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A study of women who stalk

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ABSTRACT

Objective: To examine whether female stalkers differ from their male counterparts in psychopathology, motivation, behavior and propensity for violence.

Methods: Female (n=40) and male (n=150) stalkers referred to a forensic mental health clinic were compared.

Results: Female stalkers in our sample were outnumbered by males approximately four to one. The demographic characteristics of the groups did not differ, though prior criminal offending was elevated among males (41% vs. 18%). Higher rates of substance abuse was also noted among males (31% vs. 8%), though the psychiatric status of the groups did not otherwise differ. The duration of stalking and the frequency of associated violence was equivalent between groups. The nature of the prior relationship with the victim differed, with females more likely to target professional contacts (40% vs. 17%) and less likely to harass strangers (5% vs. 21%). Females were also more likely than males to pursue victims of the same gender (47% vs. 9%). The majority of female stalkers were motivated by the desire to establish intimacy with their victim (46%), compared to men who showed a broader range of motivations, including rejected, resentful and predatory patterns of stalking.

Conclusions: Female and male stalkers vary according to the motivation for their pursuit and their choice of victim. Women typically seek to attain a close intimacy with the victim, who usually is someone previously known to them and not infrequently those cast in the professional role of helper. While the contexts for stalking differs according to gender, the intrusiveness of the behaviors and potential for harm does not.

INTRODUCTION

The 'modal' stalker has been described as a "male in his fourth decade of life pursuing a prior sexual intimate" (1). Clinical and epidemiological studies confirm that the primary perpetrators of this crime are men and the overwhelming majority of victims women (2-6). Nonetheless, stalking is a gender neutral behavior and outside the literature on erotomania (7-10), little attention has been given to females who persistently intrude on and stalk others.

Stalking by females is not uncommon. Community based studies of stalking victimization indicate that women are identified as perpetrators in 12-13% of cases (11,4). Studies conducted in forensic mental health settings have reported higher rates, often reflecting the greater incidence of erotomania in these populations. Zona et al (12) reported that 32% of subjects (24 of 74) investigated by a specialist anti-stalking unit were female, six of whom were classed as erotomaniac. Harmon et al (13) similarly found that 33% of stalkers (16/48) referred to a forensic psychiatry clinic were female, though this rate dropped to 22% (38/175) in a subsequent and larger study (14). Other studies have reported rates of between 17% (1) and 22% (15). Further illustrative examples of female harassers abound in media reports (including the stalking of actor Brad Pitt, author Germaine Greer and television host David Letterman), in addition to first-hand victim accounts (16,17).

Despite the frequency with which females stalk, no study to date has considered the contexts in which this behavior emerges among women, nor whether females differ from their male counterparts in relation to stalking characteristics or propensity for violence. Greater awareness of, and attention to this issue is indicated for several reasons. In our experience, those who find themselves the victim of a female stalker often confront indifference and skepticism from law enforcement and other helping agencies. Not infrequently male victims

allege that their complaints have been trivialized or dismissed, some victims being told that they should be 'flattered' by all the attention. In the case of same-gender stalking by females, the sexual orientation of both the victim and the perpetrator is frequently questioned, with authorities often inappropriately assuming a homosexual motive (18). Victimization studies indicate that females are seldom prosecuted for stalking offenses, with criminal justice intervention most likely to proceed in those cases involving a male suspect accused of stalking a woman (3,11). The available evidence suggests that stalking by females is yet to be afforded the degree of seriousness attached to males who harass. This is despite any empirical evidence that females are any less intrusive or persistent in their stalking, or pose any less of a threat (physical or otherwise) to their victims.

This study describes a group of women who persistently stalked and compares them to a group of male stalkers to examine any differences in demographic characteristics, psychiatric status, stalking motivation, methods and duration of harassment, and rates of associated threats and assault.

METHOD

The case material was drawn from referrals over an eight year period (1993-2000) to a community forensic mental health clinic which specializes in the assessment and management of both stalkers and stalking victims. The cases were assessed by one or more of the authors. Referrals came from throughout the Australian State of Victoria (population 4.7 million), predominantly via courts, community correctional services, police and medical practitioners. Collaborative information was available usually in the form of victim statements, police summaries of the offenses, official criminal records and psychological or psychiatric reports. For the purposes of the study we defined stalking as persistent (at least 4 weeks duration) and repeated (10 or more) attempts to intrude on, or communicate with a victim who perceived the

behavior as unwelcome and fear-provoking (5). This was an intentionally conservative definition to ensure that the study group were unequivocally stalkers. The psychiatric classification employs DSM-IV criteria (19).

A subgroup of female stalkers was identified and compared to their male counterparts in relation to demographic and stalking characteristics. The data analyses were conducted using SPSS (Version 9.01). Discrete variables were analyzed using chi-square and continuous variables were compared between groups using Mann Whitney U tests (2-tailed). The error rate required to demonstrate significance was set at 0.05.

RESULTS

Demographic Profile

Of 190 stalkers referred to the clinic during the study period, 40 (21%) were female. Their ages ranged between 15 and 60 years (median 35 years). The majority of female stalkers were single (62%), with 32% separated or divorced. Only 3 were in stable intimate relationships when they commenced their stalking activities. The majority were in paid employment, though 32% were unemployed. Female and male stalkers did not differ in terms of age, marital or employment status, though females were significantly less likely than males to have histories of criminal offending, including violent offenses (*Table 1*).

Psychiatric Status

Major psychiatric diagnoses were assigned for 18 female stalkers. Twelve manifested delusional disorders (eight erotomaniac type; two jealous type; and two morbid infatuations categorized as delusional disorder, unspecified type). Schizophrenia was diagnosed in two (one of whom presented with erotomaniac delusions), bipolar disorder in two and two presented with a major depressive disorder. The primary diagnosis in a further 20 cases was personality

disorder, predominantly dependent (6 cases), borderline (6) and narcissistic types (3). No diagnosis was assigned in 2 cases. Rates of comorbid substance abuse were lower among female than male stalkers (*Table 1*). The diagnostic profile of female stalkers ($n=38$) did not otherwise differ significantly from males (categories: personality disorder, delusional disorders, morbid infatuations/jealousy, schizophrenia, other Axis I disorders, paraphilias: $\chi^2=10.6$, $df=5$, $p=.06$).

Prior Relationship to Victim

In 95% of cases female stalkers pursued someone previously known to them. The victims consisted of professional contacts in 40% (16), in most cases mental health professionals, though several pursued teachers or legal practitioners. In 23% (9) the victim was an ex-intimate partner (7 males, 2 females). Some 17% (7) were victims encountered through other work related contexts (e.g. colleagues or customers) and in 15% (6) were casual acquaintances. Only 2 females stalked strangers. The nature of the prior relationship differed significantly from that of male stalkers ($\chi^2=11.9$, $df=4$, $p=.02$), with females being more likely to target professional contacts and less likely to pursue strangers (*Table 1*).

The rate of same gender stalking was significantly elevated among female stalkers, with 47% (19) pursuing other women, compared to 9% (13) of males who stalked other men.

Stalking Motivation

Mullen et al (1999) proposed five categories of stalker based on the motivation for the pursuit and the context in which it emerged. In this sample, 46% (18) of female stalkers were classed as intimacy seekers, the stalking arising from a desire to establish a close and loving intimacy with the victim, who was in most instances (14 out of 18) a professional contact. Some 26%

(10) were deemed 'rejected' stalkers, who responded to the termination of a close relationship with pursuit of the victim. In most cases of rejected stalking the harassment followed the breakdown of a sexually intimate relationship, though one woman commenced stalking her psychiatrist after the abrupt cessation of long-term psychotherapy. In 18% (7) the stalking was classed as 'resentful', the stalker seeking to punish and torment a victim perceived as having mistreated or slighted her. This type of stalking often emerged in the context of workplace disputes, one woman commencing a campaign of intimidation against a colleague after complaints of professional misconduct were lodged against her. Four cases (10%) were regarded as incompetent suitors, the stalking serving as a crude and intrusive means of establishing a date. There were no cases among female subjects of sexually motivated predatory stalking, though 7% of males demonstrated this stalking pattern. Significantly more female stalkers were motivated by the desire to establish a loving intimacy with the object of their unwanted attention (*Table 1*), but did not differ from their male counterparts in the frequency of rejected, resentful or incompetent types of stalking.

Duration of Stalking

The duration of stalking for females ranged between 2 months and 20 years (median=22 months). The median duration did not differ significantly from that of male stalkers (12 months; range=1-240 months; $MWU=2545.00$, $p=.14$).

Stalking Behaviors and Associated Violence

The methods of harassment are shown in *Table 2*. Female stalkers were less likely than males to follow their victims, but more likely to favor telephone calls. The number of harassment methods employed by females (median=4.00; range=1-7) did not significantly differ to that of males (median=4.00; range=1-7; $MWU=2695.00$, $p=.44$). Female stalkers also showed the same propensity for threats and violence as their male counterparts, although the rates of

physical assault were elevated among males (*Table 2*). Thirteen females inflicted property damage against their victims (7 male, 6 female victims), including one woman who caused extensive damage to her ex-fiancé's sports car and another who painted obscene messages on the fence of her victim's home. Nine female stalkers assaulted their victims (3 male, 6 female victims). The nature of the assaults did not differ qualitatively from that of male perpetrators, though no sexual assaults were committed by females. While the rates of threats and assaults did not differ significantly, female stalkers were less likely than their male counterparts to proceed from explicit threats to actual physical assaults (30% vs. 49%; $\chi^2=16.1$, $df=1$, $p=.001$).

DISCUSSION

This study compared the demographic and pursuit characteristics of female and male stalkers referred to a community forensic mental health clinic. Female stalkers did not differ from their male counterparts in terms of their demographic profiles or psychiatric status, although males were more likely to have histories of criminality and substance abuse. The intrusiveness and duration of stalking activities were equivalent between groups, as were the rates of associated threats and violence. What did distinguish female from male stalkers, however, was their choice of victim, the underlying motivation for their stalking and the context in which their behavior emerged.

With only two exceptions, female stalkers in this study pursued an individual already known to them. A substantial proportion (40%) fixed their attention on those with whom they had professional contact, particularly psychiatrists, psychologists and family physicians, though teachers and legal professionals were occasionally targeted. While the choice of victim among females was heavily skewed toward professional contacts, male stalkers pursued a broader

range of victims, with similar proportions harassing prior intimate partners (28%), acquaintances (22%), strangers (21%) and professionals (17%). Stalking by males was also more strongly gendered, with 91% pursuing victims of the opposite sex, in contrast to females who were equally likely to target men and women. Few cases of same gender stalking among females, however, involved homosexual motivations. Only two women in this series reported their sexual orientation as being homosexual, in both instances their stalking directed against prior sexual intimates. While it is often assumed that same-gender stalking cases involve homosexuality in either the perpetrator, the victim or both, the data here suggests this is the exception rather than the rule (see also 18).

Closely related to the choice of victims among female stalkers was the motivation for the stalking. For almost half, the stalking emerged from a desire to forge an intimate relationship with the victim. A quarter of the female sample manifested erotomanic delusions, with the remainder hopeful that their pursuit would culminate in a relationship. The nature of the hoped-for intimacy, though usually romantic or sexual, also encompassed such aspirations as establishing a friendship or even a mothering alliance with the victim. Given the rates of serious mental illness among female stalkers in this sample (18 of 40 had major psychiatric diagnoses), it is perhaps not surprising that mental health clinicians were so frequently targeted, their professional concern and empathy easily reconstructed as romantic interest.

While research has examined the risks of violence posed by patients against clinicians (20-22), few studies have considered the risks of stalking by current or former clients. Romans et al (23), reported that 10 of 178 university counselors in their survey indicated having been stalked by a client, including five female perpetrators. Sandberg et al (24) identified 17 psychiatric inpatients (3 female), who had stalked, harassed or threatened hospital staff after discharge. Lion & Herschler (25) described nine case studies involving clinicians who were stalked by

clients, including seven psychiatrists, a psychologist and one plastic surgeon who was fatally attacked by a female patient. Though small and selective, these studies point to the stalking of clinicians as a salient and potentially damaging behavior. In our experience, mental health practitioners who have been stalked by patients not infrequently confront judgmental rather than sympathetic responses from their colleagues, with accusations of incompetence in managing transference issues common in such cases. A handful of clinicians have ultimately abandoned their careers due to the experience of being stalked, coupled with a lack of support from their peers. Greater recognition of the vulnerability of health professionals to stalking is warranted. As a minimum clinical and administrative policies regarding inappropriate contact and harassment by clients should be developed and adhered to by workplaces, so that when such problems arise they can be acted on expeditiously and afford health professionals better protection.

Contrary to popular assumptions, this study found that female stalkers are no less likely than their male counterparts to threaten their victims or attack their person or property. Males were more likely, however, to progress from explicit threats to physical assaults on the victim. The methods of harassment were largely equivalent between the groups, the exceptions being telephone calls which were favored by all but one female stalker, and following, which was preferred by males. The tenacity male and female stalkers apply to their quest is also strikingly similar. Thus, while the contexts for stalking vary between men and women, the intrusiveness of the conduct and its potential for harm does not. There is no reason to presume that the impact of being stalked by a female would be any less devastating than that of a man, although insufficient data precluded analysis of this issue here.

To our knowledge this is the first study to compare female and male stalkers. Women undoubtedly are the predominant victims of this crime, however it is important to recognize that

in a significant minority of stalking cases females are the perpetrators. Female stalkers are typically socially isolated individuals with high rates of mental illness and characterological disturbance. Though driven in some instances by resentment or retaliation for perceived hurts, the majority are motivated by a desire to establish an intimate relationship with the victim, who is not infrequently a professional helper. Psychiatric interventions aimed at managing the underlying mental illness are crucial to the resolution of stalking behaviors in this group, but therapists providing such treatment should be cognizant of the vulnerability sometimes inherent in this role.

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Table 1

Characteristics of Female and Male Stalkers

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Female</i> (<i>n</i> =40)		<i>Male</i> (<i>n</i> =150)		<i>Test</i>	
	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	²	<i>p</i>
Currently Partnered	7%	3	17%	25	2.2	.13 ^a
Currently Employed	68%	26	57%	82	1.6	.20 ^a
History of Criminal Offending	18%	7	47%	64	10.1	.001 ^b
History of Violent Offending	13%	5	36%	47	6.6	.01 ^b
Comorbid Substance Abuse	8%	3	31%	42	8.1	.005 ^b
Currently Psychotic	47%	18	35%	51	1.9	.15 ^b
Prior Relationship to Victim						
<i>Stranger</i>	5%	2	21%	32	5.7	.02 ^b
<i>Professional Contact</i>	40%	16	17%	25	10.1	.001 ^b
Same Gender Victim	47%	19	9%	13	34.2	.001 ^b
Stalking Motive						
<i>Intimacy Seeking</i>	46%	18	29%	44	3.9	.05 ^b
	Mean (SD)		Mean (SD)		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Age, years	36.5 (9.7)		37.6 (11.1)		.56	.57

^a df = 2, ^b df = 1

Table 2

Frequency of Methods of Harassment and Associated Violence

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Female</i> <i>(n=40)</i>		<i>Male</i> <i>(n=150)</i>		<i>Test</i>	
	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	²	<i>p</i>
Following	50%	20	78%	117	12.3	.001
Intrusive Approaches	77%	31	85%	128	1.4	.23
Telephone Calls	97%	39	73%	110	10.8	.001
Letters/Faxes/Email	70%	28	63%	95	.61	.43
Unsolicited Material	50%	20	47%	71	.09	.76
Property Damage	32%	13	40%	60	.75	.38
Threats against Victim	50%	20	60%	89	1.3	.24
Threats against Others	30%	12	38%	56	.83	.36
Assault against Victim	22%	9	37%	55	2.9	.09

in all cases df = 1