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## Stalking Following the Breakup of Romantic Relationships: Characteristics of Stalking Former Partners

**ABSTRACT:** This study investigated female experiences of stalking by former partners following the dissolution of heterosexual romantic relationships. It aimed to identify those characteristics of former partners that were associated with stalking as opposed to other post-relationship experiences of minor harassment or no-harassment. Three hundred and five female undergraduates (all had experienced dissolution of a heterosexual relationship) completed a 48-item questionnaire. This assessed characteristics of participants, former partners, and experiences of harassment following the relationship. One hundred and five (34.4%) participants were classified as stalking victims; ninety-eight (32.1%) as suffering harassment, and 102 (33.4%) as experiencing no-harassment. No differences were found between the three groups in demographic characteristics of participants or former partners. Stalking former partners were most likely to have: a history of substance use (alcohol and/or drugs); criminal involvement; violence; mental health problems; difficulties in forming relationships; reacting with inappropriate emotion and jealousy and suspiciousness of the participant's relationships with others. These results add to an emerging profile of former partners who are likely to engage in stalking following the dissolution of romantic relationships. The findings are also consistent with explanations of stalking behavior that stress the etiological importance of attachment difficulties (45).

**KEYWORDS:** forensic science, forensic psychology, stalking, stalker characteristics, failed romantic relationships

The term *stalking* has become the label for a pattern of persistent pursuit and intrusive behavior directed by one person towards another that often continues for several months or even years (1–4). Stalking is a significant social problem. Prevalence studies using community samples have found relatively high rates of victimization. In the USA (5) a conservative prevalence rate for stalking of 8% for females and 2% for males has been found and higher rates have been found in other Western countries (6,7). Stalking of ex-partners appears to be the most common form of stalking (3,5,8–11), and ex-partners who stalk are more likely than strangers or acquaintances to act violently towards their victims (12–16). Increased knowledge of this type of stalking is therefore likely to be useful in designing relevant social policy and in the prevention of violence against women. This study was concerned with stalking by males of females following the breakup of romantic relationships. Of particular interest were the characteristics of participants and their former partners that were associated with stalking and which differentiated stalking from other possible relationship outcomes.

There are a number of possible outcomes of failed intimate relationships that can be related to the degree one partner attempts to maintain contact that is unwanted by the other (17). In this regard, there appears to be a continuum ranging from a “harassment free relationship breakup” through a breakup followed by “harassment” to “stalking” (3). Previous research has examined the characteristics of individuals and relationships that end in stalking (17,18), but only the studies by Coleman (17) and Fremouw et al. (18) have explicitly compared these characteristics with those of the other pos-

sible failed relationship outcomes. Research of this type is necessary because, in the absence of these comparisons, it remains unclear the extent to which characteristics apparently related to stalking are specific to stalking. In addition, such research will enable the consideration of the characteristics of former partners that predict and differentiate between each outcome. This study attempted to address this by identifying those characteristics that were significant correlates of and differentiated between “stalking,” “harassment,” and “harassment free” relationship outcomes.

One of the difficulties for studies of stalking is that there is as yet no agreed definition of stalking (19). Indeed, one of the problems is that many of the common behaviors carried out by stalkers can be considered to be routine or even harmless (19). Consider, for example, some of the more common stalking behaviors such as making telephone calls, sending e-mails, sending letters and gifts (20). Most of these behaviors are socially acceptable activities; it is only when they are unwanted and form a persistent pattern that they become more sinister, especially if the victim suffers fear and distress as a result. All definitions of stalking, therefore, stress the persistent, unwanted, and fear-inducing nature of the behaviors (3). For the purposes of this study, the definition proposed by Mullen and colleagues (14,21) was used. Within this definition, behavior is classed as stalking only when it involves at least ten separate intrusions and/or communications and continues for a period of at least four weeks. This definition of stalking has a number of advantages; because it relies upon observable behavior, it can be easily operationalized. Similarly, the conservative nature of this definition is likely to ensure that behavior meeting the criteria for stalking represents a long-term pattern of intrusion and pursuit rather than merely shorter-term innocuous or irritating behavior.

The definition of stalking used here differs from those used in similar studies such as Coleman (17) or Lewis et al. (18). Cole-

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man's definition of stalking focused specifically upon the presence of fear-inducing threats and victim-perceived malicious intent of the stalker, while harassment was regarded as unwanted attention without fear or malicious intent (17). The present study did not make threats and malicious intent central to the definition of stalking used. It is argued that explicit threats or perceived maliciousness, while undoubtedly inducing fear in the victim, are not strictly necessary for a set of behaviors to be called stalking. This is suggested because many innocuous behaviors that do not include explicit threats, such as sending gifts, making telephone calls, etc., may in themselves become threatening and induce fear if repeated on a number of occasions (22). Hence, for the present study any one or combination of a number of harassing behaviors (including threats) if carried out repeatedly and causing fear in the victim would be enough to constitute stalking. Harassment in this study was defined as unwanted attention that did not achieve Mullen et al.'s (14,21) criteria for stalking.

Much previous research into the characteristics of stalking perpetrators has been carried out using forensic populations of stalkers, and, as such, it may not be possible to generalize the results to all stalkers (19,23). It is noteworthy that the criminal justice system may become aware of only the minority of stalking incidents. It seems that only about one third of victims actually report their victimization to the police (6,24). Therefore, forensic samples may contain a highly selected sub-sample of all stalkers, with the result that the prevalence of various characteristics may be artificially inflated relative to non-forensic samples. It would not be surprising if those individuals requested by courts to undergo forensic evaluation were most likely to exhibit various psychological problems, be more violent, or have the most extensive criminal histories (3). Studies that consider stalking in non-forensic populations to generalize findings are needed. Similarly, studies that seek to identify those characteristics most associated with stalking in non-forensic samples are important in attempting to identify and prevent stalking behavior. The present study attempted to address these issues.

The non-forensic participant sample in this study consisted of female undergraduate students. This is an approach that has been used in previous research on stalking (17,18,25–28). This sample was chosen for a number of reasons. Female students are one of the groups most likely to have experienced stalking by a former partner (6,17,25,26), and so their use maximizes the likelihood of obtaining a sample of stalking victims. Also, while it is recognized that students present a potential problem for the generalizability of the results given their restricted demographic characteristics (17,23), it is argued that obtaining a representative sample of the population was less important than controlling for potential confounding variables. Students provide a good participant sample in this regard, as they are relatively homogeneous as to social class, level of intelligence, educational attainment, and age. If findings similar to those with forensic patients were found with a student sample, this would serve to add to the generalizability of these findings.

The present study stipulated the minimum duration of the romantic relationships. Following Lewis et al. (18), a romantic relationship was defined as one that lasted for a minimum of three months; this was selected so as to eliminate short-term relationships and casual dates from consideration.

Previous research has found great difficulties in identifying and obtaining information from community samples of stalkers, as individuals appear to be reluctant to admit this activity (25). It is, however, possible to obtain information about stalker characteristics indirectly by questioning their victims (17,26,27). In the con-

text of failed romantic relationships, it is argued that most individuals should be able to shed some light onto the characteristics and background of their former romantic partner regardless of the outcome of their relationship. Hence, data concerning former partners were based upon the responses of the participants, although this is also a limitation of the study.

#### *Characteristics of Stalking Victims*

Studies that have compared stalking victims with non-victims have generally failed to find differences between them. Bjerregaard (16) compared student stalking victims and non-victims and found no differences between them in terms of age, education level, household income, and marital status. Similarly, Coleman (17), in a study that compared the demographic characteristics of stalking victims to those who experienced other outcomes following the end of an interpersonal relationship (harassment and no-harassment), found no differences in age, race, and mothers' and fathers' level of education. It is possible that the results of both these studies were due to the use of undergraduate students, since they exhibit a relatively narrow range of demographic characteristics (16,17). Given the general lack of differences found in the literature between stalking victims and non-victims, no specific hypotheses were made concerning the characteristics of the victims in this study.

#### *Characteristics of Stalking Perpetrators*

There appears to be no single demographic profile of stalkers (3). Indeed, the only consistent finding is that men are more likely than women to be stalkers (1,2,4,29). Due to the inconsistent findings of previous research, this study made no specific hypotheses concerning the demographic characteristics of the participant's former partners.

#### *Criminal Background*

Studies have found that a high proportion of those convicted of stalking-related offences have a history of involvement in other criminal activities, and many have a history of violent behavior (1,2,12,29–32). It was hypothesized that participants adjudged to be victims of stalking would be most likely to report that their former partner had a history of criminal involvement and violent behavior.

#### *Substance Abuse*

Substance abuse has been found to be relatively common among stalkers, although there is some variation in the results between studies. Estimates of the prevalence of substance abuse in forensic samples of stalkers range from 2% (29) to 70% (1). Burgess et al. (33) found that substance abuse was more common among stalkers compared to other groups of offenders, while other studies have found no differences with other types of offender (1,32,34,35). Stalking victimization of former romantic partners has been found to be associated with frequent alcohol use by the stalker (26). It was hypothesized that participants adjudged to be victims of stalking would be most likely to report that their former partner had a history of non-prescription drug use and frequent and excessive alcohol use.

#### *Mental Health*

Studies have attempted to assess the prevalence of mental illness and psychological disorders within samples of stalkers (23). A

study by the Canadian Department of Justice (31) examined the records of offenders charged under Canada's anti-stalking legislation and found that 14% ( $N = 601$ ) had a history of "mental health problems," although the nature of these was not specified. Other research has attempted to identify the prevalence of specific disorders in stalker samples. The most common disorders present within stalker samples appear to be schizophrenia (2,12,29,34), mood disorders such as dysthymia, major depression or bipolar disorder (1,2,12,34,35), and personality disorders in particular Cluster B personality disorders (antisocial, histrionic, borderline, and narcissistic personality disorders (36)). It appears that stalker samples show a raised incidence of various forms of mental health problems, although by no means do all stalkers suffer such problems (10). On the basis of this research, it was hypothesized that participants adjudged to be victims of stalking would be most likely to report that their former partner had a history of various mental health problems.

### *Social Skills*

Stalkers have been found to score higher on measures of insecure attachment and borderline personality features (18). Lewis et al. (18) suggested that stalkers would be likely to exhibit a general pattern of inadequate interpersonal attachments, were more likely to have difficulty in forming and maintaining relationships, were likely to be emotionally labile and unstable, and would be most likely to experience ambivalence regarding their interpersonal relationships. Therefore, within the present study it was hypothesized that participants adjudged to be victims of stalking would be most likely to report that their former partner had difficulty forming relationships with others, and that their former partners frequently reacted with inappropriate emotion.

### *Jealousy*

Jealousy has been found to be a common characteristic of stalkers (3,37). A number of stalking victims, particularly those stalked by ex-partners, describe how their relationship with the stalker was characterized by a history of jealousy-related behaviors such as being checked up, cross-examined, and accused (3,27,38). White and Mullen (39) argue that jealousy most commonly appears in the context of a relationship that is threatened, and it serves to intensify the concern and increases the contact the jealous person has with their partner (40,41). Indeed, anger and jealousy have been found to commonly occur within stalkers who stalk former intimates (42). Therefore, it was hypothesized that participants adjudged to be victims of stalking would be most likely to report that their former partner was jealous and suspicious of their relationships with others.

## **Method**

### *Participants*

A non-random sample of convenience consisting of 307 female undergraduate students drawn from the School of Social Sciences at the University of Teesside acted as participants in this study. In order to meet the selection criteria, participants had to have been involved in a heterosexual romantic relationship that had ended and had lasted for a minimum of three months. Data from two participants were eliminated since the participants reported same sex former partners. Thus, the experimental sample consisted of 305 participants. The mean age of the sample was 24.63 (standard deviation = 6.17 years). All of the participants classified them-

selves as white and of British nationality. Within the sample as a whole, the mean duration of the relationships was 25.76 months (standard deviation = 24.56 months).

Stalking was defined according to the definition produced by Mullen and his colleagues (14,21). It was operationalized by requiring participants to indicate whether they had experienced any unwanted attention following the end of a prior relationship; to indicate which and how often they experienced a number of harassing behaviors following the termination of the relationship (harassment checklist), and whether the harassment caused them to experience fear. For the participant to be included in the "stalked" group, they had to satisfy all four of the criteria below:

1. Any attention from their previous partner following the end of the relationship was unwanted.
2. The unwanted attention had to have lasted for at least one month.
3. There had to have been at least ten separate instances of unwanted attention.
4. The unwanted attention had to induce fear within the participant.

Participants who experienced unwanted attention, but whose experiences failed to meet all of the other criteria were placed into the harassed group. Those participants who did not experience any unwanted attention were placed in the no-harassment group. Within the sample 34.4% ( $N = 105$ ) met the criteria for stalking victimization; this is consistent with previous research using female undergraduate samples (16,25). 32.1% ( $N = 98$ ) were judged to have been harassed by their former partner, and 33.4% ( $N = 102$ ) were judged to have experienced no harassment.

### *Materials*

Participants were presented with a 48-item questionnaire. The questionnaire was divided into several sections designed to obtain information about participant's experiences following the breakup of a romantic relationship, the demographic characteristics of the participant and their former partner, and other details concerning the background of the former partner.

Before starting the questionnaire proper, participants answered a screening question. The purpose of this question was to identify those participants who had experienced unwanted attention following a failed relationship and those who had not. All participants were required to base their responses to the remainder of the questionnaire upon the most recent failed relationship they had experienced. Those who answered in the affirmative to the screening question were asked to base their answers upon the most recent relationship they had experienced that ended in unwanted attention.

Section 1 of the questionnaire began with a control question, which asked for the sex of the former partner. This question allowed the identification of participants with same sex former partners whose data were eliminated from further analysis. This was followed by ten items, which asked the participants to consider various characteristics of their former partners. These included the former partner's age at the start and end of the relationship and their race. Using a yes-no response format the remaining questions in Section 1 asked participants whether their former partner had a history of alcohol use, non-prescription drug use, mental health problems, criminal convictions, violence, difficulty in forming relationships with others, and reacting with inappropriate emotion. Participants were also asked whether the former partner was jealous or suspiciousness of their relationships with others.

Section 2 of the questionnaire asked participants to report various biographical details about themselves including their sex, current age, age at the start and end of the relationship, race, and the duration of the relationship.

Section 3 of the questionnaire consisted of 27 items. The first item asked participants if they had ever experienced fear because of their former partner's behavior following the end of the relationship. The next 25 items made up a Harassment Behavior Checklist (HBC) designed to operationalize the definition of stalking (14,21) used in this study. The HBC was a self-report checklist describing various harassing behaviors that a participant may have experienced following the end of the relationship. Participants were required to indicate, using a yes-no response format, which of the behaviors they had experienced. For each item responded to in the affirmative, participants were then asked to estimate the approximate number of separate occurrences of the behavior they had experienced. The behaviors described were taken from the Stalking Behavior Checklist (SBC; 17). The SBC was designed to examine experiences of various behaviors occurring after the breakup of a relationship including common dating behaviors such as receiving letters, telephone calls, and gifts through to more overtly aggressive behavior such as stealing mail, issuing threats, and destroying property. The SBC uses a 6-point Likert-type scale, anchored by never through to once per day or more (17) to estimate the frequency of the various behaviors. The SBC response format differs from that used by the Harassment Behavior Checklist (HBC) in this study. There are several reasons for this difference. It was felt that the response format of the SBC did not allow adequate judgments to be made regarding the frequency of harassing behaviors. For example, it is possible for participants with very different experiences to give the same response to a given item—a response of once per day or more could equally be given by someone who had experienced a behavior once per day as well as someone who had experienced the same behavior ten times per day. The format of the HBC allows Mullen et al.'s criteria for stalking to be operationalized as it directly assesses the number and frequency of harassing behaviors. The yes-no format of the HBC was used to maintain consistency in the response format with the questionnaire as a whole. The final item on the questionnaire asked participants to estimate how long any unwanted attention continued.

### Procedure

This study was carried out in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the British Psychological Society. Participants were first contacted during undergraduate lectures at the University of Teesside. They were informed that the experimenter was carrying out research into their experiences after romantic relationships that had ended and of the selection criteria for the study. Those who were interested in taking part and met the selection criteria were invited to remain in the lecture theatre. Participants were then presented with the questionnaire and were allowed to examine it and

to ask any questions. They were informed that all responses were anonymous and that their data would be treated as confidential. They were then allowed to take away the questionnaire and asked to fill it out in their own time. Completed questionnaires were to be returned to a sealed box located in the reception area of the Social Sciences building of the University of Teesside.

### Results

#### *Duration of Relationships, Duration of Unwanted Attention, and Number of Separate Incidents of Unwanted Attention*

Table 1 shows the mean duration of the relationships, mean duration of the unwanted attention, and the mean number of separate harassing incidents reported by the participants. Differences between the groups with respect to the duration and number of separate incidents of unwanted attention are largely a product of the method by which group membership was allocated. It is interesting to note, however, that both the stalked and harassed participants were subject to unwanted attention that lasted for over a year on average. The stalked group appears to have suffered a substantial number of separate harassing behaviors.

Relationships ending in stalking appeared to be of longer duration than other relationship outcomes. One-way analysis of variance revealed a statistically significant effect of group membership upon duration of relationship ( $F(2,304) = 6341.68; p < 0.001$ ). Post hoc analysis using the Scheffe procedure with alpha set at 0.05 revealed that the duration of the stalked relationships was significantly longer than those of harassed or no-harassment outcomes, while harassed and non-harassed relationship outcomes were not significantly different from each other.

#### **Demographic Characteristics of Participants and Former Partners**

##### *Race of Participants and Former Partners*

All participants classed themselves and their former partners as being white. This rendered analysis of the racial characteristics of the participants redundant.

##### *Age-Related Characteristics*

Table 2 presents the age-related demographic characteristics of the sample. The current age means were similar to those obtained by Coleman (17). In general, the age-related means were similar for each of the participant groups. Difference in age between former partners and the participants was calculated by subtracting the "age of the participant at the start of the relationship" from the "age of the former partner at the start of the relationship." The positive values for the difference in age reveal that on average former partners were older than the participants were. The difference in age for the stalked group appears to be greater than for the two other groups.

TABLE 1—Mean duration of relationships, unwanted attention, and number of separate incidents of unwanted attention.

	Stalked	Harassed	No-Harassment	Whole Sample
Duration of relationship (months)	34.64* (29.21)	21.47 (21.57)	20.73 (19.11)	25.76 (24.56)
Duration of unwanted attention (months)	19.51 (20.23)	12.17 (20.93)	0 (0)	10.67 (18.58)
Number of separate incidents of unwanted attention	51.33 (55.68)	4.01 (2.37)	0 (0)	24.40 (36.17)

\* Indicates statistically significant effect of relationship type on duration of relationship ( $F(2,304) = 6341.68; p < 0.001$ ).

TABLE 2—Age-related characteristics of the participants (mean ages in years, standard deviation in brackets).

	Stalked	Harassed	No-Harassment	Whole Sample
Participants				
Current age	24.89 (6.68)	24.78 (5.81)	23.63 (5.95)	24.43 (6.17)
Age at start of relationship	20.59 (5.66)	21.44 (5.76)	21.09 (5.40)	21.03 (5.60)
Age at end of relationship	23.06 (6.01)	23.31 (6.93)	22.69 (5.91)	23.01 (5.97)
Former Partners				
Age at start of relationship	22.21 (5.46)	22.36 (5.66)	22.02 (5.52)	22.2 (5.53)
Age at end of relationship	25.18 (5.70)	24.04 (5.53)	23.74 (5.92)	24.33 (5.73)
Age Difference				
Age difference between partners	1.63 (4.05)	0.91 (4.85)	0.93 (7.02)	1.17 (5.44)

(Calculated by subtracting participants from former partners age at the start of the relationship.)

TABLE 3—Distribution of former partner characteristics by relationship outcome.

Former Partner Characteristics	Stalked (N = 105)	Harassed (N = 98)	No-Harassment (N = 102)	Overall Percentage Exhibiting Characteristic	$\chi^2$	p
Frequent alcohol use	55% (82)	40% (60)	5% (8)	49% (150)	110.55	<0.001
Frequent non-prescription drug use	65% (81)	30% (37)	5% (7)	41% (125)	106.28	<0.001
Mental health problems	51% (21)	37% (15)	12% (5)	13% (41)	11.32	<0.001
Criminal convictions	46% (24)	40% (21)	14% (7)	17% (52)	11.32	<.01
Violence	86% (86)	8% (8)	6% (6)	33% (100)	175.45	<0.001
Difficulty in forming relationships	73% (30)	24% (10)	3% (1)	13% (41)	35.15	<0.001
Frequently reacting with inappropriate emotion	73% (90)	17% (21)	10% (13)	41% (124)	136.31	<0.001
Jealous of relationships with others	49% (98)	38% (80)	13% (27)	67% (205)	118.57	<0.001
Suspicious of relationship with others	51% (96)	41% (78)	7% (14)	62% (188)	47.08	<0.001

Note: Total sample size = 305, Pearson  $\chi^2$  statistic was used and  $df = 2$  in all cases. The numbers in brackets in columns 2–4 represent the n numbers for each cell.

The percentages in columns 2–4 represent the number of former partners within a subgroup exhibiting a particular characteristic (n) relative to the total number of participants within the sample as a whole who exhibited that characteristic.

To explore differences between the stalked, harassed, and no-harassment groups, the age-related demographic data were subject to analysis using multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA). MANOVA revealed a statistically significant multivariate effect ( $F(10,598) = 4.77$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ). However, follow-up univariate analysis of variance revealed that there were no statistically significant effects of participant group (stalked; harassed; no-harassment) upon the age-related demographic characteristics.

#### Former Partner Characteristics

Table 3 summarizes the responses of participants concerning the various characteristics of their former partners. Support was found for all of the experimental hypotheses.

A minority of former partners was reported to have frequently used alcohol to excess (49%; 150/305). The majority of these were from the stalked group (55%), followed by the harassed group (40%), and the no-harassment group (5%). Data analysis using Pearson's Chi squared revealed a statistically significant relationship between group membership and frequent alcohol use ( $\chi^2 = 110.55$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

A minority of former partners was reported to have a history of frequent non-prescription drug use (41%; 125/305). The majority

of these were from the stalked group (65%), followed by the harassed group (30%), and the no-harassment group (5%). Data analysis using Pearson's Chi squared revealed a statistically significant relationship between group membership and frequent non-prescription drug use ( $\chi^2 = 106.28$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

A minority of former partners was reported to have suffered from mental health problems (41/305; 13.4%). Of those suffering from mental health problems, most were from the stalked group (51.2%), followed by the harassed group (37%), and the no-harassment group (13%). Data analysis using Pearson's Chi squared revealed a statistically significant relationship between group membership and mental health problems ( $\chi^2 = 11.32$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

A minority of former partners was reported as having criminal convictions (52/305; 17%). The majority of these (46%) were from the stalked group followed by the harassed group (40%), then the no-harassment group (17%). Data analysis using Pearson's Chi squared revealed a statistically significant relationship between group membership and former partner's criminal history ( $\chi^2 = 11.32$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ).

A minority of former partners was reported to have a history of violence (100/305; 33%). The majority of these (86%) were from the stalked group followed by the harassed group (8%), then the no-

harassment group (6%). Data analysis using Pearson's Chi squared revealed a statistically significant relationship between group membership and the former partner's criminal history ( $\chi^2 = 175.42$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

A minority of former partners was reported as experiencing difficulty in forming relationships (41/305; 13.4%). The majority of these were from the stalked group (73.2%) followed by harassed group (28.4%), then the no-harassment group (2.4%). Data analysis using Pearson's Chi squared revealed a statistically significant relationship between group membership and the former partner's experiencing difficulty forming relationships ( $\chi^2 = 35.15$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

A minority of former partners was reported as frequently reacting with inappropriate emotion (124/305; 40.7%); the majority of these (72.6%) were from the stalked group followed by harassed group (16.9%), then the no-harassment group (10.5%). Data analysis using Pearson's Chi squared revealed a statistically significant relationship between group membership and the former partner reacting with inappropriate emotion ( $\chi^2 = 136.31$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

The majority of former partners was reported as being jealous of participant's relationships with others (205/305; 67%); the majority of these (49.6%) were from the stalked group followed by harassed group (38%), then the no-harassment group (13%). Data analysis using Pearson's Chi squared revealed a statistically significant relationship between group membership and the former partner being jealous of participants' relationships with others ( $\chi^2 = 118.57$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

The majority of former partners was reported as being suspicious of participant's relationships with others (188/305; 62%), the majority of these (51%) were from the stalked group followed by harassed group (41%), then the no-harassment group (7%). Data analysis using Pearson's Chi squared revealed a statistically significant relationship between group membership and the former partner being suspicious of the participant's relationships with others ( $\chi^2 = 47.08$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

## Discussion

Approximately 34% of the sample could be classified as having suffered stalking victimization. A further 32% suffered harassment from their former partner. This is a surprising finding given that this study used a particularly strict criterion to define stalking of ten separate incidents of unwanted attention occurring for at least four weeks (14,21). This finding is consistent with prevalence rates identified by other studies of undergraduate students (25). The current findings add further to the growing evidence that stalking victimization is particularly common among female student populations (6,10,25,26).

No clear demographic profile for the victims or perpetrators of stalking in age-related characteristics were found. These findings were consistent with other research (10,17). Age-related criteria are of limited value in attempting to differentiate between relationships that result in stalking, harassment, or no-harassment, although age effects may have been masked by the relatively restricted age range of the participant sample.

The duration of the relationship did appear to differentiate between the three relationship outcomes, with relationships ending in stalking being generally longer and relationships ending with harassment and no-harassment relationships being shorter and of similar duration. The reason for this finding is not clear. Previous research has reported a range of different relationship durations associated with stalking (3,10,42), although relationship duration has seldom been compared for different relationship outcomes as

in this study. It is possible that relationships of longer duration give rise to more intense attachments between the respective partners than do shorter relationships. When such relationships end, they may be accompanied by a greater sense of loss, anger, or frustration, which may stimulate one partner to maintain (unwanted) contact with the other. This is an area for further research.

Support was obtained for all the hypotheses related to the characteristics of former partners. Former partners of stalking victims were more likely to have a history of criminal involvement, violent behavior, frequent drug use, frequent excessive alcohol use, mental health problems, difficulty in forming relationships with others, inappropriate emotional responses, and jealousy and suspiciousness of their partner's relationships with others. This over-representation of stalkers in groups with these various characteristics is consistent with research that has been carried out with forensic samples (3). Therefore, some of the characteristics of stalkers identified in forensic samples do appear to generalize to non-forensic groups.

The reported incidence of the various former partner characteristics was not particularly high. For the sample as a whole ( $N = 305$ ), the incidence of any one characteristic was greater than 50% only for jealousy (67%) and suspiciousness of the participant's relationships with others (62%). For other characteristics, the highest incidence was frequent excess alcohol use (49%), while the lowest incidence was for mental health problems (13%). These generally low incidence levels are likely to reflect the relatively low incidence of many of these characteristics within the general population.

Given the low incidence rates of these characteristics within the sample as a whole, it is important to examine which, if any of them, were particularly common characteristics of the stalking as compared with the other types of former partners. The data were examined to identify those characteristics attributed to the majority of former partners within each relationship outcome (defined as characteristics with an incidence of greater than 50% within each group).

Six former-partner characteristics were identified that were attributed to the majority of the stalkers. These were jealousy (93%; 98/105) and suspiciousness (91%; 96/105) of the participant's relationships with others; frequent excess alcohol use (78%; 82/105); frequent non-prescription drug use (77%; 81/105); a history of violent behavior (82%; 86/105); and reacting with inappropriate emotion (86%; 90/105). These findings are consistent with previous research carried out with both forensic and non-forensic samples (1,2,12,18,26,29–32,43,44,45).

Former partners from relationships ending in harassment also exhibited a high incidence of two of these characteristics, jealousy (82%; 8/98) and suspiciousness (80%; 78/98) of relationships with others, while none of the characteristics were attributed to the majority of no-harassment partners. The high incidence of jealousy and suspiciousness for both the stalking and harassing former partners suggests that these are common characteristics of partners who indulge in some form of post-relationship harassment, of which stalking is perhaps an extreme example. This finding is consistent with previous research stressing the importance of these characteristics in the aetiology of stalking and harassment (3,27,37–39,44).

Meloy (46) hypothesized that the fundamental deficit in stalking and harassment is an insecure attachment style resulting from pathological early attachments. Although this study has not explicitly assessed the attachment style of the participants, it is argued that the present findings are consistent with this view. Bowlby (47) defined

attachment as a strong enduring affectional bond between individuals. Initially attachments develop during childhood and are between parent and child; attachment behavior, however, persists throughout the lifespan, and so in later life attachments are also formed between adults (47,48). Bowlby (47) argued that stable early attachments contributed to an individual's healthy development; however, pathological early attachment patterns often lead to various maladaptive personality traits and various forms of psychopathology (49). Situations perceived to be threats to the existence of a relationship elicit various so-called attachment behaviors that are designed to safeguard the bond between two individuals (47). There are various individual differences in attachment behaviors, and some individuals exhibit maladaptive attachment styles resulting from a pathological attachment history (46,47). Of particular interest in the context of stalking are individuals with an insecure attachment style (46). Such individuals have a tendency to exhibit maladaptive attachment behaviors in the context of interpersonal relationships such as a lack of trust, jealousy, and suspiciousness of a partner (18).

The present study found evidence of maladaptive attachment behavior consistent with an insecure attachment style for the stalking and harassing former partners; this was in the form of jealousy and suspiciousness. These findings are, therefore, suggestive of an association between insecure attachment style and harassment of a former partner, consistent with Meloy's (46) hypothesis. A pathological attachment history may also be an explanation for other findings of this study. The majority of stalking former partners exhibited a history of non-prescription drug use, frequent excess alcohol use, violence, and reacting with inappropriate emotion. In previous research, these behaviors have been found associated with a pathological attachment history (49, 50). Therefore, it may be the case that various forms of anti-social behavior, including harassment and stalking of a former partner, are a product of a pathological attachment history (46,49).

It is interesting to consider how attachment history may impact upon future relationship behavior including stalking and harassment. Bowlby (51) argued that individuals develop cognitive schema that he termed working models of the attachment figure (who they are, where they are, their expected responses) and of themselves (perception of how acceptable or unacceptable they are to the attachment figure). Bretherton (52) argued that the nature of the attachment between caregiver and child directly affects the contents of the working models. Secure attachments in which the caregiver is responsive to the child's needs for comfort and protection while allowing the child to independently explore the environment give rise to a working model of the self as valued and self-reliant. Pathological attachment patterns where the caregiver consistently fails to meet the child's needs for comfort and independence give rise to working models of the self as incompetent and unworthy of the attachment figure. An individual who feels unworthy and incompetent might be expected to have difficulties forming and maintaining future interpersonal relationships. Within a relationship, such an individual may experience regular feelings that the relationship may be under threat, perhaps because they feel unworthy of their partner. One tangible source of threat to the relationship may be other individuals. Jealousy and suspiciousness may be characterized as maladaptive attachment behaviors deployed in response to the perception of threat and designed to maintain the relationship (47). Such behaviors are likely to be deployed by those with pathological attachment histories (47). Feelings and behaviors indicative of suspiciousness and jealousy of a partner's relationships with others might therefore be a common feature of the relationship. Strong emotional reactions resulting from perceived

threats to the relationship may also be evident and would perhaps be experienced by the other partner as inappropriate emotional reactions. If the relationship ends, the feelings of incompetence and unworthiness may be compounded within an individual. In some cases, this may lead them to attempt to contact the former partner with the aim of maintaining proximity to the former attachment figure and of restarting the relationship (53). If these contacts are repetitive, continue for some time, and are unwanted by the former partner, they may be classed as harassment or even stalking. This model might, therefore, explain why former partners of stalkers report experiencing jealousy, suspiciousness, and inappropriate emotional reactions from their partner during the relationship.

There are a number of issues with the design of this study that merit consideration. The generalizability of the findings is limited as the participant sample consisted exclusively of white female undergraduate students who had heterosexual relationships with white males. None of the participants were involved in marital relationships. While there were a number of advantages in using this sample as discussed previously, they represented a narrow range of demographic characteristics. In some ways this may account for the lack of differentiation in the demographic characteristics between the three participant groups. It is also likely to account for the relatively low incidence of some of the relationship and former partner characteristics.

The data rely upon the self-reports of participants. This may be subject to various biases, which may impact upon the validity of the results. The information in this study was obtained retrospectively. Therefore, faulty recall is problematic in this type of design. Some participants may have inaccurately recalled or even forgotten aspects of their relationship or their former partner, especially if the relationship occurred some years previously. Different results may have been obtained using a prospective study of the breakup of dating relationships.

There is an inherent potential for bias in asking participants to consider relationships for which they experienced unwanted attention from a former partner. If this attention provoked fear and anger, there may be a bias against the former partner, which could result in exaggerated and overtly negative responses.

This study did not examine marital relationships, relationships between same-sex partners, or partners of different races. Future studies might consider stalking in relationships between same sex and mixed race partners, or the characteristics of marital relationships that end in stalking. Research of this sort would further extend knowledge of the characteristics of relationships that end in stalking.

This research has focused upon victims of stalking. There is a need for future research to examine perpetrators of stalking, especially using non-forensic samples. Some initial work has been done in this regard (18, 27).

## Summary and Conclusions

This study has examined various characteristics of former romantic partners who were involved in relationships that followed by stalking, harassment, or no-harassment. Using strict criteria (2,3) to define stalking, a surprisingly high level of stalking was found in the sample (34%), especially as this was a non-forensic sample. This figure is consistent with rates of stalking found in other studies (25).

Support was obtained for all of the experimental hypotheses, and the results of the present study are generally consistent with previous research. These results add to an emerging profile of former partners who are likely to engage in stalking following the dissolu-

tion of romantic relationships. The findings are also consistent with explanations of stalking behavior that stress the etiological importance of attachment difficulties (10,47).

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