

Stalking on Campus: The Prevalence and Strategies for Coping with Stalking

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ABSTRACT: This epidemiological study explored the prevalence of stalkers and stalking victims among college students. Two questionnaires (one assessing the behaviors of those who stalk others, and the other assessing victims of stalking) were administered to 294 college undergraduates. The questionnaires were then revised and readministered to 299 undergraduates. Thirty percent of the female students and 17% of the males reported having been stalked; 80% reported that they knew their stalker (many had been previously romantically involved with the stalker). Only 1% of the subjects acknowledged having stalked someone, due perhaps to the social undesirability of this behavior. Methods of coping with being stalked were also assessed. The most common response among females was to ignore the stalker; among males it was to confront the stalker.

KEYWORDS: forensic science, stalking, stalkers, obsessional harassment, obsessional following, obsessional pursuit, pathology of love, forensic psychiatry, violence in relationships, relationship dissolution, human behavior

Stalking gained national attention after the tragic 1989 murder of young television star Rebecca Schaeffer, co-star of "My Sister Sam," by an obsessed fan. Madonna was also stalked and threatened by a fan, Robert Hoskins, who was convicted and sentenced to ten years in prison. Many other celebrities, such as David Letterman, have been stalked and harassed by strangers. However, not all victims are celebrities and not all stalkers are strangers. For example, the landmark case of *Tarasoff vs. Regents of the University of California* (1) arose from the murder of Tatiana Tarasoff by a college student, Prosenjit Poddar, who was obsessed with her after a causal dating relationship.

The attention and concern created by the high-profile stalking cases has led to state legislation to define stalking and to create criminal penalties for stalking before victims are harmed or killed. In California, the first anti-stalking law was enacted in 1990 in response to Rebecca Schaeffer's death (2), and most states have similar legislation. Stalking legislation differs from state to state, but most define stalking as the "willful, malicious, and repeated following and harassing of another person" (3). This social concern about stalking and the rapid legislative response has provided an impetus for the mental health field to examine the prevalence, types, and etiology of stalking.

Erotomania, first described by Esquirol in 1838, has been identified as the underlying phenomenon to explain some stalking cases (4). Erotomania is characterized as a fixed delusional belief that one is loved by another, usually someone of higher status or power. The DSM-IV (5) includes erotomania as a subtype of delusional disorder, providing further confirmation of its importance. However, most stalkers who are apprehended are not the rare, and dramatic erotomanics but angry ex-spouses or prior associates (2). Zona, Sharma, and Lane (6) identified three subtypes of subjects from a sample of 74 individuals with police records for stalking in Los Angeles: (a) erotomaniac group, with delusional disorder and no actual relationship with the victims; (b) love obsessional group, who have a psychiatric disorder (plus erotomania) in which no actual relationship exists; and (c) simple obsessional group who had a real prior relationship with the victim which has either (a) "gone sour," or (b) resulted in the subject's perception of being mistreated. Surprisingly, only 7 of 74 (10%), stalkers were categorized as erotomanics, while most of the subjects, 35 of 74 (47%), were the simple obsessional stalkers who had some type of prior relationship with the victim.

In order to evaluate the clinical characteristics of stalkers, Meloy and Gothard (7) compared 20 obsessional followers with a group of offenders who were also court referred to the same forensic clinic. Schizophrenia was found to be significantly less common in the obsessional followers group, and antisocial personality was also less frequently found. The obsessional follower group was also significantly more intelligent as determined by IQ, and better educated than the offender group. Fifty-five percent of the victims were not strangers to the stalkers.

Harmon, Rosner, and Owens (8) conducted an archival study in which they divided obsessional harassers by: (a) whether their attachment to the victim was affectionate/amorous or persecutory/angry, and (b) the nature of the prior relationship between them (i.e., personal, professional, employment, media, acquaintance, none, and unknown). Only one comparison was statistically significant, which was that there were significantly more single subjects in the affectionate/amorous group than in the persecutory/angry group. In his recent review, Meloy (9) suggests that the classification system used by Harmon et al. (8) could be simplified by reducing the prior relationship groups into three categories: (a) prior acquaintances, (b) prior sexual intimates, and (c) strangers. He reports that when the subjects are thus regrouped, 58% stalked former acquaintances, 13% stalked former sexual intimates, and 21% stalked strangers.

Finally, Mullen and Pathé (10) described 14 cases of "pathologies of love" in which the subject had stalked the object of their delusional love. Although the authors acknowledge that the majority of stalkers are those who stalk former intimates, these subjects

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were selected on the basis that the relationship between stalker and victim existed “. . . only in fantasy and delusion.” Mullen and Pathé sometimes referred to their subjects as erotomanics, perhaps due to the delusional quality of their attachment to the victims. Nine of the 14 subjects were found to have preexisting psychiatric diagnoses; five had a “pure” pathology of love.

This brief overview of the previous research on stalking demonstrates the nascent level of work in this area. This study is the first to assess stalking in a non-forensic sample. Additionally, until the present study, little attention had been devoted to what may be the most common type of stalking situations, that occurring between former intimates.

Purpose

The present study is the first epidemiological study to: (a) determine the prevalence of stalkers and victims of stalking among college students, (b) determine the prior relationship between stalkers and victims, and (c) identify the strategies most frequently used by victims to cope with being stalked. Data was collected from a sample of 294 college students, and then the procedures were revised and replicated with a new sample of 299 college students.

Method

Subjects

Study I—294 West Virginia University undergraduates were recruited from Spring, 1995 psychology classes to complete an anonymous questionnaire regarding stalking behaviors, 165 females (mean age = 19.1), and 129 males (mean age = 19.2), completed the questionnaires. The data was analyzed by gender and victim status.

Study II—To replicate the results of the first sample, 299 additional subjects completed a revised questionnaire, 153 females (mean age = 19.2), and 146 males (mean age = 19.1), completed the questionnaire.

Measures

Based on the research literature and authors' clinical experience, two questionnaires were developed to assess the frequency of potential stalking behaviors in Study I. Twenty nine behaviors were rated for frequency of occurrence such as “you kept watch on the other's home,” “you secretly followed the other,” “you verbally threatened the other,” or “you waited for the other to catch a glimpse of you” on the stalker survey. The victim survey reworded the items to read “the person kept watch on you,” or “the person verbally threatened you.” The prevalence of stalkers within the sample as determined by the subject's response to the item “Have you ever stalked someone, defined as knowingly, and repeatedly following, harassing, or threatening someone? Yes or No?” This is the legal definition of stalking in West Virginia (11). Similarly, the prevalence of stalking victims was defined as the number of students who answered yes to a corollary item. “Have you ever been stalked, defined as having someone knowingly and repeatedly following harassing or threatening you? Yes or No.”

The type of relationship between stalkers and victims was based on their response to the item “Please rate your level of involvement with this person: stranger, friend, casually dating, going out, seriously dating, living together.”

Based on an item analysis of the questionnaires data from Study I, a shorter, 22 item revised questionnaire was used in Study II. Because the prevalence of students admitting stalking in Study I was so low, Study II focused only on victims of stalking and their strategies for coping with a stalker. Victims of stalking were again defined by their yes response to the question “Have you ever been stalked, defined as having someone knowingly, and repeatedly following, harassing or threatening you?” Fifteen potential coping strategies such as moving, or getting a restraining order were listed. Students chose from the following scale to rate their coping strategies: 0 = never used the strategy, 1 = tried unsuccessfully, 2 = tried with some (but not total) success, 3 = tried, but would not recommend, and 4 = tried and would definitely recommend. Table 3 contains the highest rated coping strategies, based on the mean rating by subjects who had been stalked.

Procedure—Undergraduate students were recruited from psychology courses to complete the anonymous questionnaires. In Study I, each subject answered two forms of the questionnaires: As potential stalkers and as potential victims. In Study II, subjects only completed a revised questionnaire focusing on being a victim of stalking and means of coping with this experience. The questionnaires were separated by gender for all subsequent analyses.

Results

The prevalence of self-defined stalkers and victims among this college sample is summarized in Table 1. Only 3 of 129 (2.3%) males admitted stalking another person and no females self reported stalking. In contrast, 44 of 165 (26.6%) of females and 17 of 129 (14.7%) males reported that they had been stalked. Thus, being stalked is not a rare event, 27% of the sample has had this experience. Study II yielded even slightly higher rates of stalking, 35.2% of females and 18.4% of males. However, admitting to stalking is rare, only 1% of the first sample endorsed the item.

The relationship between victim and stalker is summarized in Table 2. Almost one-half of the females in Study I (47%) and 40% of the females in Study II were stalked by someone they had seriously dated. Males were stalked by a person they had seriously dated 24%. Being stalked by a stranger occurred to fewer than 20% of the males or females across the two samples.

The most frequent strategies for coping with stalking were assessed by the mean ratings for coping behaviors for females and males who had been stalked. As summarized in Table 3, both

TABLE 1—Prevalence of stalking among college students.

Sample I	N	Victims	Stalkers
Total	294	63 (21.4%)	3 (1%)
Female	165	44 (26.6%)	0
Male	129	19 (14.7%)	3 (2.3%)
<i>Sample II</i>			
Total	299	81 (27%)	
Female	153	54 (35.2%)	
Male	146	27 (18.4%)	
<i>Combined</i>			
Total	593	144 (24.2%)	
Female	319	98 (30.7%)	
Male	275	46 (16.7%)	

TABLE 2—*Relationship to the stalker.*

Sample 1	Female	N = 44	Incidents = 55
Stranger	10	18%	
Friend	10	18%	
Casual Date	9	16%	
Serious Date	26	47%	
	Male	N = 19	Incidents = 30
Stranger	5	17%	
Friend	13	43%	
Casual Date	5	17%	
Serious Date	7	24%	
Sample 2	Female	N = 54	Incidents = 62
Stranger	10	16%	
Friend	10	16%	
Casual Date	16	26%	
Serious Date	25	40%	
	Male	N = 27	Incidents = 41
Stranger	7	17%	
Friend	9	22%	
Casual Date	15	37%	
Serious Date	10	24%	

females and males commonly used three of the same four strategies; 1) ignored/hung up phone calls; 2) confronted the stalker, and 3) changed schedule to avoid stalker. Involving the police and magistrate courts were the least used strategies.

Discussion

Based on this survey of approximately 600 undergraduate students, stalking is not a rare phenomenon. Thirty percent of females and 17% of males had been stalked. Only 3 (1%) of the subjects admitted to stalking others, suggesting a strong under-reporting of stalking. Eighty percent of the victims knew the stalker, contrary to the erotomania phenomenon, but consistent with Zona et al.'s (5) results. More females had seriously dated the stalker (43%) than had the males (24%). A few incidents were victims stalked by someone of the same gender and fewer than 20% of victims were stalked by strangers. Therefore, this is both a relatively common experience for undergraduates and usually involves former friends or lovers.

The coping strategies most frequently used by females were: (a) ignore the stalker, (b) confront the stalker, (c) change her schedule in order to avoid the stalker, and (d) carry a spray weapon (i.e., Mace, pepper spray). Males, in contrast: (a) confront the stalker, (b) ignore the stalker, (c) reconcile with the stalker (presuming a prior relationship), and (d) change his schedule in some way to avoid the stalker. Calling the police and the use of restraining orders were endorsed as less frequent strategies. Overall, the students dealt with stalking by changing their social environment and by ignoring the stalker.

Further research on stalkers is needed using a more subtle methodology to identify stalkers. The simple, self-report method yielded so few stalkers in comparison with so many victims. Although 17% of males had been stalked, no females admitted to these behaviors. Defining stalkers from police records (6), or from court referrals to forensic clinics (7,8,10) create a sample of stalkers whose behaviors have caused legal and judicial attention. In the coping strategies survey, very few of the college students resorted

TABLE 3—*Strategies for coping with stalking.*

Females	Rating
1. Ignored/hung up phone calls from stalker	2.44
2. Confronted the stalker	1.75
3. Changed schedule in order to avoid stalker	1.6
4. Carried a repellent spray (Mace, Pepper Spray)	1.59
5. Arranged to have a personal escort at times when you felt in danger	1.46
6. Had someone warn the stalker	1.24
7. Reconciled or "made-up" with the stalker	1.08
8. Called the police	.95
9. Had a restraint/warrant issued against the stalker	.87
10. Carried a whistle or other type of an alarm	.73
Males	
1. Confronted the Stalker	2.37
2. Ignored/hung up on phone calls from stalker	1.93
3. Reconciled and "made up" with stalker	1.46
4. Changed schedule in order to avoid stalker	1.42
5. Had someone warn the stalker	1.34
6. Changed your phone number	.39
7. Moved to a different address	.39
8. Had someone beat the stalker up	.37
9. Carried a gun or knife	.37
10. Called the police	.1
11. Had a restraint/warrant issued against the stalker	.1

0 = never used, 1 = tried, but wasn't effective, 2 = tried with some (not total success), 3 = tried, but wouldn't recommend, 4 = tried, and would definitely recommend.

to legal interventions. Therefore, those who are included in the other research may be more severe, persistent, or dangerous stalkers than college students typically encounter. Perhaps, defining stalking by the behaviors without using the term "stalking" may increase the identification of students who have stalked others. Another strategy could be to study long term relationships and to determine whether any stalking occurred during or after the relationship and then interviewing the other person (stalker) who may still be on campus in an effort to understand the dynamics of relationships and how people cope with their dissolution. Because most college stalking is not by strangers, much more research is needed to understand why some people stalk others they know or dated, and why others do not.

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