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Gang stalking : internet connectivity as an emerging mental health concern

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Liz Dietrich
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as an Emerging Mental Health
Concern

ABSTRACT

This study examines emerging concerns about small online social communities that purport to support their members, but which in actuality exacerbate mental health issues. Here, the author focuses on one such community that has gone unstudied: The Gang Stalking community. Here, individuals who seem to suffer from Delusional Disorder come together and discuss their experiences of being stalked by a multitude of people in concert with the sole aim of creating terror in their lives. These people call themselves Targeted Individuals. The support that these individuals find on gang stalking websites soothes their amorphous anxiety about being watched, but in the end exacerbates the problem by concretizing their delusions, making it virtually impossible for loved ones or mental health professionals to provide real-life support, and further isolating them. This study uses Emergent Norm Theory to describe how gang stalking groups are formed, and Relational Theory to deconstruct why individuals are drawn to those websites, and to posit potential modes of treatment for affected populations.

**GANG STALKING: INTERNET CONNECTIVITY AS AN EMERGING MENTAL
HEALTH CONCERN**

A project based upon an independent investigation,
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Social Work.

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

A tautological statement has been growing in popularity among pithy internet-savvy populations over the last ten years or so: If you ever wonder if it's on the Internet, it's on the Internet. Anonymous contributors to websites such as 4Chan and Know Your Meme expanded this idea into a list of 50 Rules of the Internet that include items such as "The Internet has no rules," and "there is a porn of it, no exceptions." The root of the joke is derived from a very basic fact: Internet content, for all intents and purposes, is virtually endless. Almost any honest query one enters into a search engine will invariably yield results, usually hundreds of thousands in an impressive .33 seconds, more or less a couple hundredths-of-a-second, depending on what kind of modem you have. Social connectivity over the Internet is powerful. People use websites like Facebook and Twitter to reconnect with old friends or to keep up with their favorite celebrities, or sites like LinkedIn to find employment. More and more research is being done online, and processes by which reputable sources can be identified and vetted have been developed for research purposes. However, what if the thing you're looking for on the Internet is an explanation for why you feel a certain way? What happens when we ask the search engine, "Why do I feel so nervous?" or "Is someone watching me?" What kinds of results does the machine spit back at you? And given the social nature of the Internet, whom might you meet?

The following is an investigation into the phenomenon many people on the Internet call Gang Stalking. According to individuals who believe they are being gang stalked, Gang Stalking

is a purported systematic form of intimidation perpetrated by one or another organization—usually thought to be the government or some other conglomerate that has access to unlimited funds and resources. These individuals who feel they’re being gang stalked call themselves TIs, or Targeted Individuals. A handful of TIs have written books about their experiences. Others run websites, which encourage other TIs to fight back against the system through letter writing campaigns, or by contacting the government or the UN. Some TIs have stood before congress in hopes of generating interest in legislation against Gang Stalking. Others have been interviewed and featured by local news channels where they tell the world that they are being terrorized. Most importantly, TIs who set out to find out more about Gang Stalking on the Internet are told that they are not crazy or delusional, no matter what friends, family members or mental health professionals say. What they are experiencing is very real, and very dangerous. Anyone who denies that Gang Stalking is a real and serious phenomenon is labeled closed-minded or naïve, or, worse yet, involved as a conspirator of the Gang Stalking organization.

Gang Stalking is just one of the many online communities that uses people’s conformation bias, meaning making, and wish to belong, to deleterious ends. Other sites have been known of for some time. Possibly the most discussed such site or community is the Pro-Ana (pro anorexia) community. Pro-Ana websites exist all over the Internet where young women get together on message boards and encourage one another to live the Ana “lifestyle.” With a community of people just like them in their corner telling them it’s desirable to eat at extreme caloric deficits, it’s difficult for clinicians to dismantle the belief system that may be killing them. However, there are many resources online that counter the claims of Pro-Ana sites. If a person Googles Anorexia, their search results include medical information, support groups, and

message boards where people can share their story of struggle and recovery. However, a web search for Gang Stalking scares up almost exclusively testimonials of tortured individuals.

This paper explores the Gang Stalking phenomenon through two theories. The phenomenon that brings these people together will be examined through Emergent Norm Theory—a sociological theory that is used to explain and explore collective behavior. The psychodynamic frame best suited to explore the Gang Stalking phenomenon is Relational theory.

CHAPTER II

Phenomenon

The Internet has brought us together as a society in countless ways, making our lives more efficient, connecting us with people from all over the world, many of whom we would never have otherwise come in contact with. We use it every day to reconnect with lost high school friends, we have access to countless articles on topics that very closely fit our interests. We use it to keep up to date on the latest trends. The Internet has become a place where virtually anyone can find others like themselves with whom to commiserate.

While this affords many opportunities, the availability of information also poses potential risks. Corners of the Internet have developed where people seeking solidarity around unhealthy practices come together to encourage each other—practices that the medical and psychiatric community would label as symptoms of illnesses. Young women suffering from Anorexia join “Pro-Ana” message boards to encourage each other to starve themselves. Pro-suicide websites have been produced either by people who want to feel that they have contributed to the death of another, or who are reaching out for help from others who are as fragile as they are to form suicide pacts. The message boards on these sites are sometimes populated with conversations between people who are coaching each other about how to successfully end their own life. Many of the participants on these websites are actively seeking to normalize their experience for themselves and for others. This can have dangerous consequences.

Gang Stalking websites are frequented by individuals who believe they are being stalked by multiple entities in concert. These individuals use the phrase “Gang Stalking,” and identify themselves as TIs, or, Targeted Individuals. They often find each other on websites chiefly devoted to what most of us would refer to as “conspiracy theories.” People who feel that they are being stalked sometimes produce detailed videos of their stalkers in the act of “stalking.” However, when a healthy person watches these videos, he or she notices that something is off—that the associations and meanings that the filmmaker is making during the video seem to make little sense. It becomes clear that the stalking that the filmmaker is experiencing is actually some form of paranoia, often that associated with what would be most consistent with our ideas of a Delusional Disorder.

The DSM IV criteria for Delusional Disorder include several markers that make it a good fit for a description of a Gang Stalking delusion. The delusions experienced by a person with delusional disorder must be “non-bizarre,” in nature, such as “being followed, poisoned, infected, loved at a distance, or deceived by one’s spouse or lover” (APA, 2000, p. 297). While it may seem bizarre for a person to believe they are being poisoned or manipulated with electro magnetic waves, the delusions are supported in part by incomplete information that sufferers get from real-world sources.

There are five types of delusional disorder. Gang Stalking targets seem to experience the Persecutory Type, in which “the delusion involves the person’s belief that he or she is being conspired against, cheated, spied on, followed, poisoned or drugged, maliciously maligned, harassed, or obstructed in the pursuit of long term goals” (APA, 2000, p. 298). Strikingly, it is also mentioned in the DSM IV that an affected person may “engage in repeated attempts to obtain satisfaction by appeal to the courts and other government agencies...[abd] in litigious

behavior, sometimes leading to hundreds of letters of protest to government and judicial officials and many court appearances” (Ibid, 2000, p. 298). Many who believe they are Targeted Individuals write to their state representatives, attempt to get word to the President of the United States, and even attempt to contact the United Nations for support (Bailey, 2010; Cherubini, 2014).

Some members of these communities also seem to concurrently suffer from what is called the Grandiose Type disorder, in which “the central theme of the delusion is the conviction of having some great (but unrecognized) insight or having made some important discovery.” It will be described in a later chapter that according to Emergent Norm Theory, individuals take on different roles in a given group, one of which is the Ego-involved/Committed participant. These tend to be the “leaders” of gang stalking message boards. Some have written and published books chronicling their experiences in which they liken themselves to Anne Frank or Jesus Christ (Bailey, 2010).

Unlike those suffering from schizophrenia, sufferers of delusional disorder tend to have only one or two delusions. Their thought processes outside of the delusion tend to remain clear, allowing many to attend to their activities of daily living, and to lead productive lives. Their writings tend to be cogent and organized, backed up with “references”—most commonly other TIs.

This phenomenon of persecutory delusions is not new. What is new and troubling is the way in which websites devoted to the subject of Gang Stalking aggressively promote a tautological description of how people are being persecuted. Message boards are populated with items like, “I felt weird, like someone was following me all the time. Thank god I found this community and I know I’m not crazy!” The websites encourage people to cut off ties with

friends or family members who discourage vigilance against the gang stalkers, naming them as possible conspirators. One prominent website states: “Beware of false gang stalking sites which encourage you to underestimate government involvement. These are likely false sites put out by conspirators to confuse you and weaken your resolve” (Fight Gang Stalking, n.d.). Due to the siloed nature of delusions experienced by someone with delusional disorder, sufferers in the search for validation from their peers remain capable of writing impassioned descriptions of their experiences. It is no wonder that vulnerable individuals searching the Internet would find solace in these writings. The accounts of what would be terrifying experiences are self-assured and powerful, replacing the unnerving emotion of diffuse fear with a determined and righteous anger. If the conditions are right, the unnerved individual is swept up by his or her confirmation bias, digs further into bottomless Internet research isolating further from loved ones, and is more and more deeply entrenched into the community.

Due to the emerging nature of this phenomenon, very little has been written about it, and nothing has been written that is peer reviewed. A New York Times piece ran in the Fashion and Style section entitled, “Sharing Their Demons on the Web,” [describing this that and the other thing] (Sarah, 2008). The Washington Post put out an article with a similar flare entitled “Mind Games,” in which the author actually interacted with people who believed they were targeted individuals. Although there is a dearth of written material about gang-stalking itself, there is a lot of literature about other related topics which can be called Internet-spread psychological phenomena.

McKenna and Bargh (1999) authored an article entitled “Causes and consequences of social interaction on the Internet: A conceptual framework.” They organized research on the social psychology of Internet use into three phases: “before, during and after extensive social

interactions and group participation” on Internet sites (McKenna & Bargh, 1999, p.255). They focus, as this proposed study will seek to do, on how the Internet allows people who usually live in the shadows to connect in an anonymous way and to support one another. McKenna and Bargh (1999) identify the basic interpersonal needs of feeling like one belongs, and needing to have positive feelings about oneself as reasons that individuals venture onto the internet in search of their tribe. They describe a metamorphosis experienced by people who find others like them on the Internet. These people eventually bring their true identities into their daily lives with the support of their Internet community. However, the groups this article focuses on are stigmatized, but not mentally ill individuals who may be suffering. They follow people with non-mainstream sexual preferences, people with epilepsy, or those with radical political views. People with stigmatized characteristics such as these may very well gain support from the internet and, for instance, a gay person may find a community online that normalizes their sexual preference and aids in their coming out process. However, gang stalking groups seem to work in the opposite way, bolstering an individual’s fears about the rest of the world, and arguably doing more harm than good in the long term. The delusion they experience is not something that needs to necessarily be accepted by society, but is an isolating and panic-producing affliction that may be ameliorated through the therapeutic alliance. So much is written about the positive ways in which the Internet affects people’s lives, but the purpose of this paper is to look at what this article misses—the dark corners in which individuals can become even more lost.

Whitlock, Powers, and Eckenrode(2006) set out to generally examine the way in which electronic forms of interconnectivity—vis-à-vis the Internet, were being used by adolescents to discuss self-harming practices such as cutting. They identified that the anonymity provided by the Internet can serve several functions. It can make communication with others significantly

easier for shy or “introverted” youth who might not speak up about their feelings in in-person settings. They see the Internet as a vehicle that may feel safer to adolescents where they can develop three central social skills: to establish meaningful relationships, to find and feel accepted and a sense of belonging in social groups, and to establish intimacy with others. They conducted two studies on message boards dedicated to the topic of self-harm to investigate how adolescents might develop these kinds of relationships. One explored the prevalence and nature of these message boards, and the other explored correlations between what was discussed on those websites. Researchers found 400 websites related to self-injury, and chose the first ten sites resulting from a search for a message board to analyze in depth.

The authors’ method of exploring message boards is possibly problematic because it is not clear what verbiage the researchers used to search for these websites. They also indicate that the top ten websites that came up in their searches are usually the most frequently visited websites on their topic, but without knowing what search term they used, this cannot be validated.

Whitlock et al. (2006) found that the largest proportion of posts was related to informal support of one another. People requesting or sharing techniques made up only 6.2% of the posts. However, they also found a correlation between people sharing techniques and discouraging the reader from disclosing their problem to a medical or psychiatric professional. Without knowing what terms the researchers searched for, it is impossible to glean much information. If they searched simply for “self harm” or “cutting,” they may have gotten a very different proportion of message board participants talking about methods than if one were to search for “how to hide my cutting,” or “how deep can I cut without dying?”

This research is relevant to a study of Gang Stalking in several ways. First, from the content on the Gang Stalking message boards, one could come to the conclusion that those who perceive they are being stalked are not in need of psychiatric care. Also, self-harming websites normalize the act of self-harm and create community among its members, as Gang Stalking websites normalize the idea of being stalked, and bring those who are affected in conversation with one another.

Biddle (2008) ventures deeper into the problem of the Internet being a possible delivery system that can spread an epidemic of self-harm. She acknowledges that the portrayal of one suicide method or another on television has led to epidemics of suicide by that means. She narrows her study of self-harm-related websites—particularly websites about suicide, at least partially resolving Whitlock et al.'s problem of a uniform and benign search phrase by using twelve different possible search terms, ranging from the simple “suicide” to more specific phrases including “suicide sure methods,” and “pain-free suicide” (2008, p. 410.). With these more targeted searches, half of the websites reached were judged to be “encouraging, promoting, or facilitating suicide” (Whitlock et al., 2008, p. 10.). Of the top ten sites that Biddle's research team retrieved, the top three were labeled “pro-suicide,” consisting of two suicide methods files, and the now defunct “Satan Service” which was designed to convince fragile individuals to commit suicide. People who believe that they are being gang stalked are already in a fragile state. Like the pro-suicide websites, Gang Stalking websites act to encourage their members to devote even more vigilance to their stalking, validating their delusions and making psychiatric intervention more difficult. Also, suffering individuals who visit both of these kinds of sites can do so in the privacy of their own home on the Internet, making it difficult and sometimes impossible for loved-ones to intervene.

Another sub group that has been described as “contagious” or “a threatening epidemic” is the so-called “Pro-Ana” group. Borzedowski, Schenak, Wilson and Peebles (2010) set out to enumerate the features and possible future trajectory of the “pro-Ana” movement, grounded chiefly in websites “present[ing] graphic material to encourage, support, and motivate site users to continue their efforts with anorexia and bulimia” (p. 1528). They examine their findings using behavior change and communications theories, including Bandura’s social cognitive theory, positing that when young, vulnerable users witness modeled behaviors, they are likely to imitate them. The websites studied are saturated with images referred to by members of the groups as “thinspiration.” These consist of images of women rendered cartoonishly thin with the use of Photoshop, or images of magazine models. They also point that these websites’ move to make what the medical community deems as “illness” into a more normative and acceptable “lifestyle.” Content analysis of 180 active websites revealed that 84% offered “pro-anorexia content,” 85% prominently featured thinspiration, and 83% provided “overt suggestions on how to engage in eating-disorder behaviors” (Borzedowski et al., 2010, p. 1530). The authors posited that as websites are continually being shut down, some by the owners and others by governments, that pro-Ana content will increasingly use more video and social networking approaches to help their members stay connected (Borzedowski et al., 2010).

Possibly the most publicly discussed websites are those on which young people have gone to obtain instructions or advice about how to commit suicide. Baume, Cantor and Rolfe (1997) discuss the way in which rashes of homicides and suicides are potentially imitative, citing the clusters of such acts that follow mainstream media coverage of similar events. They point out that vulnerable individuals, often young people, are influenced by deaths such as that of Kurt Cobain—that they may recognize suicide as a possibility for the first time after seeing a

glamorous movie star committing the act. The Internet puts these already vulnerable populations in even closer contact.

They focus their article on the website “alt.suicide.holiday” or “a.s.h.,” a website originally created to factually discuss the increase of suicides around the holidays, which was taken over by people seriously considering suicide (Baume et al., 1997). Tips are provided, and messages of discouragement or alternative support are not welcome. Members plan their suicides on message boards, sometimes receiving exhortations to get help, but are also given advice on what methods to use, and even how to aim a gun to ensure death. In one case, a 26 year old man referred to as “Andy K” showed serious apprehension, delaying his suicide several times, writing at length about his ambivalence about leaving his loved ones behind. With the support for suicide from his online peers, he finally did die, to the dismay of his real-life friends who found his postings after his death (Baume et al., 1997). Adekola, Soderberg, Pohl and Alao (2006) also write about closed websites where individuals are actively banned if they try to dissuade users from committing suicide, and where suicide pacts have been made and carried out. In these cases, the connective power of the Internet has lost the potential power to help through connectivity, and have instead resulted in deaths.

Crandall (1988) examines the “contagious” nature of binge eating by conducting two studies on women in different sororities. He was specifically interested in how social inclusion affected the extent of binge eating. The author distributed similar questionnaires at three different times to two sororities (the fact that these questionnaires were not identical may or may not decrease validity). In both sororities, levels of binging and purging both correlated with the popularity of the individual, however, in one sorority, a woman who binged to the highest degree was considered to be the most popular, and in the other, the most popular woman would be the

one who binged the most moderately. Crandall (1998) attributed this to the setting up of social norms within each sorority, saying that conforming to the norms of the given group dictated how popular one would be in that group. He took from the findings of his studies, and from speaking to members of other sororities, that Bulimia is a learned or “contagious” phenomenon. The author points out that psychological issues traditionally linked to Bulimia, such as impulsiveness or feelings of inadequacy, have been around for a long time, but only now is there an epidemic of Bulimia. Bulimia is most prevalent in groups of all younger women, such as dance camps and cheerleading squads, and the “onset of eating disorders follows entrance into the group, suggesting that social pressure may be involved” (Crandall, 1998, p. 591). One cheerleader was quoted as saying, “Everybody on the squad binges and vomits. That’s how I learned. Everyone does it then, so it doesn’t seem like [an eating disorder]” (Crandall, 1998, p. 591). Many gang stalking believers are so inexorably entrenched in their world of their message boards, that they are unable to see their behavior as aberrant. The confirmation they get from their online peers makes them feel more positive that what they are experiencing is valid. Just like the sorority members in Crandall’s (1998) study, the idea and “culture” of gang stalking has been normalized. They have felt understood and accepted into a social community that values their delusional thinking and calls it normal.

The “theory” of social contagion is criticized in the article, “Memetics& social contagion: Two sides of the same coin?” Marsden(1998) sets out by describing a wave of suicides that swept across Europe in a seemingly infectious way two centuries ago. It was found that many of these individuals had recently read Goethe’s “The Sorrows of Young Werther,” in which the main character commits suicide. He sets forth the social contagion thesis this way, “...sociocultural phenomena can spread through, and leap between, populations more like outbreaks of measles or

chicken pox than through a process of rational choice” (Marsden, 1998, p. 15). The author looks at four areas of social contagion research including the contagion of deliberate self-harm (DSH). Research on self-harm contagion rates “vary proportionally to the extensity, intensity and content of exposure, both in local and dispersed collectives” (Marsden, 1998, p. 15). Marsden believes that Social Contagion does not qualify as its own theory, lacking agreement among researchers on its underlying mechanism, or even a consistent definition among groups, and more specific theories are necessary to describe the phenomena currently studied under contagion theory. He points, most saliently to this writer, to Convergence Theory, which suggests that instead of an attitude of behavior being contagious, that groups who already share motivations cause those individuals to find each other. If individuals already feel that they are being gang-stalked and go out seeking a community of people who experience the same thing over the vast Internet, Convergence Theory will be helpful. However if slightly paranoid people become convinced by gang stalking videos, other theories will have to be used.

Tokunaga (2012) investigated whether problematic Internet Use (PIU) should be categorized as its own unique disorder or as a symptom of underlying psychological problems by conducting two studies. In the first study, Undergraduate students were asked to participate in exchange for research credit. These students were also asked to recruit non-student Internet users. Lastly, letters of recruitment were placed on popular gaming and social media websites and message boards known to be read by those who self identified as being addicted to the Internet. This study focused on levels of social anxiety, loneliness, depression, problematic Internet use, and functional impairment. Results differed between the different problems studied. For instance, Internet use “mediated the relationships between social anxiety and friendship impairment, and social anxiety and declining family relationships” (Tokunaga, 2012, p.

37). However, PUI did not mediate the relationship between loneliness and impairment of friendships, although it did mediate loneliness between users and familial relationships. Although this study worked to study the relationships between problems like social anxiety, depression or loneliness with PUI, it failed to find a causal relationship between PUI and these other afflictions.

The second study focused only on incoming freshman at a large university, who were asked to complete the same questionnaire three times—the summer preceding their first year in college, the middle of their first semester, and at the end of that same semester. Separate established scales were used to scrutinize the five areas of interest, and were evaluated for reverse causation, and found that the investigated psychological problems can initiate uncontrolled use of the Internet. One potential bias here is that most of the individuals polled were college students. It might be completely natural for students to report experiencing alienation from their families and not from their friends. Students use social networking sites such as Facebook to stay connected to their friends as well as their families, but online social networking may bolster relationships that students maintain day-to-day on their campuses. It is possible that the problems of social isolation may have been more significant had the author tested a group of non-students alone. The concept of the “chicken or the egg” put forth in this article is important to the proposed study because it is important to consider whether people who participate in gang stalking forums have a pre-existing condition that makes them particularly vulnerable, or if the sites themselves carry such powerful messages that individuals who are healthy are also seduced by the gang stalking culture. The loved ones of gang stalking message boards participants describe that their loved ones spend enormous amounts of time on these sites, and become anxious when they are unable to reach a computer. Therefore, PIU may be an

inherent facet of the gang stalking phenomenon, which could either further complicate treatment of such an individual, or may help a clinician create a treatment plan that includes modification of Internet use.

In Phillips' (1980) "Airplanes, accidents, murder and the mass media: Towards a theory of imitation and suggestion," Phillips sets out to explore the modern sociological theory of imitation. He cites that suicide stories that are made public trigger additional suicides, some of which are disguised as car crashes. He also shows data that indicates that after publicized murder-suicide stories, there is an increase in noncommercial and commercial airplane crashes. He looks at imitation and suggestion metaphorically through the less specific lens of social contagion. He argues that just as people in poor biologic health are known to be susceptible to biologic contagion "Persons who are anomic, have low self-esteem, and a past history of failure" are in poor psychological health, and are more susceptible to suggestion and imitation (Phillips, 1980, p. 1012). This writer does not suggest that people who come to believe they are being gang stalked need only to have low self-esteem to be taken in by the concept. However, if a person is susceptible to delusional thinking, he or she may be more likely to visit sites on which gang stalking message boards exist. Phillips goes on to discuss "channels of infection," in which he shows that some channels of media are more effective than others (1980, p. 2013). For instance his evidence suggests that newspapers provide a more effective channel than television, "because an individual can spend a great deal of time reading and rereading a newspaper story, whereas the same individual cannot view and review a television story on that topic" (Phillips, 1980, p. 2018). This idea is extremely salient to Gang Stalking, for people with an Internet connection have virtually limitless access to the materials about Gang Stalking that are posted on their dedicated message boards.

In the next chapters, the Gang Stalking phenomenon will be viewed through two lenses: Emergent Norm Theory—a sociological theory that focuses on the influence of conformity, and Relational Theory—a psychodynamic theory, which posits that objective experience is irrelevant, if not nonexistent, in human relationships, clinically based and otherwise. The author will endeavor to utilize these theories to elucidate the underpinnings of the Gang Stalking phenomenon, and to some extent make a case for a logical potential treatment track for an individual who believes he or she is targeted.

CHAPTER III

Emergent Norm Theory

Emergent-Norm Theory was developed by sociologists Ralph Turner and Lewis Killian, and is best documented in their work *Collective Behavior* (1957). In it, they attempt to develop a framework for understanding collective behavior through a social-psychological lens that emphasizes the overwhelming influence of conformity – even in its understanding of seemingly extreme or bizarre group action, such as riots, lynching, mob violence, and mass panic. “Collective behavior” as a term can be defined as any social process that does not reflect the existing social structure—laws, conventions, institutions, traditions, norms (Smelser, 1962). The sociological study of collective behavior tends to focus on seemingly spontaneous eruptions or shifts that run counter to, deviate from, or resist the larger social system. While this includes extreme or violent behavior, it can also include the sudden spread of trends or beliefs, from fashion shifts to rumor generation to sudden emerging social movements. Collective behavior studies tend to focus on “crowd” behavior as distinct from “group” behavior. “Crowd behavior always represents some sort of deviation from ordinary social norms (Locher, 2002). In traditional sociology, collective behavior “crowds” are distinct from groups in three important ways (Smelser, 1962) in that crowds are more short-lived, there are no clear social boundaries to membership and, lastly, the norms created are either weak and/or unconventional. While crowds can become groups and groups crowds, the distinction matters most in defining a crowd as a gathering of people who otherwise would have only casual connection if not for a shared purpose

bent on action and an influence on one another based on emotionally charged expression (Smelser, 1962).

As a means of understanding group deviant behavior, Emergent-Norm Theory both encompasses and expands on the older Contagion Theory and Convergence Theory, maintaining most of the former theoretical elements of both while letting go of the more pejorative assumptions that subjects under study are irrational, illogical or suffering from delusions.

Contagion Theory emerges from the work of French anthropologist Gustave Le Bon (1926) with his *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*. Writing in the historical context of 19th century social upheavals in France, including the Paris Commune and the Dreyfus Affair, Le Bon theorized about the concept of “the crowd” as an entity formed through a collective “unconsciousness” that coalesces around a “magnetic influence” and “transmutes” the individual consciousness to develop a “group mind” (Le Bon, 1926, p. 54). Le Bon identified three key processes to this transformation, including “anonymity” and “suggestibility,” but most importantly that of “contagion.” Contagion is theorized by Le Bon as the mysterious transmission of group consciousness that regresses the infected individual, causing him to “yield to instincts” and revert back to a more atavistic “racial unconscious,” essentially inverting Darwin’s law of evolution on a mass scale, if only for a time (1926, p. 19). For Le Bon, “The Crowd” becomes through this process, a homogeneous and malleable entity unto itself, wherein individual consciousness essentially goes offline, individual interests and beliefs are abandoned, and members are guided instead by a “group mind” informed by deeper “racial unconsciousness” (1926, p. 19). It is unclear by what Le Bon means by the term “race.” At the very least, he seems to be positing that crowd consciousness descends into a more primitive, regressed, animalistic

state. “An individual in a crowd is a grain of sand amid other grains of sand, which the wind stirs up at will” (Lebon, 1926, p. 24).

The view of crowds as essentially mindless or hierarchically more primitive was challenged by the proponents of Convergence Theory. Emerging from 20th century sociology, Convergence Theory embraces a more functionalist perspective, which assumes that all societies or groups have certain built in requirements that allow them to survive and operate effectively. While Convergence Theory grew out of analysis of large states and the industrialization process (Locher, 2002), it has also been applied to analysis of crowd behavior. Put briefly, Convergent Theory views the formation of crowds as the result of like-minded individuals coming together (Locher, 2002). Even the case of extreme activity, e.g., violent mobs, is merely the result of violent people finding other violent people and sharing their collective goal in mob form.

While its understanding of crowd process is certainly less mysterious than Le Bon’s, Convergent Theory fails in its explanatory power to account for the tendency of people within groups to do things they would be unlikely to do on their own. In other words, its simple, functionalist model fails to encompass the psychological impact of crowds as a behavioral enhancer and reinforcer. For years, the examination of how crowds spur others to behavior they would not otherwise engage in resided almost exclusively in the realms of social psychology, such as Muzafer Sherif’s (1935; 1937) studies of norm formation, Robert Jacobs and Donald Campbell’s (1961) studies of the transmissions of false beliefs, and Solomon Asch’s (1955) studies of group pressure.

Turner and Killian’s Emergent-Norm Theory (Locher, 2002) essentially sought to combine both Contagion and Convergence theory, arguing that a combination of factors including like-mindedness, shared emotion, and anonymity all contribute to the dynamics of

crowd behavior. This combined social-psychological lens emphasizes the overwhelming influence of norm-seeking conformity, communication breakdown, emotion-driven distress and urgency, and circular reinforcement to establish a new norm structure that provides helpful constraint and consistency. It also helpfully provides a five-part classification system for participants, differentiating motivations, emotional buy-in, and separate roles for individuals within the creation of a new norm.

Emergent-norm Theory operates from the premise that collective behavior participants are *not* essentially driven by irrational motivations as it is framed in Contagion Theory, which explains crowd activity as a sort of shared, mass insanity. Rather, all participants in the development of an emergent norm are responding to a pre-requisite condition of shared uncertainty, disorganization and confusion. Under these circumstances – that is, under a shared subjective emotional experience of uncertainty, disorganization and confusion -- standard norms no longer appear to apply and people are no longer sure what to do. This emotional experience is distressing and intolerable, separating the person from attributable meaning and shared social definition of events, and is *itself* the motivation to seek a new emerging norm. Those distressed by confusion seek guidance from what other people are doing or communicating, which in some cases is the milling rumor phase. At the same time, the confused are collectively observing the emerging groups' new behavior to see if there are any negative reactions. If there are no negative reactions, or they are late to arrive, then the individual members will assume the behavior is acceptable within the group and become likely to engage in that behavior themselves, thus creating a process of circular reinforcement.

Emergent-Norm Theory does not, as in Contagion Theory, see people as violating accepted norms because they have “lost themselves” due to infection from a group mind, rather

they ceased to conform to traditional norms because they are instead, due to confusion and uncertainty, conforming to an emerging norm. It takes place when traditional norms have become absent or unclear, creating a situation requiring reinvention, exploration, testing, and circular reinforcement on the path to create a new sustaining norm. Despite this behavior seeming sometimes bizarre to outsiders, the authors postulate that these new norms are always seen by insiders as *appropriate under the circumstances*. They are the right thing to do given the time, given the perceived circumstances.

In accordance with Convergence Theory, Emergent Norm Theory sees members of collective behavioral groups as continuing to act as individuals, and that members of the group choose similar behaviors for similar reasons. However, it adds to it the human psychological tendency of imitation and conformity to act as circular behavioral reinforcers. It also sees these tendencies as the mechanism for generating shared group definition and meaning making. Even passively, any behavior that does not elicit social disapproval or negative consequences creates the norms for what is acceptable in the social situation. Further, it sees the psychological distress caused by communication breakdown, confusion, lost confidence, and ambiguity as motivating forces for creation of emerging norms. This emotional distress moves participants from uncertainty to urgency, i.e., *something must be done – and soon!* This in turn inspires communication of mood and imagery within the forming crowd, and a simultaneous creation of a state of permissiveness and constraint: that attitudes and behaviors that were normally inhibited in the traditional norm are now free to be expressed, while at the same time establishing an emerging sense that one should conform to the norms of the crowd.

Turner and Killian's (1957; 1987) theories also contributed a classification schema to distinguish participants of collective action both through their differing motivation and behavior.

While the authors vary their use of these labels in their work, those discussed below are a blend of those used in various editions (Turner & Killian, 1957; 1987).

The Ego-involved/Committed is the most deeply and personally involved participant. Such a participant often plays a leadership role, demanding action and expressing deep emotion in the formation of an emerging norm. In the Gang Stalking phenomenon, the individual authors who self-published their own testimonials or recruitment literature, or who provide the yeoman's work of administering Gang Stalking internet forums, are almost by definition members of this category based on the sheer effort contributed in their commitment to the cause.

The Concerned are not as personally involved and have less clearly defined commitments or roles. They serve more as follower, team-players, and are motivated primarily out of a sense of loyalty to those with whom they feel emotional bonds that inspire shared concern or identification.

The Insecure are, like The Concerned above, less personally involved than The Ego-involved, but differ from them in that they are primarily motivated by a desire for the emotional sense of power and unanimity that comes from belonging. The authors identify this emotional gratification as being driven from a "generally insecure status" (Turner & Killian, 1957; 1987) and towards a desire to be socially important, a part of something, and a sense of renewed righteousness. Membership in the crowd is itself appealing to The Insecure, and provides a tremendous sense of belonging and security.

The Spectator is perhaps the least engaged participant, being motivated primarily by curiosity rather than shared concern or confusion. Spectators tend to be relatively inactive participants in group action, and the authors seem to strive to include them in their model primarily to counter the tendency of official accounts to lump these individuals in with more

committed and active participants, exaggerating and inflating both the size and impact of emergent-norm phenomenon. Additionally, though, the mere presence of Spectators themselves is reinforcing of emerging-norm formation because they provide an audience for more committed, engaged participants. The field of social psychology identifies the powerful factor of social facilitation, i.e., that the mere presence of others strengthens the dominant (prevalent or likely) response. As Robert Zajonc (1965) identified that audience observation acts as arousal that enhances performances. The reinforcement factor of audience observation arouses those performing to greater extremes of behavior or expression, merely by observing alone.

The Ego-detached/Exploiters are the last and most idiosyncratic type of participant identified in Turner and Killian's model. The Exploiters are motivated by interests separate from the group, and carry within them a tendency to wish to engage in socially unacceptable behavior for its own sake. That is, The Exploiter arrives at the outgrowth of an emergent norm already being primed to wish to deviate from the norm. They often serve the role of emotionally detached instigator, or see the emerging norm as a phenomenon to hijack for the advance of their own private agenda. This agenda may be as simple as mere amusement or an innate tendency to be gratified by violence, disorder or confusion. Within the realm of the Gang Stalking phenomenon, and within online communication generally, this could perhaps best be illustrated through the frequency of Internet "trolling." Trolling has been defined (knowyourmeme.com/memes/subcultures/trolling) as "Internet use or behavior that is meant to intentionally hurt or frustrate someone else." Unlike the more targeted "cyberbullying," trolling is often done without any specific reason beyond amusement, as a sort of emotional communication prank.

Emergent-Norm Theory has been largely embraced within its own native discipline of sociology, although with some caveats from the more structure oriented factions that it is “too psychological” in that it focuses almost entirely on conditions within the crowd rather than social or political conditions. However, within the realm of psychology itself, and in particular that of abnormal and clinical psychology and social work, Emergent-Norm Theory could be seen as “not psychological enough” in that it seems to leave out of its phenomenological model any examination of internal states of mental health distress such as psychosis or disordered mood as being in themselves drivers for the emergent norm formation. It remains for the present work to examine the possible intersection of internal states of delusional or disordered thoughts with the conformity-driven mechanism of Emergent-norm Theory, and to explore how those combine to shed light on the phenomenon of Gang Stalking.

CHAPTER IV

Relational Theory

While the last chapter described the way in which norms are created by individuals in communities, this chapter will focus on relational theory—both as a fitting frame in which to potentially treat an individual who believes he or she is being Gang Stalked, and as a lens through which we can understand the function of delusion in an individual’s psychological integration. Important features and contributions to the theory will be covered, and the theory will be somewhat broken down in terms as it applies to the Gang Stalking phenomenon.

Relational theory belongs to no single author, philosophy or discipline, but emerges from an underlying perspective that stresses the shared experience of interaction and relationalco-created meaning. In the realms of clinical psychology and social work, it encompasses a variety of approaches including object relations, attachment, self, and humanist psychologies. However, its origins could equally be found in the academic realms of critical theory, post-modern deconstructionism, post-structuralism, intersubjectivity, and feminist theory. As is consistent with the relational approach itself, it seeks to find among all these disparate voices a common framework that emphasizes mutual relatedness within a shared context.

The emergence of the “relational model” as a psychodynamic approach distinct from the more traditional “drive-conflict model” began to be delineated in the 1980s, although its origins reach back much further. Greenberg and Mitchell (1983) provided an early overview of what they see as a schism away from the individual ego focus towards an inherently dyadic model in

their *Object Relations in Psychoanalytic Theory*. Half of that writing duo, Stephen A. Mitchell, would go on to promote and advance that distinction in editing other essential works such as *Relational Concepts in Psychoanalysis: An Integration* (1988) and *Relational Psychoanalysis: The Emergence of a Tradition* (1999). Put briefly, the authors trace the emergence of a relational tradition as distinct from classic psychoanalysis through the contributions of many authors, including the object relations theories of Melanie Klein and D.W. Winnicott, the interpersonal psychoanalysis of Harry Stack Sullivan, Erich Fromm and Clara Thompson, the attachment theories of John Bowlby and Mary Main, the self psychology of Heinz Kohut, and psychoanalytic feminism of Carol Gilligan, Dorothy Dinnerstien, and Nancy Chodorow. (Mitchell & Aaron, 1999).

The dyadic, “two-person” model is an essential element in the relational approach, and carries the premise that in any relationship -- especially in relationship between equals without a disabling power differential that puts one or the other “out of relationship” -- both parties’ subjective outlook will mutually influence the other *and in turn, the larger social context*. For example, in the relationship between patient and therapist, both transference and countertransference reactions are seen as intersubjective communications and creations. While the roles of the two parties may vary, neither is privileged as “the knower” or “the authority.” Even so-called “unconscious” reactions or patterns are understood within the relational framework as emerging from a pattern of relatedness rather than residing solely within the individual (Hadley, 2008).

This context-based, co-constructed, relational approach also can also be applied to groups much larger than two. Indeed, critical theorists have extended this framework to their understanding of complex, industrialized societies and civilizations. These include feminist

critiques of the construction of gender and gender-based social roles and the social construction of race and other oppressive power hierarchies (Gilligan, 1982).

From a clinical perspective, the relational approach has perhaps gained most traction in the developing approaches to trauma – clinical presentations that disproportionately impact traditionally oppressed groups such as women, children, racial and ethnic minorities, and the economically disadvantaged. A defining mark of trauma, and one of the mind’s chief defensive responses to trauma, is dissociation. As a symptom, dissociation carries with it the likely consequence of shutting off the victim both from their own more complex memories and feelings, as well as the wider community as a whole. Relational approaches as championed by Judith Herman (1992) and Bessel van der Kolk (2014) have gained wide acceptance in their success at drawing out the dissociated and disconnected survivors of trauma.

The relational framework has a particular salience in a clinical approach to the problem of delusion. As defined by the DSM-IV delusions are “a false belief based on incorrect inference about external reality that is firmly sustained despite what constitutes incontrovertible and obvious proof of evidence to the contrary” (APA, 2000, p. 298). Looked at from an intersubjective perspective, this definition contains some obvious points of difficulty starting with its easy use of terms such as “false,” “incorrect,” and “incontrovertible truth.” This stance carries within it seemingly unexamined presumption of objective, knowable truth as something the clinician can be in possession of, especially in regard to something as intangible as a “belief.” This presumption sits at the origins of modern mental health treatment, including the work of Sigmund Freud. As relational psychoanalyst Jay R. Greenberg critiques:

Freud’s model of the analyst’s role is based on the position of the observing scientist as that was understood in the 19th century [...]. Freud’s [model] embodies a formulation

which contemporary philosophers would consider to represent an outmoded, not to say particularly presumptuous, notion about the nature of scientific investigation. (Greenberg, 1986, p. 135)

It is of course immediately apparent that most human beings, if not all, subscribe to ideas and beliefs outside of the parameters of what could be called verifiable and observable scientific proof. Most cultural and religious traditions, for example, fall well outside these categories. In this regard, the DSM-IV definition of delusion wrestles to differentiate and define by virtue of exclusion from a larger majority norm: “The belief is not one ordinarily accepted by other members of the person’s culture or subculture” (APA, 2000, p. 298). While the DSM-5 definition of delusions seem designed to amend some of this scientific presumption, it still relies on an essentially embracing a ‘majority rules’ approach: “Delusions are deemed bizarre if they are clearly implausible and not understandable to same-culture peers and do not derive from ordinary life experiences” (APA, 2000, p. 298).

In the realm of the Gang Stalking phenomenon, as understood in the diagnostic frame of delusional disorder, the clinical approach of relational psychology would seem to be a good fit. For individuals who believe they are the victims of gang stalking surveillance, much of their distress and anguish stems from their frustration at not being believed, and of having their subjective interpretation of events dismissed, ignored, invalidated and marginalized. It is easy to imagine that any therapeutic intervention that engages in a struggle to challenge the veracity, or establish the truth or falsehood of the distressed person’s account risks the likely reenactment of the same antagonistic relationship already present with the culture at large. An approach that embraces a perspective of intersubjectivity, in which the quest for absolute truth is abandoned in

place of a co-created meaning, is likely a necessity if the task of creating a therapeutic alliance has any chance of success.

As relational psychoanalyst Paul Renn writes, “psychosis confronts us with the problem of consensual meaning” (Renn, 2007). In the face of bizarre, confusing beliefs of elaborate “gang” surveillance and persecution that we cannot rationally credit as true, how are we to join in a therapeutic alliance in the absence of a shared reality? A relational approach escapes this power struggle by abandoning the futile quest to establish objective truth and accepts as a premise that all perspectives are by definition subjective. Relational psychology instead focuses on the *function* of psychotic belief-systems, viewing them as “part of the human response to overwhelming stress and perceived danger,” and as part of an attempt to “communicate that the self is crumbling and attempting to hold itself together in whatever way it can” (Renn, 2007, p. 3). This shift towards the functional purpose of delusional narratives allows us to place our emphasis on the terrifying experience of psychotic disintegration, and to understand bizarre beliefs as creative attempts to attribute meaning to these terrifying experiences. Relational psychology sees attempts to attribute meaning within a shared socio-cultural context as an essentially healthy function of the mind. To seek out the support and comfort of others in order to have one’s subjective reality affirmed and validated is a response that can lead to healing. “The person’s experience of insecurity and social isolation are emphasized in the development of psychosis, as is the importance of recognizing the sense in which his or her ‘delusional’ accounts are true rather than absurd” (Renn, 2007, p. 5).

Yet, while relational approaches to psychosis have yielded rich and encouraging findings, particularly in the “Open Dialogue” network-based approach to treating psychosis in Finland (Seikkula et al., 2003), it faces an uphill battle as far as being broadly adopted. Although

relational therapy could be said to have successfully differentiated itself from classic psychoanalysis, it now faces a challenge to maintain itself against the growing trend of biogenetic reductionism and favoring of psychopharmacological interventions to the exclusion of “talk therapy.” The neuroscientist and relational psychiatrist Brian Koehler (2006) has criticized “the tendency to reduce mind and culture to molecular events occurring within the central nervous system” that has led to a “one-dimensional, monolingual approach to the complexities of human suffering.” He calls for the return to a more “patient-centered model” that conforms to the tenants of relational theory, and pleads for a balanced approach “giving equal weight to subjective experience [as to] objective neuroscience research.” This same point is asserted within the field of neuroscience itself in the writing of JaakPanksepp (2004):

A fuller recognition of basic emotional imbalances of many psychiatric disorders may also help reverse a growing problem of modern psychiatry – the marginalization of patients by making them mere consumers of pills rather than agents in reconstructing meaningful human relationships and life insights. (p.18-19)

With regard to the gang stalking phenomenon, the deficits of a reductive biological and molecular based approach can be made even more plain – far more so than in its treatment of individuals. Quite simply, the medical-reductivist framework has almost nothing to say to the question of why online gang stalking communities might form, and to what function they serve as a factor in the formulation of a delusional disorder. For this we must extend our exploration from out of the spheres of the strictly biogenetic and into the wider psychosocial sphere.

At the very least, gang stalking message boards serve, in some sense, as the platform on which to build temporary communities, even if they are communities built around a shared,

terrifying delusion. For a functional understanding of why such communities would form in the first place, a relational framework possesses unique explanatory power.

A central concept of the relational approach is the idea of the “third,” a place or position of reflection that occurs in relationships, down to the smallest dyad. Originally conceived from the analyst Thomas H. Ogden’s (1994) reveries around his own psychotherapy practice, the “third” represents a position beyond the mere one-to-one connection. It is a place of reflection that can illuminate the process around the relationship, but which itself can often remain out of conscious awareness. It should be added, it can be collapsed or damaged at points of relational failure, when conflicts of dominance and submission overwhelm the vulnerable equilibrium of the relationship dynamic.

While originally used to account for the process of relationship in the analytic situation, the concept of “thirdness,” of an “ever-changing unconscious third subject” (Ogden, 1999, p. 1), is one that “takes on a life of its own in the interpersonal field.” (Ogden, 1999, p. 1). It can be used to understand the powerful enhancement dynamic found within any relationship of mutuality. This concept seems comparable to the “generative potential space” that Winnicott (1951) wrote of as emerging from the helpful therapeutic bond. As discussed in earlier chapters, an individual joining an online community around the topic gang stalking offers almost immediate rewards of understanding, acceptance, and validation. For those who have been suffering in increasing isolation, it provides, immediately and at no financial cost, an experience of relief from self-doubt and a supportive context of shared meaning to experience what was in the past a lonely, terrifying state. It gives, in short, a substance, a body, that holds often paralyzing anxiety and distress and gives it a form and structure, a true “third subject” that permits a context for reflection and the assignment of new meaning. What was once a lonely,

isolated dyad of a mind struggling with psychosis, that is of an internal observant-self wrestling with a mounting experience of fragmentation and distress, now becomes transformed and externalized into an entirely new perspective. As has been noted above, a new entrant to the gang stalking community is often greeted with positive attention and enthusiasm, which is soon often followed by an invitation for deeper participation in what is now framed as a resistance movement. While it must be terrifying to accept that one has been singled out for persecution by a vast, shadowy conspiracy, the broader context of acceptance in a community offering mutual aid, fellowship and support must nevertheless be welcomed. Where before they were alone, frightened and confused, they are now joined, angry, and a part of a movement.

This is another way of saying they are in a relationship, in that the connection is built on shared, co-created meaning. As has been discussed above, Greenberg and Mitchell, when first delineating the existence of a relational psychology, placed it as direct outgrowth emerging from the tradition of object relations theory, as evidenced in the title of their seminal book *Object Relations in Psychoanalytic Theory* (1982). Object relations approached psychosis by focusing on the catastrophic sense of futility, terror and powerlessness, which underlies psychotic states. Melanie Klein (1952) saw these rooted in early developmental stages or “positions” that she labeled the “paranoid-schizoid position.” Psychosis is seen as a disintegration of the suffering person’s subjectivity and the pervasive feeling of external threat, and of persecution and paranoia. While gang stalking communities no doubt reinforce the narratives of paranoia and external threat, they also serve a clear adaptive function in *reintegration* for the suffering individual back into a shared relational context.

In the above section, the author has examined the nuances of Relational Theory and its dominant themes of object relations, thirdness, and emphasis on intersubjectivity. In the

following chapter, she will relate the two theories, and describe the usefulness from a clinical perspective of combining the two theories as conceptual frameworks for the Gang Stalking phenomenon. The particular good fit of social work for addressing the phenomenon will be discussed, in contrast to the fields of psychiatry and psychology.

CHAPTER V

Discussion

Gang Stalking communities represent a dark side of the Internet—those that reinforce unhealthy behavior. These corners have developed where people seeking solidarity around unhealthy practices come together to encourage each other—practices that the medical and psychiatric community would label as symptoms of illnesses. In the case of the Gang Stalking phenomenon, individuals share experiences with one another online of being followed or systematically harassed by large, nameless organizations. The reason for the onset of the harassment is usually mysterious to the Targeted Individual, but continued harassment is often as perceived punishment against the TI for speaking up against their stalkers. Authorities, friends and family consistently deny that stalking is occurring, labeling the claims outlandish, and the individual becomes more convinced of a conspiracy. These individuals, who meet the DSM criteria for Delusional Disorder, unconsciously select small pieces of information or experiences and imbue them with disproportionate importance, often growing delusions from what appears to outsiders to be nothing at all.

Sociology's Emergent Norm Theory offers powerful explanatory capacity to describe the formation of gang stalking communities. It gives us a framework with which we can understand how these groups come to be. According to Emergent Norm Theory, new norms surface in a group through a process of circular reinforcement. Individuals contribute to message boards, and are responded to positively or negatively by other members of the community. If members begin

to share postulations about their experience that are too far outside the accepted schema of the community, he or she is sometimes chastised or removed from the board, but most likely simply ignored. When a new member finds the message board and describes that he or she is experiencing being followed or harassed, he or she is given a good deal of attention and validation, reinforcing their experiences with emphases on the particular attitudes—or norms—of that message board. Visitors who visit the websites, terrified by their amorphous experiences, may find meaning through the community and therefore tend to “buy in” aggressively.

A Targeted Individual must continue to reexamine his or her experiences while the co-created emergent norms of the community continue to develop. This constant reevaluation often results in new beliefs. While a Targeted Individual A might initially only believe that employees of government agencies are tracking his movements, he might read that Targeted Individual B recently realized that her family was monitoring her as well as government workers, sending Targeted Individual A into suspicion about his own family.

Adherence to the norms of the websites put TIs in a bind. They are taught by those who accept them as a member that they are not to seek help from anyone who might question the validity of their plight, as nearly all mental health professionals or concerned family members would naturally be inclined to do. This results in a closed system in which there is little or no room for building a healing therapeutic relationship.

While Emergent Norm Theory describes how the Gang Stalking websites work to pull individuals in and keep them engaged, Relational Theory can be used to describe a potential impetus for joining such a network. Relationships are built through co-created meaning, and are intersubjective processes. We can also apply the theory to help discern potential modes for healing from the delusional belief in Gang Stalking. Relational Theory frees a practitioner of the

restraints of finding an objective truth. In fact, in its purest form, Relational Theory denies the very existence of such truth, particularly within interpersonal relations. Relational Theorists view delusions as healthy functions of the mind. However, while the delusion may protect the mind in the short-term, the ever-changing nature of the message boards can become fuel for the TIs delusions. New people's stories are constantly being posted, and an ensconced TI can cherry-pick from these experiences to further verify his or her experience. Vigilance against the outside world becomes paramount, and the trauma from which the delusion worked to protect the mind from goes unaddressed.

The problem is evident. While according to relational theory, the reaching out is a positive indication of health, or potential for health, new members are reaching into a closed system that will reinforce their delusions and may ultimately only act to deepen their belief in them. The connections made in online message boards are soothing to the paranoid individual, but are so focused on this one aspect of the individual's life—his or her delusion. These connections are not truly relational—they are only a shadow of a relationship. Therefore, a pure and more genuinely relational, intersubjective alliance will have to be made with a therapist in order for the TI to start to loosen his or her grip on the delusions. The “third” resulting through a therapeutic alliance would be in effect in competition with the “third” of a constant deluge of delusion-affirming information available 24-hours-per-day via Gang Stalking websites. This would not be an easy task, and might even be ethically problematic within the bounds of pure relational psychoanalysis. In order to avoid a reenactment of the trauma of being forever disbelieved, a therapist might have to join with the client's delusions quite readily and unquestioningly. Questions about the validity of such delusions would have to come very slowly, and only after an extremely strong bond had been established. However, if the bond is not

established, the initial joining may act to more deeply entrench the delusions, giving the client even more confirmation about his or her delusions and making subsequent therapeutic intervention more difficult.

The two theories explored in this piece combine to reveal a deeper level of understanding about this phenomenon. However, this author does not endeavor to identify a complete treatment plan. More concrete, evidence-based study is necessary to identify pathways to healing individuals in this community. Procuring participants for a live study would be, for the reasons outlined above, extremely difficult. However, the writer will argue that the field of social work is best situated in the mental health community to reach out. Our field, ubiquitously informed by relational tenets, has the best chance of crossing the barriers put up by these communities because our values emphasize the unique perspective of all individuals wherein no one person or institution is privileged as the Knower. The importance of meeting a client “where he’s at” is central to the social workers’ credo. This position would be crucial in approaching a group online or in person.

Meeting these clients in their delusion is in stark contrast to the potentially alienating interventions that would most likely come out of the fields of psychiatry, which would address the problem primarily through treatment with medication, or the equally reductive assumptions made by the field of abnormal psychology. So, the intention of this work is to explore the gang stalking phenomenon through the lens of the values of social work. We emphasize that no human understanding is available without proper attention paid to the context of their larger relational sphere.

Because of the group-based nature of the online social networks, group therapy occurs to this writer as potentially being a fitting intervention if one found a way to successfully engage

with TIs. Two therapists might meet with a group of individuals who identify as TIs and see if through intensive group therapy without the input of the faceless Internet voices, and see if new norms would emerge. Such a group would bring together the safety of being a part of their trusted community, along with the skilled guidance of carefully non-judgmental therapists. Without the rigid culling of comments that don't fit the norm of a Gang Stalking website, clients might begin to see that their experiences can be different from one another, and that the range of content allowed on the message boards is narrow. TIs would undoubtedly hear about the other things going on each others' their lives, and see similarities in their own lives. They might create a new norm—that a group should focus on the whole life of the client—the stalking being only one aspect of their lives. Stories of trauma might emerge and be worked through. The Gang Stalking problem might thus be diluted, so to speak, with the other aspects of their lives and there could be potential to gain perspective about how much pain they find themselves in when participating for hours each day on their message boards, versus when communing with other real people in physical space.

People who identify as Targeted Individuals currently have no resources other than gang stalking websites that can soothe their diffuse feelings of anxiety. On gang stalking website message boards, TIs are welcomed, encouraged, and told they are not alone. The reaching out is relationally healthy, but it also drastically cuts the individual off from loved ones and health care professionals who might be able to help them uncover the underlying sources of their free-floating angst. The combination of a firmly-grasped understanding of the phenomenon through Emergent Norm Theory, coupled with a relational therapeutic approach is a good potential place for clinicians to start to engage with these individuals, loosen the grip of their delusions, and move them away from their obsessive attention to Gang Stalking message boards.

This is a new frontier of Internet connectivity, and it requires that the social work field keep up. A stricter interpretation and application of “meeting clients where they’re at” may represent a new frontier of social work intervention. The closed systems of gang stalking communities are immune to criticism, calls to reason, evidence, or derision. The protections against the world, of which TIs are so terrified, entrench them in a connection that gives immediate relief, but can potentially be harmful in its self-enclosed rigidity. Social workers are uniquely positioned to navigate this new terrain, equipped as they are with a relational understanding of the person in the environment. A deep and nuanced understanding of relational dynamics, carefully and compassionately applied to an emerging cultural community online may be the most powerful intervention possible. All too often the experience of delusional symptoms alienate the subject from their family, friends, intimate partners and otherwise supportive networks. Appeals from these domains to rejoin and connect are, in the strange alchemy of psychosis, transformed into a force driving them further into extremity and isolation. Existing ties, such as family and friends, while most invested in retrieving their loved ones from these networks, are ironically the least well-equipped to help. It is the opinion of this writer that a new relationship must form after a TI has become committed to a gang stalking social network, and that a social worker is best equipped to intervene.

There is a larger issue indicated by this study that must be addressed in social work as a field. The world is changing. The Internet is growing exponentially, facilitating this rapid change. We all use the Internet, and hardly think about it—it has become a part of our quotidian routine. In this way it has become largely invisible. Most Americans born in the century have never known a world without it. It is powerful and useful, but what we recognize here is that it can be dangerous for many communities. Too little is known about emerging Internet

phenomena, and neglecting it can be dangerous. There is no way to keep up with emerging trends, but it's important to know the kinds of trends that exist outlined in this piece, including Gang Stalking, Pro-Ana websites, and online "support" groups hosted by untrained, unlicensed individuals.

But what else can we do? Perhaps it would be judicious to make queries about Internet use during intake interviews, or to simply bring the subject of Internet use into the room more often. Many spend so much time online that Internet use might prove to be as important as other things we cover in intakes, such as major relationships or occupational satisfaction. We cannot know the whole Internet, but we need to start somewhere, because a quiet but profound shift has occurred. It's time to start paying attention to it.

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