem to increase as the

TABLE 3 Means and standard deviations of item's answers for each scenario

Scenario Victim-perpetrator sex Severity Items	A		B		C		D		E		F		G		H		I		J		K		L	
	Same sex												Different sex											
	MM						FF						MF						FM					
	Low	M(SD)	Moderate	High	Low	M(SD)	Moderate	High	Low	M(SD)	Moderate	High	Low	M(SD)	Moderate	High	Low	M(SD)	Moderate	High	Low	M(SD)	Moderate	High
1—Stalking	5.11 (3.08)	6.59 (2.82)	8.48 (2.18)	4.91 (3.05)	6.41 (2.84)	8.57 (2.07)	4.69 (3.06)	6.71 (2.68)	8.43 (2.21)	4.69 (3.10)	6.69 (2.71)	8.66 (2.02)	4.38 (2.84)	6.07 (2.71)	8.21 (2.21)	4.19 (2.91)	5.98 (2.82)	8.31 (2.14)	4.14 (2.92)	6.29 (2.72)	8.06 (2.30)	4.20 (3.01)	6.31 (2.70)	8.43 (2.09)
2—Severity	3.56 (3.17)	5.22 (3.17)	7.96 (2.53)	3.45 (3.15)	5.27 (3.20)	8.07 (2.44)	3.46 (3.17)	5.77 (3.10)	7.78 (2.63)	3.57 (3.23)	5.76 (3.17)	8.18 (2.39)	4.90 (3.14)	6.36 (2.81)	8.21 (2.28)	4.50 (3.08)	6.12 (2.90)	8.26 (2.21)	4.20 (3.04)	6.27 (2.79)	8.11 (2.31)	4.45 (3.12)	6.51 (2.77)	8.43 (2.11)
3—Crime	4.50 (3.05)	5.90 (2.93)	8.09 (2.36)	4.22 (3.06)	5.65 (2.97)	8.03 (2.38)	3.89 (3.04)	5.94 (2.94)	7.91 (2.46)	4.20 (3.10)	6.15 (2.88)	8.21 (2.27)	2.08 (2.41)	2.16 (2.50)	2.03 (2.63)	2.07 (2.39)	2.04 (2.41)	2.05 (2.67)	1.93 (2.33)	1.87 (2.32)	1.95 (2.53)	1.92 (2.36)	1.89 (2.33)	2.04 (2.69)
4—Alarm	3.11 (3.22)	4.89 (3.32)	7.60 (2.84)	3.05 (3.16)	4.86 (3.34)	7.66 (2.78)	3.11 (3.18)	5.37 (3.26)	7.38 (2.95)	3.24 (3.22)	5.48 (3.26)	7.88 (2.65)	2.08 (2.41)	2.16 (2.50)	2.03 (2.63)	2.07 (2.39)	2.04 (2.41)	2.05 (2.67)	1.93 (2.33)	1.87 (2.32)	1.95 (2.53)	1.92 (2.36)	1.89 (2.33)	2.04 (2.69)
5—Violence	3.11 (3.22)	4.89 (3.32)	7.60 (2.84)	3.05 (3.16)	4.86 (3.34)	7.66 (2.78)	3.11 (3.18)	5.37 (3.26)	7.38 (2.95)	3.24 (3.22)	5.48 (3.26)	7.88 (2.65)	2.08 (2.41)	2.16 (2.50)	2.03 (2.63)	2.07 (2.39)	2.04 (2.41)	2.05 (2.67)	1.93 (2.33)	1.87 (2.32)	1.95 (2.53)	1.92 (2.36)	1.89 (2.33)	2.04 (2.69)
6—Responsibility	3.11 (3.22)	4.89 (3.32)	7.60 (2.84)	3.05 (3.16)	4.86 (3.34)	7.66 (2.78)	3.11 (3.18)	5.37 (3.26)	7.38 (2.95)	3.24 (3.22)	5.48 (3.26)	7.88 (2.65)	2.08 (2.41)	2.16 (2.50)	2.03 (2.63)	2.07 (2.39)	2.04 (2.41)	2.05 (2.67)	1.93 (2.33)	1.87 (2.32)	1.95 (2.53)	1.92 (2.36)	1.89 (2.33)	2.04 (2.69)
7—Justice	3.11 (3.22)	4.89 (3.32)	7.60 (2.84)	3.05 (3.16)	4.86 (3.34)	7.66 (2.78)	3.11 (3.18)	5.37 (3.26)	7.38 (2.95)	3.24 (3.22)	5.48 (3.26)	7.88 (2.65)	2.08 (2.41)	2.16 (2.50)	2.03 (2.63)	2.07 (2.39)	2.04 (2.41)	2.05 (2.67)	1.93 (2.33)	1.87 (2.32)	1.95 (2.53)	1.92 (2.36)	1.89 (2.33)	2.04 (2.69)

severity rises in all items except for number six, the one about the victim's Responsibility, which maintained low values throughout the various scenarios. Looking at high-severity scenarios, in scenario I (male victim and female perpetrator), we can find the lowest scores for all items. On the contrary, scenario L (female victim and male perpetrator) shows the highest values on all items except six.

3.1 | Professional experience, personal experience, and previous training in stalking

Most participants—60.15% ($n = 729$) said they never had previous professional experience with stalking cases, while 39.85% ($n = 483$) reported having had professional contact. As for the personal experience, 37.71% ($n = 457$) of the participants responded that they never had that experience, 18.23% ($n = 221$) mentioned knowing someone that was a victim of stalking, 7.43% ($n = 90$) answered they had been a victim, 6.02% ($n = 73$) mentioned knowing a perpetrator, and four participants (0.33%) admitted to having been a stalking perpetrator.

Regarding previous training about stalking, 28.05% ($n = 340$) of participants said they had never had any training. Of those who had training, 31.52% ($n = 382$) mentioned having received training from informal sources (e.g., reading on their own initiative, or through other professionals at work), 1.07% ($n = 13$) responded they had training from formal sources (e.g., class at university, workshop), and 9.49% ($n = 115$) mentioned having training from both formal and informal sources.

3.2 | Victim and perpetrator sex (VPS) effect on “reasonable” perceptions of stalking crimes: Intra and within-subject analysis

In Table 4, we present the means and standard deviations for all items in all 12 scenarios, as well as the results of the tests of significance on the intrasubject effect (repeated measures ANOVA). Victim and perpetrator sex will always be referred to in that order, using the sex initials (e.g., FM = Female victim and Male perpetrator). Afterward, we will present the results by item, analyzing the VPS effect, professional experience effect, personal experience effect, and previous training effect by the level of severity. We chose to display the results concerning the intersubject variables (experience and previous training) only when they had a significant effect.

3.2.1 | Recognition of a situation as stalking

Police officers' perceptions of stalking situations vary with the manipulation of the scenario's severity and the victim-perpetrator dyad. Looking at low-severity scenarios ($n = 925$), we found significant differences in answers' means between all scenarios. A–D ($p < 0.001$), A–G ($p < 0.001$), A–J ($p < 0.001$), D–G ($p < 0.001$), and D–J ($p < 0.001$). The scenario with a significantly higher score was the one in which both the victim and perpetrator were male (A). On the contrary, police officers had more difficulty recognizing stalking in different sex dyads (G and J), with lower scores in the scenario that represents a male as a victim and a woman as a perpetrator.

As for moderate-severity scenarios ($n = 756$), the VPS effect was statistically significant. The scenario that obtained the lowest score was the one with a female victim and a female perpetrator (E). This effect was also significant for participants who did not have previous training in stalking, thus the highest score was obtained when the victim and perpetrator were both male (B) or female (E).

Regarding high-severity scenarios ($n = 732$), the VPS effect was also significant. We can therefore conclude that those police officers recognized the situation as stalking more often when the victim was female (F and L), regardless of the perpetrator's sex.

Looking at participants' sex, we observed that the effect was significant for male participants, with differences between the scenarios. Therefore, male participants perceived the situation as stalking more often when the victim was female (F and L) than when they were male (C and I).

TABLE 4 Means and standard deviations for each item for all 12 scenarios and victim and perpetrator sex (VPS) effects's significance

Severity Scenario	Low						Moderate						High					
	A (MM)	D (FF)	G (MF)	J (FM)	B (MM)	E (FF)	H (MF)	K (FM)	C (MM)	F (FF)	I (MF)	L (FM)	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)		
1—Stalking	5.08 (3.11)	4.88 (3.09)	4.69 (3.08)	4.70 (3.10)	6.75 (2.76)	6.56 (2.78)	6.71 (2.67)	6.75 (2.69)	8.58 (2.06)	8.62 (2.00)	8.52 (2.14)	8.67 (2.00)						
	F (2.126, 1964.677) = 41.713***						F (2.092, 1579.678) = 5.793**						F (2.354, 1720.470) = 9.958***					
2—Severity	4.35 (2.86)	4.22 (2.93)	4.18 (2.93)	4.27 (3.00)	6.23 (2.65)	6.14 (2.74)	6.32 (2.70)	6.38 (2.68)	8.32 (2.10)	8.37 (2.06)	8.17 (2.22)	8.44 (2.06)						
	F (2.359, 2111.607) = 5.647**						F (2.132, 1582.041) = 7.623**						F (2.380, 1742.030) = 28.295***					
3—Crime	3.50 (3.20)	3.44 (3.19)	3.45 (3.17)	3.57 (3.24)	5.41 (3.14)	5.40 (3.15)	5.76 (3.11)	5.80 (3.15)	8.09 (2.40)	8.13 (2.38)	7.90 (2.51)	8.22 (2.35)						
	F (2.329, 2094.205) = 3.584*						F (2.239, 1666.176) = 26.745***						F (2.552, 1854.977) = 26.023***					
4—Alarm	4.85 (3.18)	4.51 (3.13)	4.21 (3.06)	4.47 (3.13)	6.52 (2.77)	6.24 (2.83)	6.26 (2.79)	6.57 (2.77)	8.31 (2.18)	8.32 (2.15)	8.24 (2.21)	8.44 (2.09)						
	F (2.408, 2184.062) = 61.327***						F (2.324, 1710.740) = 19.651***						F (2.636, 1905.664) = 10.341***					
5—Violence	4.46 (3.07)	4.20 (3.08)	3.89 (3.05)	4.20 (3.10)	6.06 (2.88)	5.77 (2.91)	5.92 (2.94)	6.17 (2.87)	8.17 (2.28)	8.08 (2.33)	8.02 (2.36)	8.23 (2.27)						
	F (2.381, 2114.117) = 49.156***						F (2.205, 1612.014) = 18.345***						F (2.607, 1863.980) = 9.635**					
6—Responsibility	2.07 (2.44)	2.06 (2.43)	1.93 (2.34)	1.90 (2.35)	2.09 (2.46)	1.99 (2.38)	1.86 (2.30)	1.88 (2.32)	2.04 (2.63)	2.05 (2.67)	1.91 (2.50)	2.02 (2.68)						
	F (1.963, 1790.138) = 8.637***						F (2.023, 1499.285) = 9.870***						F (2.736, 2005.397) = 3.690**					
7—Justice	3.09 (3.23)	3.05 (3.17)	3.12 (3.18)	3.25 (3.22)	5.08 (3.31)	4.98 (3.32)	5.35 (3.25)	5.51 (3.23)	7.71 (2.73)	7.69 (2.75)	7.52 (2.84)	7.88 (2.65)						
	F (1.924, 1777.775) = 9.506***						F (2.153, 1634.497) = 32.110***						F (2.341, 1734.861) = 22.258***					

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

3.2.2 | Behavior's severity

Regarding low-severity scenarios ($n = 896$), post hoc tests showed significant differences in answers' means on the following scenarios: A-D ($p = 0.005$), A-G ($p = 0.006$), and G-J ($p = 0.021$). Severity perception was higher when the perpetrator was male (A and J), especially when the victim was of the same sex. Concerning previous professional experience with stalking, the effect was significant for participants with no previous experience, meaning that they perceived the situations as more severe when the victim and perpetrator were both male (A).

Regarding moderate-severity scenarios ($n = 743$), we observed significant differences between the following scenarios: E-H ($p = 0.006$) and E-K ($p < 0.001$). The scenarios with the highest scores were the ones in which the victim and perpetrator were of different sexes (H and K) and they were mostly considered less severe when the victim and perpetrator were female.

Regarding high-severity scenarios ($n = 733$), we found significant differences between scenarios C-I ($p < 0.001$), C-L ($p < 0.001$), F-I ($p < 0.001$), F-L ($p = 0.004$), and I-L ($p < 0.001$). For these scenarios, severity perception was particularly high when the victim was female and the perpetrator was male (L), and low when the victim was male and the perpetrator was female (I).

3.2.3 | Behavior criminalization

About low-severity scenarios ($n = 900$), there were significant differences in D-J ($p = 0.029$) and G-J ($p = 0.001$). Police officers more often considered that the behavior should be considered a crime when the victim was female and the perpetrator was male (J), and less when the perpetrator was female (D and G).

Regarding moderate-severity scenarios ($n = 745$), we found significant differences between the following scenarios: B-H ($p < 0.001$), B-K ($p < 0.001$), E-H ($p < 0.001$), and E-K ($p < 0.001$). The score was higher when the victim and perpetrator were of different sexes (H and K).

As for high-severity scenarios ($n = 728$), we observed significant differences between the scenarios C-I ($p < 0.001$), C-L ($p = 0.004$), F-I ($p < 0.001$), F-L ($p = 0.12$), and I-L ($p < 0.001$). Therefore, the score was higher in scenarios with a female victim and a male perpetrator (L), and lower in the opposite case, when the victim was male and the perpetrator was female (I).

3.2.4 | Victim's alarm

Regarding low-severity scenarios ($n = 908$), there were also significant differences: A-D ($p < 0.001$), A-G ($p < 0.001$), A-J ($p < 0.001$), D-G ($p < 0.001$), and G-J ($p < 0.001$). In these scenarios, police officers considered that the behavior would provoke alarm in the victim when the victim and perpetrator were both male (A), and less when the victim was male and the perpetrator was female (G).

Considering moderate-severity scenarios ($n = 737$), we observed significant differences between scenarios B-E ($p < 0.001$), B-H ($p < 0.001$), E-K ($p < 0.001$), and H-K ($p < 0.001$). The scores were higher when the perpetrator was male (B and K), so police officers consider that the victim's alarm is higher when the perpetrator was male, regardless of the victim's sex.

Regarding high-severity scenarios ($n = 724$), there were significant differences: C-L ($p = 0.004$), F-L ($p < 0.001$), and I-L ($p < 0.001$). Thus, the scores were higher when the victim was female and the perpetrator was male (L).

3.2.5 | Fear of violence

Regarding low-severity scenarios ($n = 889$), post hoc tests showed significant differences: A-D ($p < 0.001$), A-G ($p < 0.001$), A-J ($p < 0.001$), D-G ($p < 0.001$), and G-J ($p < 0.001$). The participants considered that the victim could

fear violence more when the victim and perpetrator were males (A), and the scores were lower when the victim was male and the perpetrator was female (G).

As for previous training about stalking, the VPS effect was significant for participants who had had formal and informal training ($F(2.229, 245.167) = 3.243, p = 0.036$) between scenarios G–J ($p = 0.013$), when compared with participants who only had informal or formal training or those who had no previous training at all. Therefore, participants with formal and informal training considered to a greater degree that the victim could fear violence when she was female and the perpetrator was male (J) than in the opposite case (G).

Regarding moderate-severity scenarios ($n = 732$), there were significant differences between scenarios B–E ($p < 0.001$), E–K ($p < 0.001$), and H–K ($p < 0.001$), so the scores were higher when the perpetrator was male (B and K). This VPS effect was significant for participants who had no personal experience with stalking ($F(2.176, 939.991) = 9.844, p < 0.001$): scenarios B–E ($p < 0.001$), B–H ($p = 0.021$), E–K ($p = 0.001$), and H–K ($p < 0.001$). They considered that the victim could fear violence when the perpetrator was male (B and K). Comparing participants who had formal training on stalking with the ones who had informal training or no training at all, we found significant differences in the answers of those who had formal training ($F(3, 30) = 7.712, p = 0.001$) for scenarios B–K ($p = 0.004$). They tended to consider that the victim could fear more violence when both he and the perpetrator were male (B), than when the victim was female and the perpetrator male (K).

Concerning high-severity scenarios ($n = 716$), there were significant differences only between the scenarios C–I ($p < 0.001$). Similar to what was found in moderate-severity scenarios, the scores were higher when the perpetrator was male (C and I), regardless of the sex of the victim.

Looking at participant sex, the effect was significant on male participants ($F(2.685, 1702.134) = 11.811, p < 0.001$), for scenarios C–I ($p < 0.001$) and I–L ($p < 0.001$), so they considered that the victim could fear violence when the perpetrator was male (B and K), regardless the sex of the victim.

3.2.6 | Victim's responsibility

Regarding low-severity scenarios ($n = 913$), we observed significant differences between scenarios A–G ($p = 0.025$), A–J ($p = 0.006$), D–G ($p = 0.012$), and D–J ($p = 0.002$), so police officers tended to put more responsibility on the victim when they were of the same sex as the perpetrator (A and D).

Regarding moderate-severity scenarios ($n = 742$), there were significant differences between scenarios B–H ($p = 0.001$), B–K ($p = 0.003$), and E–H ($p = 0.009$). The scores were higher when the victim and perpetrator were of the same sex (B and E), especially when they were both males, and they tended to be lower when the victim was male and the perpetrator was female (H).

As for personal experience with stalking, the effect was significant for participants that said they knew someone that was a perpetrator ($F(1.638, 113.040) = 9.643, p < 0.001$) for scenarios B–H ($p = 0.005$), B–K ($p = 0.003$), and E–K ($p = 0.047$). These participants tended to put more responsibility on same-sex couples (B and E).

Looking at high-severity scenarios ($n = 734$), there were significant differences between scenarios C–I ($p = 0.006$), and F–I ($p = 0.037$). Similar to other severity levels, the scores were higher for scenarios with same-sex dyads (C and F), and significantly lower when the victim was male and the perpetrator was female (I).

3.2.7 | Need for criminal justice system intervention

Regarding low-severity scenarios ($n = 925$), we found significant differences between scenarios A–J ($p = 0.005$), D–J ($p < 0.001$), and G–J ($p < 0.001$). Participants tended to consider that there was a need for intervention by the criminal justice system when the victim was female and the perpetrator male (J).

When it came to moderate-severity scenarios ($n = 760$), post hoc tests showed significant differences for scenarios B–H ($p < 0.001$), B–K ($p < 0.001$), E–H ($p < 0.001$), E–K ($p < 0.001$), and H–K ($p = 0.001$). The scores were higher for different sex dyads (H and K), especially if the victim was female and the perpetrator was male.

Regarding high-severity scenarios ($n = 742$), there were significant differences between the following scenarios: C-I ($p < 0.001$), C-L ($p < 0.001$), F-I ($p = 0.005$), F-L ($p < 0.001$), and I-L ($p < 0.001$). Therefore, police officers considered that criminal justice intervention was less needed when the victim was male and the perpetrator was female (I). On the contrary, the scores were higher when the victim was female and the perpetrator was male (L).

3.3 | Severity (SV) effect on “reasonable” perceptions of stalking crimes: Intra and within-subject analysis

In Table 5, we present the means and standard deviations for all items in all 12 scenarios, as well as the results of the tests of significance on the intrasubject effect (repeated measures ANOVA). The victim and perpetrator sex are always referred to by that order, using the initials (e.g., FM = Female victim and Male perpetrator). Afterward, we will present the results by item, analyzing the SV effect, professional experience effect, personal experience effect, and previous training effect, looking at the different dyads. We chose to display the results concerning the intersubject variables (experience and previous training) only when they had a significant effect.

3.3.1 | Recognition of a situation as stalking

Regarding police officers' perceptions of scenarios where both the victim and perpetrator were male (MM, $n = 799$), we found that the SV effect was significant between the following scenarios: A-B ($p < 0.001$), A-C ($p < 0.001$), and B-C ($p < 0.001$). The scores were, therefore, lower for low-severity scenarios and higher for high-severity scenarios.

As for scenarios where both the victim and perpetrator were female (FF, $n = 743$), there were significant differences between scenarios D-E ($p < 0.001$) and E-F ($p < 0.001$). As we observed in MM scenarios, the scores were higher when the severity was high and lower when it was low.

Looking at participant sex, the SV effect was significant for female ($F(1.595, 130.775) = 96.555, p < 0.001$) and male ($F(1.627, 1072.406) = 728.217, p < 0.001$) participants. These differences translated into the answers' means increasing as scenario severity went up, meaning that they would increase when comparing low-severity scenarios to moderate severity, as well as when comparing moderate-severity scenarios to high-severity ones.

Regarding MF scenarios (male victim and female perpetrator, $n = 760$), there were significant differences between scenarios G-H ($p < 0.001$), G-I ($p < 0.001$), and H-I ($p < 0.001$). Again, police officers better recognized the situation as stalking when the scenarios' severity was high and less when it was low.

Regarding scenarios in which the victim was female and the perpetrator was male (FM, $n = 734$), there were significant differences between scenarios J-K ($p < 0.001$), J-L ($p < 0.001$), and K-L ($p < 0.001$). Thus, the scores increased along with severity. Considering participant sex, this effect was significant for female ($F(1.733, 142.146) = 97.827, p < 0.001$) and male participants ($F(1.626, 1056.963) = 782.234, p < 0.001$), producing similar results.

3.3.2 | Behavior's severity

Regarding MM scenarios ($n = 767$), there were significant differences between answers' means in the following scenarios: A-B ($p < 0.001$), A-C ($p < 0.001$), and B-C ($p < 0.001$), with behavior severity being identified more easily in more severe scenarios.

Looking at professional experience with stalking, the SV effect was significant for participants who had had previous experience ($F(1.686, 777.474) = 682.108, p < 0.001$) and for those who had not ($F(1.528, 464.532) = 349.149, p < 0.001$).

As for FF scenarios ($n = 727$), we found significant differences between scenarios D-E ($p < 0.001$), D-F ($p < 0.001$), and E-F ($p < 0.001$); The effect was also significant for MF scenarios ($n = 747$) - G-H ($p < 0.001$), G-I ($p < 0.001$), and

TABLE 5 Severity effect

Victim and perpetrator sex	MM		FF		MF		FM					
	Low	High	Low	High	Low	High	Low	High				
Severity	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L
Scenarios	M (SD)		M (SD)		M (SD)		M (SD)		M (SD)		M (SD)	
Items	M (SD)		M (SD)		M (SD)		M (SD)		M (SD)		M (SD)	
1—Stalking	5.11 (3.10)	6.66 (2.81)	8.49 (2.16)	4.98 (3.08)	6.57 (2.80)	8.58 (2.07)	4.81 (3.06)	6.72 (2.67)	8.49 (2.18)	4.84 (3.09)	6.80 (2.66)	8.66 (2.02)
	F (1.632, 1302.717) = 730.960**		F (1.626, 1206.326) = 816.720**		F (1.669, 1267.110) = 875.934**		F (1.632, 1193.608) = 874.090**					
2—Severity	4.37 (2.87)	6.21 (2.69)	8.25 (2.19)	4.28 (2.93)	6.19 (2.73)	8.34 (2.13)	4.24 (2.93)	6.31 (2.71)	8.12 (2.27)	4.36 (3.01)	6.42 (2.66)	8.44 (2.10)
	F (1.623, 1243.171) = 1019.643**		F (1.631, 1184.106) = 1052.510**		F (1.735, 1294.012) = 995.158**		F (1.651, 1193.608) = 994.319**					
3—Crime	3.54 (3.19)	5.31 (3.16)	7.95 (2.54)	3.56 (3.22)	5.45 (3.16)	8.08 (2.45)	3.58 (3.21)	5.77 (3.10)	7.85 (2.58)	3.73 (3.26)	5.85 (3.16)	8.19 (2.40)
	F (1.717, 1344.510) = 1001.995**		F (1.722, 1271.075) = 1013.972**		F (1.768, 1322.320) = 919.190**		F (1.762, 1286.578) = 896.830**					
4—Alarm	4.88 (3.16)	6.44 (2.82)	8.22 (2.27)	4.64 (3.12)	6.26 (2.84)	8.26 (2.22)	4.32 (3.06)	6.29 (2.78)	8.20 (2.25)	4.62 (3.13)	6.61 (2.73)	8.44 (2.09)
	F (1.652, 1293.292) = 667.261**		F (1.626, 1195.414) = 790.422**		F (1.707, 1270.152) = 891.107**		F (1.694, 1236.571) = 821.620**					
5—Violence	4.50 (3.04)	6.00 (2.90)	8.07 (2.37)	4.31 (3.07)	5.81 (2.90)	8.04 (2.37)	3.99 (3.07)	5.92 (2.96)	7.95 (2.43)	4.38 (3.09)	6.22 (2.85)	8.21 (2.27)
	F (1.691, 1307.047) = 748.905**		F (1.693, 1227.453) = 789.082**		F (1.731, 1273.851) = 841.998**		F (1.710, 1236.325) = 790.735**					
6—Responsibility	2.01 (2.41)	2.08 (2.48)	2.02 (2.61)	2.02 (2.41)	2.00 (2.40)	2.04 (2.66)	1.88 (2.29)	1.85 (2.31)	1.91 (2.49)	1.84 (2.28)	1.89 (2.34)	2.04 (2.68)
	F (1.761, 1386.290) = 0.642, $p = 0.507$		F (1.592, 1171.477) = 0.413, $p = 0.805$		F (1.469, 1105.993) = 0.502, $p = 0.548$		F (1.522, 1115.620) = 5.074*					
7—Justice	3.13 (3.26)	4.99 (3.33)	7.60 (2.83)	3.16 (3.22)	5.02 (3.31)	7.66 (2.78)	3.23 (3.24)	5.37 (3.26)	7.48 (2.87)	3.40 (3.27)	5.58 (3.24)	7.89 (2.64)
	F (1.729, 1380.126) = 940.592**		F (1.717, 1282.282) = 937.774**		F (1.763, 1347.292) = 860.966**		F (1.760, 1302.756) = 894.605**					

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.001$.

H-I ($p < 0.001$), and for FM scenarios ($n = 724$) - J-K ($p < 0.001$), J-L ($p < 0.001$), and K-L ($p < 0.001$). Participants considered the behaviors more severe in higher-severity scenarios.

Looking at professional experience, the SV effect was significant for participants who had experience with stalking ($F(1.651, 767.706) = 668.105, p < 0.001$), as well as for participants who had not had experience ($F(1.630, 418.996) = 333.171, p < 0.001$). So, for item two, the scores increased along with severity, meaning that the participants better recognized the situation as stalking when the scenarios' severity was high and less when it was lower.

3.3.3 | Behavior criminalization

The SV effect was significant for MM scenarios ($n = 784$)—A-B ($p < 0.001$), A-C ($p < 0.001$), and B-C ($p < 0.001$); and for FF scenarios ($n = 739$)—D-E ($p < 0.001$), D-F ($p < 0.001$), and E-F ($p < 0.001$). Looking at professional experience with stalking, the SV effect was significant for participants who had previous experience ($F(1.737, 818.276) = 673.845, p < 0.001$) and for those who had not ($F(1.697, 451.449) = 345.517, p < 0.001$).

As for MF scenarios ($n = 749$), we found significant differences between scenarios: G-H ($p < 0.001$), G-I ($p < 0.001$), and H-I ($p < 0.001$). Considering professional experience with stalking, the effect was significant for participants who had it ($F(1.776, 820.411) = 597.354, p < 0.001$) and those who did not ($F(1.731, 493.345) = 325.978, p < 0.001$).

Regarding FM scenarios ($n = 731$), there were significant differences J-K ($p < 0.001$), J-L ($p < 0.001$), and K-L ($p < 0.001$). Considering previous professional experience, the effect was significant for participants who had previous experience ($F(1.773, 836.699) = 612.457, p < 0.001$), as well as for those who had not ($F(1.684, 432.912) = 291.599, p < 0.001$). Therefore, the scores for answers for item three increased along with severity.

3.3.4 | Victim's alarm

Regarding MM scenarios ($n = 784$), the SV effect was significant when comparing the following scenarios: A-B ($p < 0.001$), A-C ($p < 0.001$), and B-C ($p < 0.001$). As for FF scenarios ($n = 736$), there were significant differences between scenarios D-E ($p < 0.001$), D-F ($p < 0.001$), and E-F ($p < 0.001$).

Regarding MF scenarios ($n = 745$), we found significant differences between scenarios G-H ($p < 0.001$), G-I ($p < 0.001$), and H-I ($p < 0.001$). When it comes to FM scenarios ($n = 731$), there were significant differences between scenarios J-K ($p < 0.001$), J-L ($p < 0.001$), and K-L ($p < 0.001$). Like previous items, the scores for item four tended to increase along with the scenarios' severity.

3.3.5 | Fear of violence

Regarding MM scenarios ($n = 774$), there were significant differences between the following scenarios: A-B ($p < 0.001$), A-C ($p < 0.001$), and B-C ($p < 0.001$). As for FF scenarios ($n = 726$), we found significant differences between all scenarios: D-E ($p < 0.001$), D-F ($p < 0.001$), and E-F ($p < 0.001$). When it comes to MF scenarios ($n = 737$), the SV effect was significant on the following scenarios: G-H ($p < 0.001$), G-I ($p < 0.001$), and H-I ($p < 0.001$).

Regarding FM scenarios ($n = 724$), we found significant differences between scenarios J-K ($p < 0.001$), J-L ($p < 0.001$), and K-L ($p < 0.001$). Looking at participant sex, the effect was significant on female ($F(1.745, 139.621) = 56.185, p < 0.001$) and male ($F(1.712, 1099.419) = 744.078, p < 0.001$) participants. Like the other results found for item 5, participants' perceptions that the victim would feel fear were higher when the scenarios' severity was high and lower when it was low.

3.3.6 | Victim's responsibility

Regarding item six, the SV effect was not significant on MM scenarios ($n = 788$), FF ($n = 737$), and MF scenarios ($n = 754$). It was only significant for FM scenarios ($n = 734$), with differences between the following scenarios: J-L

($p = 0.044$) and K-L ($p = 0.019$). According to the participants' perceptions, the victim's responsibility increases in higher severity scenarios, when the victim was female and the perpetrator was male.

3.3.7 | Need for criminal justice system intervention

Regarding MM scenarios ($n = 799$), we found significant differences between scenario A-B ($p < 0.001$), A-C ($p < 0.001$), and B-C ($p < 0.001$). Concerning professional experience, the SV effect was significant for participants who had previous experience ($F(1.777, 847.626) = 590.375, p < 0.001$) and those who had not ($F(1.643, 525.877) = 355.610, p < 0.001$).

As for FF scenarios ($n = 748$), there were significant differences between the following scenarios: D-E ($p < 0.001$), D-F ($p < 0.001$), and E-F ($p < 0.001$). Looking at professional experience, the effect was significant for participants who had experience ($F(1.772, 843.328) = 626.760, p < 0.001$), as well as for those who had not ($F(1.612, 435.283) = 314.995, p < 0.001$).

Regarding MF scenarios ($n = 765$), there were significant effects between scenarios G-H ($p < 0.001$), G-I ($p < 0.001$), and H-I ($p < 0.001$). As for previous professional experience, the SV effect was significant for participants who had it ($F(1.785, 846.315) = 569.303, p < 0.001$), and for those who did not ($F(1.712, 494.845) = 299.051, p < 0.001$).

About FM scenarios ($n = 741$), the SV effect was significant on the following scenarios: J-K ($p < 0.001$), J-L ($p < 0.001$), and K-L ($p < 0.001$). Concerning professional experience, the effect was significant for participants who had experience ($F(1.800, 853.124) = 613.98, p < 0.001$) and for those who had not ($F(1.667, 441.856) = 288.58, p < 0.001$). Like previous items, the scores for this item tended to increase along with the scenario's severity, meaning that participants better recognized the need for intervention when the scenario's severity was high and less when it was low.

4 | DISCUSSION

From this study, we observed how individual and situational variables can influence police officers' perceptions about stalking situations, specifically in post-intimate relationship breakup scenarios. Our objective was to confirm whether severity and victim and perpetrator sex affected these perceptions while considering the participant's sex and previous experience with stalking (personal, professional, and training). We also looked at differences in perceptions between the same sex and different sex scenarios.

We hypothesized that police officers would be able to identify the scenarios as stalking situations (hypothesis 1). It turns out that these perceptions were significantly influenced by victim and perpetrator sex (hypothesis 2), that is, behaviors tended to be considered stalking mostly when the perpetrator was male. These results are similar to those found in other studies, in which male perpetrators tend to be seen as more dangerous (e.g., Finnegan et al., 2018; Scott et al., 2015), though it has been shown that female perpetrators can be just as dangerous (Scott & Tse, 2011). Victims may be deterred from seeking help due to the fear of not being taken seriously since their stalker is female (Scott & Tse, 2011). As shown in previous studies, male victims tend to be perceived as more capable of defending themselves (e.g., Scott et al., 2015; Sheridan et al., 2003), so participants tend to underestimate the risks and help male victims may need (Scott et al., 2015). These perceptions align with gender stereotypes that have been perpetuated over the years, related to men and women's traditional roles within intimate heterosexual relationships—e.g., the man chasing after the desired woman, as well as men's active role, in contrast to women's passivity and vulnerability. Due to these biases, stalking situations may not be taken seriously enough, or intervention may not be considered necessary. Portuguese men did not consider police support useful (Matos, Matias, & Gonçalves, 2019), which underlines the importance of raising police officers' awareness of more gender-conscious interventions.

Comparing situations between the same sex and different sex ex-couples (hypothesis 3), police officers tended to perceive the stalking behavior more as a crime and that intervention was necessary when the victim and perpetrator

were of different sexes. In contrast, the victim was considered, to a greater degree, responsible for encouraging the behavior when they were of the same sex as the perpetrator. In this case, when the victim and perpetrator were of the same sex, police officers considered to a greater extent that the behavior was stalking, that it would cause the victim to be alarmed, and that the victim should fear violence.

These results are innovative, since to our knowledge, there are no studies that assess police officers' perceptions about stalking situations between the same sex and different sex ex-couples. Strand and McEwan (2011) emphasized the challenges of studying cases involving same sex couples because they are a minority and these cases are often undervalued or not detected. Same-sex victims of stalking may not be believed and might have to face larger challenges when seeking help (Pathé et al., 2000, cited in Strand & McEwan, 2011). Sheridan, Scott, and Campbell (2016) emphasized that LGBTIQ people are still left out of stalking studies even though they constitute a high-risk group.

As for participants' sex (hypothesis 5), male participants saw the situation more as stalking when the victim was female, and they considered that the victim might fear violence more when the perpetrator was male. This result is similar to what we found on the influence of victim and perpetrator sex regarding gender stereotypes and previous literature (e.g., Hills & Taplin, 1998), though some more recent studies did not find that participants' sex influenced the perception of stalking and its severity (e.g., Finnegan et al., 2018; Sheridan et al., 2003).

Regarding the influence of professional experience (hypothesis 6), the effect was significant for participants who did not have previous experience, considering that the stalking behavior was more serious when the victim and perpetrator were male, in low-severity scenarios. As for personal experience with stalking (hypothesis 7), police officers who did not have previous experience thought that the victim would fear more violence when the perpetrator was male, regardless of the victim's sex. The participants who knew someone who had been a perpetrator tended to put more responsibility on the victim for the situation when they were of the same sex as the perpetrator. These results too can be explained by gender stereotypes, specifically when it comes to men's perceived aggressiveness. The fact that the victim is regarded more responsible when they are of the same sex as the perpetrator may relate to the perception that stalking is more 'normalized' among different sex couples, making the same-sex situation uncommon.

The effect was also significant when looking at previous training about stalking (hypothesis 8). Participants who had no previous training regarded the situation more as stalking when the victim and perpetrator were both males, than when they were both females. This makes sense when looking at the effect of victim and perpetrator sex like we have before. However, police officers who had both formal and informal training were also influenced by victim and perpetrator sex, as they thought the victim would fear more violence when they were female and the perpetrator was male than in the opposite case, in low-severity scenarios. Likewise, participants who only had formal training tended to think that the victim would fear more violence when both the victim and perpetrator were male than when the victim was female and the perpetrator was male, in moderate-severity scenarios. The fact that participants with training showed similar biases as participants who had no training could indicate that training programs are not effective.

As for the influence of a scenario's severity on stalking perceptions, the scores increased along with severity—meaning that they were lower for low-severity scenarios and higher for high-severity scenarios—when looking at the recognition of a situation as stalking, behavior's severity, criminalization of the behavior, victim's alarm, fear of violence, and the need for criminal justice system intervention (hypothesis 4). This effect also tended to be significant regardless of whether the participants had previous professional experience with stalking or not. The exception to this effect was the perception of the victim's responsibility, on which it was only significant for scenarios where the victim was female and the perpetrator was male, meaning that the high-severity scenarios had significantly higher scores than others. Concerning participants' sex, this effect was significant in the recognition of stalking and fear of violence for female and male participants when the victim was female. The fact that severity had such a consistent influence on perceptions could mean that some behaviors can be considered less serious, which can lead to some cases being dismissed by police officers for not being perceived as severe enough to be stalking.

In fact, despite the severity continuum of behaviors being frequently mentioned in the descriptions of stalking, there are still some controversies and doubts about the best way to operationalize this dimension. To the best of our knowledge, the study conducted by Stefanska et al. (2021) is a pioneer in assessing this issue. Using a randomly

selected sample of 924 cases from the database of the National Stalking Helpline (United Kingdom), the authors concluded that some specific stalking behaviors better represent the severity of stalking than others. Specifically, unwanted communication behaviors such as text messages and phone calls were located at the lower end of the severity scale, whereas criminal damage and death threats were mapped at the higher end of the continuum. This kind of empirical data provides many implications for all professionals, namely for those who work in legal or criminal contexts.

Kamphuis et al. (2005) found that police officers had a higher tolerance for these behaviors than professionals in other areas because they had a higher limit for what they considered normal, nonintrusive behaviors. It becomes crucial to sensitize these officers to the importance of early intervention to prevent a negative evolution of these behaviors (Kamphuis et al., 2005) and mitigate their negative consequences (Galeazzi et al., 2009).

The Just World Hypothesis may help to explain these perceptions of stalking, specifically why a victim can be blamed for the situation. People try to see the world as predictable and organized, where everyone obtains what they deserve (Sheridan et al., 2003). Continuing this argument, perpetrators who had a previous relationship with the victim may be seen as having a right to act on these stalking behaviors simply because they had a previous history with the victim, within which the victim can be held accountable for the situation. The perpetrator's behavior can be justified and seen as normal, while the victim is responsible for leading the perpetrator on (Scott et al., 2010), and therefore deserving to be a victim.

Our results become significant for the future development of training programs for police officers. Biases in stalking perceptions affect the way professionals deal with stalking cases. It is important to take victims' experiences seriously and not underestimate certain situations due to factors that influence the way they are perceived. It is also essential to study stalking situations between same-sex people. Observing the differences between situations where the victim and perpetrator are of the same sex while manipulating the relationship between both would be interesting and relevant.

The importance of continued study of perceptions about stalking situations, both for intervention and training programs, becomes clear. It would also be relevant to include other professionals who have direct contact with potential victims. This knowledge is necessary for the development of training programs. Another important study would address the gaps in the existing training programs, so that the development of new programs will be more rigorous and apt, targeting these biases, which may impact the criminal justice system and decision-making when it comes to stalking cases (Scott et al., 2010).

Despite the contributions of the present work, some important limitations should be noted, and further research is necessary to support or refute the current findings. One limitation is that a convenience online sample was recruited, which presents risks in terms of self-selection bias and limits external validity. There is a need to replicate and extend these findings using more robust designs, preferably with larger and more representative samples. For the present study, we can also identify as a limitation the length of the questionnaire, which could have caused lower participant adherence. Participants did not receive material or financial incentives to complete the survey, was perhaps another disincentive. This lower adherence may have particularly affected the questions on professional and personal experience, and training, because they were the last questions on the questionnaire, after 12 vignettes, each with seven questions. A future study could decrease the number of variables within the vignettes, consequently reducing the number of scenarios, which could promote adherence to the questionnaire in its full length. In addition, future studies may benefit from the inclusion of an attention/manipulation check to test the reliability of the data.

Notwithstanding these limitations, this study aims to shine a light and generate knowledge about a phenomenon still often forgotten in Portugal. It is groundbreaking because it allows us to identify the individual and situational factors that influence police officers' perceptions regarding stalking situations, thereby potentially informing and contributing to training policies in this important field.

5 | CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The current findings indicate that stalking perceptions among police officers are significantly influenced by victim and perpetrator sex, meaning that behaviors are considered to be stalking mostly when the perpetrator was male and when the victim and perpetrator were of different sex. In the same direction, behaviors are considered to be stalking mostly when the severity of the behaviors increased. Furthermore, male participants saw the situation more as stalking when the victim was female, and they considered that the victim might fear more violence when the perpetrator was male. Police officers who had no previous personal experience with stalking thought that the victim would fear more violence when the perpetrator was male, regardless of the victim's sex. In turn, those who did not have previous training regarded the situation more as stalking when the victim and perpetrator were both males, than when they were both females.

There have been calls for legal and criminal justice practices that promote and guarantee safe and supportive contexts for disclosing (stalking) victimization experiences, which reduce the risk of secondary victimization and increase the likelihood of adequate support, a necessary condition for adaptive and resilient post-victimization trajectories. It is important to provide and disseminate knowledge regarding stalking perceptions that allow us to counter misperceptions about this type of violence, which may limit the necessary support for its victims. In legal and criminal justice contexts, there is a need to tackle the endorsement of stalking misperceptions, which requires an in-depth understanding of how these perceptions operate. The current work adds to our understanding of this issue by providing preliminary evidence that different variables such as severity, victim and perpetrator sex, participant sex and previous training, or personal or professional experience with stalking play an important role in the police officers' perceptions of stalking.

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