

An Investigation of the Psychological Characteristics of Stalkers: Empathy, Problem-Solving, Attachment and Borderline Personality Features

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ABSTRACT: This study examined the psychological characteristics of a sample of self-reported stalkers in comparison with a control group, on measures of empathy, problem-solving skills, attachment, and borderline personality features. Stalkers were identified by their endorsement of specific behavioral items, consistent with a widely adopted definition of stalking, denoting behaviors that: (a) are repeatedly directed toward an identified target; (b) are intrusive and unwanted; and (c) evoke fear in the victim. Stalkers scored significantly higher than controls on measures of insecure attachment and borderline personality features, suggesting that the stalking group demonstrates a general pattern of inadequate interpersonal attachment, has limited abilities to form and maintain appropriate relationships, is emotionally labile and unstable, and experiences ambivalence regarding their interpersonal relationships. Treatment implications are discussed herein.

KEYWORDS: forensic science, stalking, psychological characteristics, forensic psychology

In the past several years, high profile stalking cases, such as the murder of actress Rebecca Shaeffer (in 1989) have resulted in a heightened media interest in the phenomena of stalking. While there is a wealth of anecdotal evidence portrayed in popular print, media, and talk-show circuits, scientific investigation regarding the perpetration and impact of stalking is still in its infancy. Historical accounts indicate that stalking behavior has been identified and recorded as far back as the 19th century. In 1838, De Clérambault (1,2) described individuals experiencing a “delusion of passion,” in which they erroneously perceived themselves to be intimately involved with their victims. However, De Clérambault’s syndrome, presently known as erotomania is believed to account for only an incidental percentage of stalking cases, with the majority of perpetrators being formerly involved with their victims (3,4).

Several epidemiological studies have recently documented the prevalence of stalking behaviors. Fremouw, Westrup, and Pennyacker (5) revealed that in a sample of 600 undergraduates 30% of females and 17% of males reported having been stalked. The Na-

tional Violence Against Women survey, funded by the National Institute of Justice and the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (6) conducted an exploratory investigation of 16,000 people and reported that one out of 12 American women (8%) and one out of 45 American males (2%) had been stalked in their lifetime. The latter study employed a more rigorous definition of stalking by requiring that the victim perceives the stalking as a “credible threat” to his or her well-being or physical integrity.

There is a dearth of research investigating the psychological impact of stalking on victims. In a survey of Australian stalking victims, researchers reported a variety of psychological sequelae associated with stalking, including heightened anxiety, intrusive thoughts, and flashbacks related to the stalking incidents, excessive fatigue, and suicidal ideation. Further, victims reported numerous behavioral changes subsequent to stalking (e.g., increasing security measures and decreasing social interactions, 7). Westrup, Fremouw, Thompson, and Lewis (8) conducted the first empirical examination of the impact of stalking on victims, utilizing objective and standardized instruments. Their results indicated that stalking victims reported significantly more depression, posttraumatic stress, heightened interpersonal sensitivity, and a heightened level of general distress.

The majority of stalking research has concentrated on perpetrator characteristics and has utilized forensic samples of adjudicated stalkers (3,9,10). Researchers have reported a variety of descriptors, such as demographic information, personality features, and clinical variables that appear to be common among court referred stalkers. When compared to a sample of offenders with mental disorders, stalkers presented with different demographic profiles. They tended to be male (between the ages of 35–40), never married or currently divorced, unemployed or underemployed, and better educated (3). The majority of the stalking sample had a prior criminal background and a relatively unstable work history (10).

A study investigating MMPI-2 profiles of three classes of stalkers (misdemeanor, felony, and recidivist) reported that the overall population of stalkers was significantly different than a “typical” forensic population (11). Both felony and recidivist stalkers had MMPI-2 profiles suggesting severe pathology, e.g., clinically significant elevations on Scale 4 (Psychopathic Deviate), Scale 6 (Paranoia), and Scale 8 (Schizophrenia). Notably, the current literature has exclusively examined samples of adjudicated stalkers, despite the available evidence that the vast majority of stalking cases are perpetrated by previous romantic partners (6) and never reported to the local police (8).

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The purpose of the present study was to assess psychological characteristics of stalkers among undergraduates who self-reported stalking behavior, utilizing a sample of stalkers exhibiting less severe and threatening behaviors than what is typically seen in forensic practices. The sample is therefore more representative of most stalking situations. The stalkers will be compared to an undergraduate control group.

This research investigated variables with theoretical relevance to aggressive behavior and stalking (e.g., problem solving skills, empathy, attachment, and borderline personality features). Problem solving skills are crucial to the health and adaptability of intimate relationships, providing the behavioral repertoire to combat inevitable, often reparable interpersonal difficulties. Conversely, the absence of these necessary skills place individuals at greater risk for conflict and potentially aggressive behavior. Researchers have found evidence that poor problem-solving skills are associated with an increased risk for aggressive behavior in children (12), dating relationships (13), and parenting (14). In this study, it was hypothesized that stalkers would demonstrate poorer cognitive flexibility and less developed problem-solving skills than the control group.

Empathy has been defined as possessing the awareness, sensitivity, and vicarious experience of another individual's thoughts and feelings (15) and has been demonstrated to have an inverse relationship with aggressive behavior (16). For example, physically abusive mothers were found to have significantly lower scores on a measure of empathy than their non-abusive comparison group (17). In this study, it was hypothesized that the stalking group would demonstrate significantly less empathy and affective sensitivity than the control group.

Attachment is generally defined as a strong enduring bond, commencing in infancy but expanding to include adult interpersonal relationships. Researchers contend that threatening situations will elicit potentially maladaptive behaviors, designed to preserve the attachment bond between two individuals (18). Previous research has found that stalkers tend to have ambivalent, avoidant, or generally insecure attachment styles (19). Further, Meloy (3) purports that the fundamental deficit observed in stalkers is an inadequate interpersonal attachment. This study hypothesized that the stalking group would demonstrate greater overall insecure attachment, while the control group would score significantly higher on a measure of secure attachment.

Borderline personality functioning is evidenced by impulsivity, lability, uncontrollable anger, and unstable interpersonal relationships. Individuals with borderline personality features may be more prone to aggression, manipulative behavior, and overall interpersonal dysfunction (20). Although previous research has assessed the clinical profiles of stalkers using the MMPI-2 (11), no study to date has investigated the relation between borderline personality characteristics and the perpetration of stalking. In this study, it was hypothesized that stalkers would score significantly higher on a measure of borderline personality functioning than the control group.

Method

Participants

A total of 240 individuals (143 men, mean age = 21.0 years and 97 women, mean age = 19.8 years) served as participants. The sample was drawn from a pool of undergraduates (freshman through seniors) at West Virginia University in Morgantown, WV. Individuals were recruited from undergraduate psychology classes

and were given extra credit for their participation. To meet inclusionary criteria, participants must have had a romantic relationship of three months or longer within the past 18 months. It was not mandatory that they continued in that particular relationship and they may have had other intimate relationships since that time.

The term stalking has been used to describe a class of behaviors and denotes behaviors that: (a) are repeatedly directed toward an identified target; (b) are intrusive and unwanted; and (c) evoke fear in the victim (4). Based on the aforementioned definition and for the purposes of this research, the critical tenet of identifying stalking behavior in the sample was *repetitive*, threatening behaviors. Participants were identified as stalkers by their endorsement of distinctive behavioral items on the Stalking Behavior Checklist (SBC; 21). The SBC is a 25-item self-administered measure of harassing and stalking behaviors, ranging from typical dating behaviors (e.g., calling, writing letters, and sending flowers) to harassing and stalking behaviors (e.g., stealing mail, threatening others, and destroying property). To increase specificity of the SBC, only the 14 most severe, threatening behaviors comprised the stalking scale. To meet criteria for the stalking group, participants must have endorsed one of the 14 threatening behaviors *more than once* or engaged in *more than one* of the stalking behaviors. The SBC was administered twice to assess pre- and post-relationship behaviors. An individual was categorized as a stalker if he or she engaged in stalking behaviors on either the pre- or post-relationship questionnaire.

The "Stalking" group was comprised of a subsample of the entire pool of participants ($n = 240$) and included 12 men and 10 women (9%). It is difficult to determine if this rate of stalking behavior is consistent with prevalence rates in the general population for several reasons. A lack of consensus regarding a definition of stalking and the paucity of research in this area renders an incomplete comprehension of stalking perpetration. However, victim impact research indicates that in a sample of college students, 17% of women and 30% of men reported being stalked (5), suggesting that the participants in this sample may have under reported their stalking behaviors.

Measures

The independent variables in the present study were gender and stalking behaviors, assessed with the SBC. The dependent variables included empathy, problem-solving skills, interpersonal attachment, and borderline personality features. The dependent measures consisted of the following scales: Alternate Uses Test (AUT; 22), Emotional Empathy Questionnaire (EEQ; 23), Attachment Style Inventory (ASI; 24), and the Personality Assessment Inventory-Borderline Scale (PAI-BOR; 25).

Alternate Uses Test—The AUT is an analog behavioral measure of cognitive rigidity and problem-solving ability. Participants are provided with six common objects (i.e., car, shoe, button) and they are instructed to generate as many distinct uses for the object within a 2 min time period as possible. Higher scores indicate greater cognitive flexibility and more developed problem-solving skills.

Emotional Empathy Questionnaire—The EEQ is a 33-item self-report measure of empathy. Respondents indicate their agreement with various items on a 9-point scale, ranging from "very strongly disagree" to "neither agree nor disagree" to "very strongly agree." After reverse-scoring a subset of individual items, higher scores denote greater affective sensitivity and increased empathy.

Attachment Style Inventory—The ASI is a 15-item self-report measure of interpersonal attachment. Respondents endorse “True” or “False” to individual items, yielding three scores: Avoidant, Ambivalent, and Secure Attachment. Higher scores suggest an attachment style more characteristic of that particular scale. For example, a higher Avoidant subscale score provides evidence for difficulty with intimacy, fear of commitment, and few interpersonal relationships. It is also possible to combine the subscales, Avoidant and Ambivalent attachment, yielding an aggregated scale, termed Nonsecure Attachment.

Borderline Scale-Personality Assessment Inventory—The PAI-BOR assessment is a 24-item self-report measure of borderline personality features. The Borderline Scale is one of the 11 clinical scales on the PAI and assesses a borderline level of personality functioning, as evidenced by impulsivity, lability, uncontrollable anger, and unstable interpersonal relationships. The PAI-BOR has been employed in previous research, successfully predicting interpersonal dysfunction and academic difficulties in a sample of young adults meeting the cut-off criteria (20). When employing the PAI-BOR independent of the full PAI, Morey (25) recommends a cut-off score of 38 (t -score = 70), identifying individuals scoring two standard deviations above the mean. The suggested cutoff score was used in this research to compare the personality features of stalking individuals versus controls.

Procedure

Individuals were recruited from undergraduate psychology classes to participate in a study examining interpersonal conflict and resolution in romantic relationships. Interested participants, meeting inclusionary criteria, were encouraged to attend one of several data collection sessions. After providing informed consent, oral, and written instructions were given to participants regarding the completion of the questionnaire packet. The AUT was initially administered. Following, participants completed the self-report measures at their own pace. To preserve anonymity, extra credit slips were provided at the completion of data collection.

Results

A total of 240 surveys were administered to undergraduates. Twenty-two participants, 10 males and 12 females, were identified as exhibiting stalking behaviors and formed the “stalking group.” The control group ($n = 218$) consisted of participants denying stalking behaviors. Univariate ANOVAs were computed to compare participants by stalking and gender on demographic characteristics, problem-solving skills, empathy, attachment styles, and borderline personality features. Due to the discrepancy in the cell sizes of the groups, equality of error variance tests were also computed and confirmed homogeneity of variance for the majority of results provided. The exceptions are noted herein.

Descriptive statistics were computed to determine demographic information for stalking and control groups. One-way Analyses of Variance indicated there was not a significant difference between the two groups for age, relationship history, or current dating situation. The mean age for the stalking group was 20.2 years and the mean age for the control group was 19.6 years. Participants in both stalking and control groups reported similar relationship histories and length of time in current relationships. The stalking and the control groups reported that over the past 18 months, they had exclusively dated their partners, for six months or more (stalkers =

68%, controls = 58%) and reported casually dating at this time (stalkers = 59%, controls = 47%).

Univariate Analyses of Variance were computed for all the dependent variables. Table 1 reports the means and standard deviations for each measure for both the Stalking and the control groups. The most notable results occurred between the stalking and the control groups and these data are provided in Table 1, collapsed across gender.

To assess differences in problem-solving between stalking and control groups and by gender, a 2×2 Analysis of Variance was computed for the AUT. The ANOVA revealed a significant interaction by stalking and gender, $F(1, 236) = 4.286, p < 0.05$, with male controls demonstrating greater cognitive flexibility than did the male stalking group, suggesting more highly developed problem-solving skills. However, the female stalkers scored higher than the female controls, indicating less cognitive rigidity and an improved ability to creatively solve problems. There was no gender or overall differences between the stalkers and the controls on the AUT.

To examine differences in empathy between stalking and control groups and by gender, a 2×2 Analysis of Variance was computed for the EEQ. The ANOVA revealed a main gender effect, $F(1, 236) = 31.98, p < 0.01$, indicating that females exhibited markedly greater affective sensitivity and empathy than did the males in this sample. Again, there was no overall differences between the stalking and the control group. Due to the unequal cell sizes, an equality of variance test was computed and revealed that the variance for this statistical result was not homogeneous. This does not render the results invalid; however, the authors have made interpretations with this information in mind.

To assess differences in interpersonal attachment between stalking and control groups and by gender, four 2×2 Analyses of Variances were computed for Avoidant, Ambivalent, Secure, and Nonsecure attachment scores. The ANOVAs revealed several significant differences between the stalking and control groups. The stalking group scored significantly lower on the ASI, secure attachment scale, $F(1, 236) = 5.306, p < 0.025$. Again, the variance for this test was not homogeneous and, therefore, interpretations were made cautiously. The stalking group scored significantly higher on the ASI, Nonsecure attachment scale, $F(1, 236) = 4.307, p < 0.05$. A significant difference also emerged between stalkers and controls on a measure of ambivalent attachment, $F(1, 236) = 3.273, p < 0.05$, although the variance was not homogenous for this statistical test. There was no significant difference between the two groups on the ASI, Avoidant attachment scale, $F(1, 236) = 1.729, p = 0.09$.

TABLE 1—Psychological characteristics of stalkers.

	Stalkers ($n = 22$)		Controls ($n = 218$)		F
	M	SD	M	SD	
Alternate uses scale	7.23	2.41	7.25	2.91	0.071
Empathy questionnaire	193.18	27.63	194.44	28.22	0.258
Avoidant attachment	2.32	1.36	1.84	1.46	1.729
Ambivalent attachment	2.45	1.63	1.89	1.41	3.273*
Secure attachment	2.68	1.46	3.35	1.22	5.306†
Nonsecure attachment	4.77	2.37	3.73	2.15	4.307†
Borderline scale	36.14	11.35	27.62	10.39	5.152†

* $p < 0.05$.

† $p < 0.025$.

These significant differences suggest that the stalking group demonstrates a general pattern of inadequate interpersonal attachment, has limited abilities to form and maintain appropriate relationships, and tends to simultaneously experience a need for intimacy as well as a need to disengage from others. There were no significant gender or interaction effects on the Attachment scales.

To assess differences on borderline personality functioning between the stalking and control groups by gender, a 2×2 Analysis of Variance was computed for scores on the PAI-BOR scale. The ANOVA revealed a significant difference between stalkers and controls, $F(1, 144) = 5.512, p < 0.025$. This indicates that the stalking group has difficulty sustaining interpersonal relationships, is emotionally unstable and labile, and ambivalent about interactions with others. Furthermore, only 11% of the controls scored above the recommended cut-off for borderline personality features compared with 42% of the stalking group. There were no significant gender or interaction effects on the PAI-BOR scale.

Discussion

Male stalkers demonstrated significantly less developed problem-solving skills and cognitive flexibility than male controls. Inadequate problem-solving skills, or the inability to generate alternative solutions greatly reduces the probability of successful conflict resolution. Poor problem-solving skills have been documented to be associated with an increased risk of aggression in dating relationships (13), children's interpersonal behavior (12), and parenting (14). Lacking the necessary skills to resolve conflict and solve problems, male stalkers are at high risk to behave aggressively toward their victims. However, problem-solving deficits are amenable to treatment. A skills acquisition training approach could potentially ameliorate cognitive rigidity, resulting in more developed conflict resolution strategies. Surprisingly, female stalkers demonstrated better problem-solving skills than female controls. This discrepancy between male and female stalkers suggests that other variables are impacting stalking behavior. While men may stalk as a result of a skills deficit, females' stalking behavior is potentially controlled by other variables, such as learning history. Previous research (5) found that the strategy most employed by male victims of stalking was reconciliation with their female stalkers. Additional research is warranted to address the discrepant function of stalking behavior for men and women.

Stalkers did not demonstrate less empathy and affective sensitivity than the control group. This suggests that stalkers may not necessarily lack the awareness of other individual's thoughts and feelings as expected. Previous research has documented the inverse relation between empathic responding and aggressive behavior (17); however, stalkers, in this sample, were equally aware and sensitive as the control group. Female participants were notably more empathetic than male participants, providing additional evidence that empathy and sensitivity are often gender-based traits.

It has been postulated that a fundamental deficit observed in stalkers is an insecure, inadequate attachment style (3). Stalkers were significantly more avoidant and insecurely attached, while the control group was significantly more securely attached. An insecure attachment bond results in a variety of complications, such as an inherent lack of trust, approach and avoidant behaviors, ambivalence regarding commitment, and an overall dysfunctional approach to interpersonal relationships. Both male and female stalkers reported greater difficulty with dependency, trust, abandonment, and security issues. Attachment is viewed as an enduring bond, commencing in infancy, but subsequently expanding to adult relationships

(18). As a result, it is often viewed as characterological and less impacted by intervention. However, there are facets of attachment, such as dependency and trust that are likely improved by treatment.

Stalkers demonstrated significantly more borderline personality features than did the control group, with 43% of the stalking group scoring above the recommended criterion for a diagnosis of borderline personality disorder (compared with 11% of the control group). Individuals with borderline personality functioning are more likely to be aggressive, emotionally labile, unstable, and manipulative (20). As a result, borderline personality functioning further exacerbates the cognitive and interpersonal deficiencies evidenced by stalkers. Although borderline personality features have traditionally been viewed as intractable, anecdotal clinical accounts suggest that this dysfunctional interpersonal style can be attenuated with treatment.

These findings may have important implications for the treatment of stalking behaviors, as mentioned above. Further, this research is the first to date assessing characteristics of non-adjudicated stalkers, resulting in a more representative sample. An important caveat, however, is the use of a convenient, college student sample. Participants in this study were entirely comprised of volunteer college students. As a result, it is difficult to generalize these findings to individuals outside the university setting or beyond the parameters of participants in this study. Moreover, social desirability and the self-report bias impact respondents' behavior, specifically when the assessed behavior is illegal or socially unacceptable. The desire to respond favorably may have inhibited some participants from accurate reporting. Future research could address these deficits by including representative samples (e.g., stalkers in the community at large) and employing assessment measures that are less vulnerable to reporting bias, such as traditional assessment measures with validity indexes or observational methods of assessment. Additionally, the inclusion of a social desirability scale, such as the Edwards Social Desirability Scale (26) would be an important addition to future investigations. This measure allows researchers to assess and control a participant's tendency towards responding in the desirable direction.

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