

Sheridan, L., & Scott, A. J. (2015). Discriminating approachers and non-approachers: Can knowledge from research within a public figure context be extrapolated to a community context?. *Journal of Threat Assessment and Management*, 2(2), 88-97.

Abstract

The stalking and threat assessment literatures overlap but have developed separately, having different focal points. It has been demonstrated that if ex-intimates are removed from analyses, then the stalking and threat assessment literatures can produce very similar findings. The present study examines whether five of Meloy et al.'s (2010) six predictors of stalker approach could be identified within a database of self-identified stalking victims ($N = 1440$). These variables have been found to predict approach within both public figure and general population stalker samples. None predicted stalker approach in the present study. Our sample differed from earlier samples in important ways, recording far lower rates of serious mental disorder in stalkers and including stalkers who were not apprehended by police and/or referred to forensic mental health services. Also, the threat assessment literature categorizes attempted approaches as approaches, whilst the stalking literature employs a more literal classification. It is concluded that findings from the stalking context can be extrapolated to the threat assessment context, but that caution must be applied. In particular, the nature of the sample appears to dictate the transferability of findings.

Keywords: stalking; threat assessment; approach; literature; victims.

Discriminating approachers and non-approachers: Can knowledge from the stalking context be extrapolated to the threat assessment context?

Although they have much in common, the stalking and threat assessment literatures have developed separately, and this may be attributed to a focus on attacks and assassinations in the dominant US-based research relating to threat assessment (see James et al., 2010a). The literature on threat assessment is often based on the data files of those who have provided direct input into cases concerning specific types of public figures (for instance, British royalty or Hollywood celebrities). The much larger literature on stalking, by comparison, is often based on studies of members of the general public. Threat assessment is “concerned almost wholly with the risk of targeted violence by a subject of concern, and has a behavioral and observational policing focus” (Meloy, Hoffmann, Guldemann, & James, 2012, p. 257). The stalking literature contains numerous studies on the prediction of stalker violence (see e.g., Thompson, Dennison, & Stewart, 2013), but these do not form the majority of stalking-related works. McEwan, MacKenzie, Mullen, and James (2012) note that much of the empirical research on stalking has focused on epidemiology, psychopathology and the link with domestic violence. The nature and impact of stalking have also been focal points, as has perceptions of the phenomenon. Threat assessment can be applied in cases of stalking, as demonstrated by the development of tools such as the Stalking Risk Profile, the Guidelines for Stalking Assessment and Management, and the DASH (see MacKenzie et al., 2009; Kropp, Hart, Lyon, & Storey, 2011; Sheridan & Roberts, 2011, respectively). The overlap between the threat assessment and stalking literatures is further illustrated by the reality that public figures are often stalked (e.g., Dietz & Martell, 2010), hence. The present study

therefore seeks to add to a small number of studies that examine how far findings from the stalking context can be extrapolated to the threat assessment context.

Several works have identified important similarities in findings from research on threat and research on stalkers. Specifically, predictors of approach behavior have been found to be similar whether the targets are various types of public figures or members of the general public. James et al. (2010a) note that the issue of approach has been a research priority within studies of risk of violence towards public figures, given that physical approach is by necessity a pre-condition for most forms of physical attack. Furthermore, intrusive behaviors such as unwanted physical approaches are in themselves a source of fear and distress (McEwan et al., 2012). James et al. (2010a) compared a sample of general population stalkers with a sample of individuals who targeted the British Royal Family. This study looked specifically at factors associated with stalker persistence (i.e., the likelihood that an episode of abnormal attention will continue). Despite the sample differences, the same factors tended to be associated with persistence; principally the presence of psychotic illness in the stalker and a motivation for intimacy/a relationship with the target. The authors argue that “Although the harassment of the prominent differs in certain aspects from stalking of other groups, it is desirable that it should be encompassed in the stalking discourse in order that important insights obtained in the study of one group should not be lost to the other” (p. 284). It was concluded that general population stalker samples and public figure stalker samples are substantially similar. These authors further state that any comparison made between general population and public figure samples must exclude cases involving prior intimate partners. The exclusion of prior intimate partners makes sense, given that the overwhelming majority of public figures will not be pursued by ex-intimates (unlike general population victims, of whom

around 50% are stalked by ex-intimates, e.g., Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007).

Meloy et al. (2010) examined six studies of problematic communications and approach behavior toward public figures (British royalty, Hollywood celebrities, and US politicians) in order to identify which variables best predict physical approaches by ‘problematic individuals’. Comparisons of variables deemed sufficiently similar across studies highlighted six predictors that best distinguished individuals who engaged in approach behavior (i.e., approachers) from individuals who did not (i.e., non-approachers): i. multiple contacts and targets, ii. serious mental illness, iii. an absence of threatening communications, iv. multiple means of communications, v., an absence of antagonistic communications, and vi. requests for help.

McEwan et al. (2012) examined several of these factors in a sample of general population stalkers. The sample was split according to whether or not the victim had a former intimate relationship with the stalker in order to allow the comparison of their findings and those within the public figure literature. Consistent with James et al.’s (2010a, 2010b) works, McEwan et al. found that psychotic illness and forms of intimacy seeking were strongly associated with stalker approach and escalation in non-intimate cases. Similar to Meloy et al. (2010) they found that non-approachers were more likely to use multiple means of communicating with the victim. The findings led the authors to conclude that similar factors are associated with stalker approach and escalation in different samples collected within different (English-speaking) countries, and that the findings provide “further evidence that the phenomena of stalking and harassment and their core associated risk factors are fundamentally similar, whether the victims are ordinary members of the population or those with a more prominent public image...” (McEwan et al., 2012, p. 403). Although there were some non-conforming findings in this study, these were

explained by the differing methods of communication available to general population and public figure stalkers. For instance, it is much easier to directly e-mail an 'ordinary' person and very few ordinary persons do not open their own mail. None of the factors examined in McEwan et al.'s work distinguished approachers from non-approachers in ex-intimate cases.

The McEwan et al. (2012) study was based on 211 stalkers referred to a forensic mental health service and as such, rates of mental illness in general population stalkers and severe cases were likely to have been overrepresented. This issue also applies to James et al.'s (2010a, 2010b) works and Meloy et al.'s (2010) study. The present study seeks to partly replicate (as far as matching data-points allow) these works employing a more general sample of stalking cases, namely a large sample of self-defined stalking victims. If the current work produces similar findings to those based on forensic samples, then it will serve to strengthen the argument that predictors from the stalking context can be extrapolated to the threat assessment context, as those who stalk non-intimates are fundamentally similar, regardless of the status of the person(s) they target. If disparate findings are produced, however, it may be suggested that findings from the stalking context should only be extrapolated to the threat assessment context with caution, and that the transferability of findings is dependent on the nature of the base sample or other factors.

Method

Participants

The sample comprised 1440 self-defined victims of stalking from Australia, the UK and the USA. The majority of respondents were female ($n = 1,256$, 87.2%) and the mean age of respondents when the stalking victimization began was 33.02 years ($SD = 10.35$, range 10 to 71). The original sample comprised 1641 victims, but 12.3% of respondents were excluded from the analyses for the following reasons: they were aged less than 18 years, the stalking period was under four weeks and/or constituted less than 10 occasions (as per Pathé, Purcell, & Mullen's [2000] criteria for persistence and repetition), missing data (>10%), concern that the respondent was a stalker and not a victim, or was describing phenomena other than stalking (such as workplace bullying). We also removed cases that appeared to be delusionally based accounts of stalking and 'group-stalking'. That is, where victims provided accounts of extremely unlikely and elaborate patterns of surveillance and other behaviors (such as the use of mind control weaponry) by highly organized groups (see Sheridan & James, 2015).

Materials

A 29-page questionnaire was used, comprising eight sections, 349 closed questions and 59 open questions. Sections one and two obtained comparable demographic information about the victim and the stalker via a combination of open (e.g., country of origin, country of residence, occupation) and closed (e.g., ethnicity, marital status) questions. Section three considered the stalking behavior, with open questions asking when the stalking started, how it ended (if applicable), the perceived trigger for the stalking, how the respondent first realized they were being stalked, and

who (if anyone) aided the stalker. Closed 'yes/no' questions included a list of 30 stalking behaviors (with respondents indicating any they had experienced), and closed 'multiple option' questions pertaining to the sources used by the stalker to gather victim-related information, and whether the stalker harassed third parties (with respondents indicating all that were applicable).

Section four focused on the official and non-official responses of others to the stalking. Open questions concerned how many harassing incidents respondents experienced before reporting to the police and why cases that were reported to the police did not reach the courts. Closed 'Likert scale' questions concerned how helpful various agencies and individuals had proven to be. Section five comprised open questions and considered victims' recommendations for best practice, asking their opinions on police training, how stalkers may best be stopped, and when stalking truly ends. Section six comprised mostly open questions and focused on the support available for victims of stalking, asking what type of interventions were or would likely be most useful (e.g., helplines, information packs). Section seven comprised mostly closed questions and considered the victim's direct and non-direct responses to the stalking, asking whether they used coping strategies (e.g., staying indoors, substance use), responded to the stalker, and whether these reactions were beneficial. Section eight comprised mostly closed 'yes/no' questions and focused on the effects of stalking, specifically the physical, psychological, social and economic consequences.

The questionnaire used in the present study was created by the first author as part of an ongoing project, and has been completed by more than 6000 self-defined victims of stalking. Although data from this ongoing project have been reported elsewhere (e.g., Sheridan & Grant 2007; Sheridan & Lyndon, 2012; Sheridan, North,

& Scott, 2014; Sheridan, Scott, & North, 2014), the current work employs a partially unique dataset. This approach is considered appropriate when a large amount of data were collected, and “especially so where a different and distinctly separate question has been asked or the endpoints reported are very different, and the same dataset can provide the answer to these questions” (Klein, Pozniak, & Pandit, 2014, p. 196).

Procedure

Following an international press release, and a series of television, radio and newspaper interviews (e.g., BBC on-line news, BBC World Service), self-identifying victims of stalking were directed to a website where they could complete an online questionnaire. Potential respondents were informed that the study aimed to develop a better understanding of stalking victimization. Links to this website were also placed on the web pages of a number of anti-stalking charities and information forums based in Australia, the UK and the USA. Respondents were assured of their anonymity and of the confidentiality of their responses prior to completing the questionnaire.

Questionnaires were completed by self-defined victims of stalking from 22 countries. However, the present study is restricted to the data of respondents from Australia, the UK and the USA because their responses were not significantly different on a range of key variables (e.g., the proportion of victims stalked by ex-intimates, the proportion of male and female stalkers and victims, the frequency of experiencing a range of stalking behaviors).

Study Variables

The present study examined the relationship between five independent variables and the presence or absence of approach behavior, classified as follows:

i) *Multiple contacts and targets*. Stalkers were classed as having multiple contacts and targets where victims stated they knew about the stalker targeting other primary victims, and the stalker broadened his or her targets to harass others associated with the victim.

ii) *Serious mental illness*. Stalkers were classed as having a severe mental illness where victims stated that the stalker had been treated as an inpatient for a mental illness or detained under mental health legislation after the stalking commenced. It is acknowledged that this figure may be artificially low because many victims are unlikely to have had accurate access to this information.

iii) *Threatening communications*. Victims were classed as having received threatening communications where they indicated that they had received threats against themselves, their children, their pets, or other persons, and that these threats were in written, electronic or verbal form.

iv) *Multiple means of communications*. Victims were classed as having received multiple means of communications where they indicated that the stalker had contacted them via more than one of the following modalities: telephone calls, text messages, e-mail, letters, other forms of communication (this final modality included 17 forms of communication, including messages etched into the ground, graffiti messages, and messages displayed on custom made posters).

v) *Antagonistic communications*. Victims were classed as having received antagonistic communications where they indicated their stalker had directed anger or hostility towards them.

Requests for help were omitted from analyses because it was impossible to ascertain this information from the dataset.

With regard to the dependent variable, consistent with McEwan et al. (2012) and Meloy et al. (2010) victims were classed as having been ‘approached’ if the stalker had engaged in one or more of the following behaviors in domestic, educational, occupational, or social locations: loitering, accosting, vandalizing the victim’s property, following, and overt spying.

Data Analysis

Chi-square (χ^2) tests examined associations between the five (categorical) independent variables and the (categorical) dependent variable. Unequal group sizes are not considered problematic for chi-square tests (McHugh, 2013). Phi (ϕ) is included as an index of effect size, with the statistic ranging from 0 to 1 and values closer to zero indicating weaker associations between the relevant variables. Odds ratios (OR) are also included as an indicator of the likelihood of the occurrence of each specific association, along with their 95% confidence intervals (CI).

Results

The analyses aimed to identify which of five independent variables previously identified as predictors of stalker approach in clinical and public figure samples were related to stalker approach within a general sample of stalking victims. When the current sample was examined in its entirety, three of the five variables of interest were significantly associated with stalker approach: threatening communications, multiple means of communications and antagonistic communications (see Table 1). However, two of these variables were associated in the opposite direction to the associations

identified by Meloy et al. (2010): threatening communications and antagonistic communications were associated with higher levels of stalker approach than non-threatening communications and non-antagonistic communications (50.2% vs. 23.6% and 84.6% vs. 67.1%, respectively). Only one variable was in the same direction: multiple means of communications was associated with higher levels of stalker approach than single means of communications (94.3% vs. 89.3%).

---Table 1 about here---

Next, data relating to stalkers who were ex-intimates only, acquaintances and strangers only, and strangers only to the victim were examined separately, following the sound recommendation made by James et al. (2010a) that comparisons between general population and public figure stalking should exclude ex-intimates from the former (see Table 2).

---Table 2 about here---

The second set of analyses included ex-intimates only, and the picture did not alter dramatically: threatening communications and antagonistic communications were still associated with stalker approach in the opposite direction to the associations identified by Meloy et al. (2010): threatening communications and antagonistic communications were again associated with higher levels of stalker approach than non-threatening communications and non-antagonistic communications (55.2% vs. 19.6% and 87.6% vs. 65.2%, respectively). However, multiple means of communication was no longer significantly associated with stalker approach.

The third set of analyses included acquaintances (such as neighbors and work colleagues) and strangers only, and produced the same pattern of findings. Threatening communications and antagonistic communications were associated with higher levels of stalker approach than non-threatening communications and non-

antagonistic communications (44.3% vs. 25.5% and 81.2% vs. 68.1%, respectively).

It was decided that equating acquaintances (who will have had various degrees of previous contact with their victim) with strangers (who will have had little to no previous contact with their victim) may have affected the comparability of findings. Public figures will in most cases have had no or minimal contact with their stalkers. Consequently, a fourth set of analyses included strangers only. This time, threatening communications was the only variable to be significantly associated with stalker approach: threatening communications (42.0%) were associated with higher levels of stalker approach than non-threatening communications (12.5%).

The final set of analyses aimed to better reflect the earlier studies examined by Meloy et al. (2010) and included non-intimate cases investigated by the police only (see Table 3). Although the direction of findings was consistent with the previous analyses none of the five variables were significantly associated with approach behavior.

---Table 3 about here---

Discussion

The present study has failed to support the findings of Meloy et al. (2010) in a general population stalking victim sample. The predictors of approach behavior toward public figures that were identified by Meloy's examination of six original studies (conducted by Dietz et al., 1991a; Dietz et al., 1991b; James et al., 2010b; Meloy, Mohandie, & Green, 2008; Scalora et al., 2002a; and Scalora et al., 2002b) did not predict approach behavior in our sample of 1440 self-identified stalking victims. We found a pattern of non-significance combined with a pattern of findings in the opposite direction to those described by Meloy et al. (2010).

The pattern of findings was maintained when criteria were applied with the aim of making our data more comparable to that analyzed by the relevant earlier works. These earlier works covered more severe stalking experiences than those represented by many of the cases in our victim database. Our sample was based on self-identified stalking victims, and the studies assessed by Meloy et al. (2010) were based on police files, case files from threat assessment practitioners, prosecutorial agencies, and security departments of entertainment agencies. McEwan et al.'s (2012) clinic attendees had all been convicted of stalking or related activities. Application of our most stringent criteria – inclusion of only those non-intimate cases investigated by the police – left 273 cases. The findings did not support those of Meloy et al. despite the use of this criteria, with none of the five variables being significantly associated with approach behavior.

Meloy et al. (2010) found an absence of threatening communications and antagonistic communications to be associated with approach behavior in their public figure samples. We found the opposite in our analyses of the entire sample, as well as the ex-intimates only, and acquaintances and strangers only subsamples. That is, the presence of threats and antagonistic content was associated with approach behavior in our general population sample. A possible explanation for this disparity may concern the serious mental illness variable. A very small minority of the stalkers described in our victim database (0.3%) was classified as having a serious mental illness. This figure is likely an underrepresentation, as although the current sample is non-clinical, previous research would suggest a higher figure (but see Patton, Nobles, & Fox, 2010). We had no reliable method of establishing the presence or absence of serious mental illness in the stalkers and this unreliability will have affected the findings. Rates of diagnosed mental disorder in earlier works were high. For example, 29% of

McEwan et al.'s (2012) non-intimate stalkers were diagnosed with psychotic disorder and 87% of James et al.'s (2010a) public figure stalkers "exhibited overt evidence of serious mental illness" (p. 293). Indeed, one of Meloy's et al.'s (2010) predictors of problematic approach was the presence of a serious mental illness.

Another possible explanation for the disparity in findings between this and earlier works concerns how the variables of interest were operationalized. All the predictor variables in this study and the six studies that Meloy et al. (2010) assessed were similar, rather than identical. The classification of 'approach' in particular saw marked variance. For instance, the James et al. (2010b) study defined approach behavior as inappropriate attempts to achieve proximity, not only to members of the British Royal Family, but also to royal residences and events. The Dietz et al. (1991a, 1991b) works included visits to an office or agency believed to represent the targeted public figure. All six studies included attempts to approach a public figure in their definitions of approach behavior. The present study, by comparison, only included actual physical approaches. A splitting of actual and attempted approaches would likely provide little real value in studies of public figures, as more of the variance would likely be accounted for by the quality of security than by the tenacity of the stalker. More useful would be further analyses of how serious mental illness relates to (dangerous) approaches in samples of clinical and non-clinical general population stalkers. Regardless, this difference in classification between public figure and general stalking studies provides a useful reminder of fundamental differences between the two study populations.

It is clear that the current work suffered from the existence of ceiling effects, with the majority of victims (90.3%) being approached by their stalkers. James et al.'s (2010b) British Royal Family stalkers had an approach rate of 81%, and McEwan et

al.'s (2012) sample saw an approach rate of 74%. Future studies should seek to break down approach into additional variables (such as harmless approach, repeated approach, risky approach). The present study was also unable to provide a good measure or indicator of stalker motivation. James et al. (2010b), when discussing their findings from both public figure and general population stalker datasets, argue that approach behavior and escalation are associated with psychosis and a sense of entitlement to closeness with the target. Future victim surveys need to assess and record stalker motivation in order to increase the comparability of studies that collect information pertaining to stalking from differing sources. None of the general population or public figure stalker samples compared within the literature so far are ideal. For instance, data on stalkers of the British Royal Family are based on referrals from police, and it is likely therefore that letters from obviously mentally ill persons were more likely to be flagged, and information concerning whether the stalker had also targeted other persons was not available (see James et al., 2009). Another pertinent issue must be borne in mind when interpreting the current and similar findings. Meloy (2014) makes the important point that a proportion of stalkers whose communication characteristics are the precise opposite of those associated with non-approach behavior in the literature will actually approach their target. As such, Meloy cautions that readers should focus on actual frequencies and effect sizes rather than significant differences and category membership alone.

For those variables that were significantly associated with approach behavior (threatening communications, multiple means of communications, antagonistic communications), the percentage values tended to be similar for all five sets of analyses (entire sample, ex-intimates only, acquaintances and strangers only, strangers only, non-intimate cases investigated by the police only). There was one

difference worthy of note. That is, analysis of the stranger only and non-intimate cases investigated by the police only cases revealed larger proportions of persons with a serious mental illness than did analyses of the other groups. This does of course support prior findings as these individuals were more likely to meet inclusion criteria for studies of those who may pose a risk to public figures.

In conclusion, the present study would suggest that findings from the stalking context cannot simply be extrapolated to the threat assessment context, and this remains the case when stranger stalking cases and non-intimate cases investigated by the police are examined in isolation. Perhaps it is that the (assumed) much lower rates of severe mental disorder in the current work have a major impact on the other variables of interest. Indeed, previous work (James et al., 2010a, 2010b; McEwan et al., 2012) has suggested psychosis to be a (if not the) key variable in distinguishing more persistent and severe stalking. If the stalking and threat assessment literatures are to meaningfully inform one another, then researchers must be careful to include comparable data points when designing new studies.

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Table 1: Associations between the five independent variables and whether or not the stalker approached the victim for the entire sample

	Approached victim		χ^2
	Yes	No	
<i>Entire sample (N = 1440)</i>	90.3% (1300)	9.7% (140)	n/a
Multiple contacts and targets	71.3% (927)	70.7% (99)	<i>ns</i>
Serious mental illness	1.6% (21)	1.4% (2)	<i>ns</i>
Threatening communications	50.2% (652)	23.6% (33)	$\chi^2(1) = 35.81, p < .001, \phi = .158$ OR = 3.26, CI = 2.18–4.89
Multiple means of communications	94.3% (1226)	89.3% (125)	$\chi^2(1) = 5.50, p = .019, \phi = .062$ OR = 1.99, CI = 1.11–3.57
Antagonistic communications	84.6% (1100)	67.1% (94)	$\chi^2(1) = 27.24, p < .001, \phi = -.014$ OR = 0.37, CI = 0.25–0.55

Table 2: Associations between the five independent variables and whether or not the stalker approached the victim for ex-intimates only, acquaintances and strangers only, and strangers only

	Approached victim		χ^2
	Yes	No	
<i>Ex-intimates only (n = 745)</i>	93.8%	6.2%	n/a
	(699)	(46)	
Multiple contacts and targets	71.8%	69.6%	<i>ns</i>
	(502)	(32)	
Serious mental illness	0.3%	0.0	<i>ns</i>
	(2)	(0)	
Threatening communications	55.2%	19.6%	$\chi^2(1) = 22.03, p < .001, \phi = .172$
	(386)	(9)	OR = 5.07, CI = 2.41–10.66
Multiple means of communications	95.7%	91.3%	<i>ns</i>
	(669)	(42)	
Antagonistic communications	87.6%	65.2%	$\chi^2(1) = 18.07, p < .001, \phi = -.156$
	(612)	(30)	OR = 0.27, CI = 0.14–0.51
<i>Acquaintances and strangers only (n = 695)</i>	86.5%	13.5%	n/a
	(601)	(94)	
Multiple contacts and targets	70.7%	71.3%	<i>ns</i>
	(425)	(67)	
Serious mental illness	3.2%	2.1%	<i>ns</i>
	(19)	(2)	

Threatening communications	44.3%	25.5%	$\chi^2(1) = 11.73, p = .001, \phi = .130$
	(266)	(24)	OR = 2.32, CI = 1.42–3.78
Multiple means of communications	92.7%	88.3%	<i>ns</i>
	(557)	(83)	
Antagonistic communications	81.2%	68.1%	$\chi^2(1) = 8.55, p = .003, \phi = -.111$
	(488)	(64)	OR = 0.49, CI = 0.31–0.80
<hr/>			
<i>Strangers only (n = 186)</i>	87.1%	12.9%	n/a
	(162)	(24)	
Multiple contacts and targets	62.5%	70.4%	<i>ns</i>
	(15)	(114)	
Serious mental illness	4.9%	4.2%	<i>ns</i>
	(8)	1	
Threatening communications	42.0%	12.5%	$\chi^2(1) = 7.70, p = .006, \phi = .203$
	(68)	(3)	OR = 5.06, CI = 1.45–17.66
Multiple means of communications	92.0%	87.5%	<i>ns</i>
	(149)	(21)	
Antagonistic communications	84.6%	70.8%	<i>ns</i>
	(137)	(17)	
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Table 3: Associations between the five independent variables and whether or not the stalker approached the victim for non-intimate cases investigated by police only

	Approached victim		χ^2
	Yes	No	
<i>Non-intimate cases investigated by the police only (n = 273)</i>	88.3% (241)	11.7% (32)	n/a
Multiple contacts and targets	80.1% (193)	71.9% (23)	<i>ns</i>
Serious mental illness	7.5% (18)	6.3% (2)	<i>ns</i>
Threatening communications	53.5% (129)	37.5% (12)	<i>ns</i>
Multiple means of communications	94.2% (227)	87.5% (28)	<i>ns</i>
Antagonistic communications	88.8% (214)	78.1% (25)	<i>ns</i>