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PREVIEW

Clinical Characteristics of Stalkers

A Dissertation

Presented for the

Doctor of Philosophy

Degree

The University of Memphis

Frances L. Coleman

December 1999

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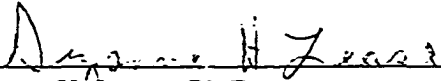
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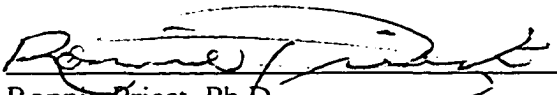
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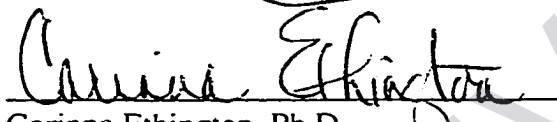
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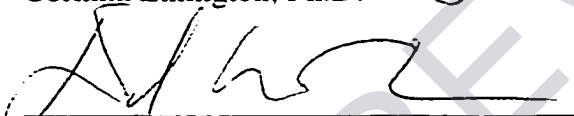
I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Frances L. Coleman entitled "Clinical Characteristics of Stalkers." I have examined the final copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy with a major in Counseling Psychology.


Suzanne H. Lease, Ph.D.
Major Professor

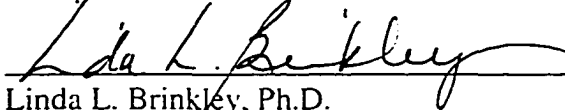
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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to Mary Wojcicki with much gratitude for her unwavering and invaluable support, without which this accomplishment might not have been possible.

PREVIEW

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I would like to thankfully acknowledge the contributions of my committee: Ronnie Priest, Ph.D., Corinna Ethington, Ph.D., and David Houston, Ph.D. I would especially like to express my appreciation to Suzanne H. Lease, Ph.D., committee chair, for her excellent editorial comments and her patience throughout the process of completing this document.

PREVIEW

ABSTRACT

Coleman, Frances L. Ph.D. The University of Memphis. December, 1999. Clinical Characteristics of Stalkers. Major Professor: Suzanne Lease, Ph.D.

The present study was a survey of mental health professionals regarding their experience treating patients who have stalked another person. Stalkers were divided into two groups based upon the relationship between stalker and victim prior to the stalking behaviors. Group differences in DSM-IV diagnoses and behavioral patterns were examined. The Intimate group (N=78) pursued former romantic partners and the Non-intimate group (N=52) pursued strangers or acquaintances. Intimate stalkers were more likely to be diagnosed with substance abuse, intermittent explosive disorder, antisocial and narcissistic personality disorder. Non-intimate stalkers were more likely to be diagnosed with schizoid personality disorder. Descriptive information was also reported regarding stalkers' criminal history, psychosocial background, motivation for the stalking, and how the stalking stopped.

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PREVIEW

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In 1994 Congress passed the Violence Against Women Act in response to a growing awareness and concern about the prevalence of violence against women in America. The act instructs the Attorney General to compile an annual report to Congress regarding domestic violence and stalking. The report is to address the incidence of stalking and domestic violence and to examine the effectiveness of current legislation. Three annual reports have been issued thus far.

In their most recent report to Congress, the authors state that there still exists a shortage of research in this area, especially regarding stalking behavior (Office of Justice Programs, 1998). A recent national survey sponsored by the National Institute of Justice and the National Center for Injury Prevention and Control (Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998), found that the incidence of stalking is much higher than previously estimated, making the need for research in this area more pressing. The authors note that there still exists a perception that stalking primarily occurs between strangers due to the media attention given to celebrity stalking cases. Yet the national survey conducted by Tjaden and Thoennes (1998) confirmed what many domestic violence advocates already suspected, most stalking occurs between former romantic partners.

The report addressed concerns that much existing research has used nonrandom sampling techniques and focused on stalkers drawn from criminal populations. This sampling method is thought to underrepresent intimate stalkers, who are likely to be involved in domestic violence situations. In addition, previous studies have used such a

wide variety of ways to define their groups that it is difficult to compare the results of different studies or draw general conclusions about who stalkers are and what they do (Office of Justice Programs, 1998). More information is needed to develop effective legal and mental health interventions.

Stalking Laws

The first antistalking law was passed in California in 1990 following the shooting death of actress Rebecca Schaefer at her home by an obsessed fan. Since then all 50 states have passed antistalking statutes. In 1996 the Interstate Stalking Punishment and Prevention Act was passed, making it a federal crime to cross state lines to injure, harass, or place another individual in fear of harm (Office of Justice Programs, 1998).

In 1993 the National Institute of Justice sponsored a study to develop a "Model Antistalking Code" and presented its results to state policymakers in a series of educational seminars (Bureau of Justice Assistance, 1996). The Model Code recommends several elements that should be addressed in state statutes such as: defining a course of conduct that involves repeated physical proximity to the victim, addressing behavior that occurs twice or more and the occurrence of implicit and explicit threats, and behavior that goes against the will of the victim or his or her family. The code recommends that criminal intent be defined as repeated following and threatening of the victim accompanied by the stalker's knowledge or expectation that the behavior will cause the victim, or his or her family, fear of harm or death (Office of Justice Programs, 1998).

Several states have adopted some of the recommendations made by the Model Code, but stalking statutes still vary from state to state. In some states stalking is a

misdemeanor, while in others it is a felony. Some states require that the stalker threaten the victim verbally and some go further to require that the person must demonstrate behaviorally an intent and an ability to act on that threat. Many states require the prosecution to demonstrate that the stalker intended to cause fear in the victim. The laws do share a few common elements. Stalking is generally defined as "willful, malicious, and repeated following and harassment of another" (Bureau of Justice Assistance, 1996, p. 20). These laws are constantly under review and several states are currently developing legislation to address the stalking of minors and four have provided for tort action (Office of Justice Programs, 1998).

The constitutionality of stalking laws in many states has been challenged, especially in states that allow arrest without a warrant. Lawmakers are limited by the need to ensure that legislation does not violate an individual's First Amendment right to freedom of expression. Individuals have the right to due process under the Fifth Amendment, which entitles persons to "fair notice" of the types of behaviors prohibited. A state must also have sufficient reason to restrict an individual's freedom of movement (National Institute of Justice, 1993).

These constitutional considerations make it difficult to write laws that effectively address the unique nature of the crime of stalking. Stalking is unlike most other criminal behaviors in that it is not a single, isolated act. There is not one crime scene from which to gather evidence. The behavior must occur repeatedly and compose a pattern to be labeled stalking. The individual behaviors that combine to form a pattern of stalking may be constitutionally protected. Making phone calls, appearing uninvited in a public place,

or sending letters or gifts is not a crime. While the behavior viewed collectively may cause a person fear of harm, it may be difficult to show criminal intent, especially if the perpetrator has not made explicit threats (Bureau of Justice Assistance, 1996).

The effectiveness of existing laws is also questionable. Tjaden and Thoennes (1998) found that only 13% of female victims and 9% of male victims reported that their stalker was prosecuted. Additionally, only 9% stated that the stalking stopped when the stalker was convicted of a crime, only 1% stated the stalking behavior ceased when the perpetrator was arrested, and less than 1% credited a restraining order with stopping the stalking. These numbers indicate that while stalking has received increasing attention in the legal and research community, the information about stalkers is inadequate for developing effective legal interventions.

Even when a perpetrator is convicted, it does not ensure the safety of the victim. Some offenders may suffer from psychiatric disturbances that may be left untreated during incarceration. The stalker may continue to be preoccupied with the victim and even blame the victim for the situation. Violence may be directed toward the victim after the perpetrator's release or sentencing may not include imprisonment (Fein, Vossekuil, & Gwen, 1995). As a result of these observations the Bureau of Justice Assistance has urged, " that research be carried out on a wide range of matters related to stalkers including behavior, motives, and relationships with victims to provide guidance for criminal justice and social services practitioners in developing intervention strategies" (Bureau of Justice Assistance, 1996, pp. 13-14).

Limitations of the Research on Stalking

While the number of studies conducted on stalking has been growing, the literature is still in its infancy. Many studies have been based on a small number of cases seen in forensic settings or archival information from police and court records. Some information is merely anecdotal. Adding to the confusion in identifying stalking populations, most researchers believe that there are actually two or more different types of stalkers. There is disagreement about what characteristics should be used to subdivide this population and researchers define these groups differently from study to study. Some researchers have defined their groups by the type of relationship the stalker has with his victim and others define their groups by psychiatric diagnosis.

Stalker Subtypes in the Literature

While there appears to be two main types of stalkers, researchers have proposed a number of different categories for subtyping and grouping stalkers. Zona, Sharma, and Lane (1993) used three categories: erotomantic, love obsessional, and simple obsessional. The erotomantic subjects were individuals who were diagnosed with delusional disorder, erotomantic subtype. These persons develop a fixation on another person with whom they have had no previous contact. The love obsessional group also pursues a victim whom they have no prior relationship with, such as a celebrity. But persons in this group have a primary diagnosis other than erotomania, although erotomania may be a secondary diagnosis. The simple obsessional group consists of persons who pursue someone with whom they have had a prior relationship. This may involve former romantic partners or

simply an acquaintance or neighbor. The behavior is motivated by a desire to reunite with the former partner or to enact revenge.

Harmon, Rosner, and Owens (1995) classified their sample of stalkers according to the motivation for the stalking. One group was labeled affectionate/amorous and included persons who begin their pursuit with feelings of love that later turn to anger or hate. The persecutory/angry group included persons who are motivated by a real or imagined injury incurred in a business or professional relationship. This anger may be targeted toward an institution rather than an individual.

Schwartz-Watts and Morgan (1998) compared violent versus nonviolent stalkers. Persons who incurred charges for physically harming their victims were placed in the violent group. Nonviolent stalkers were those who did not bodily harm their victims. Kienlen, Birmingham, Solberg, O'Regan, and Meloy (1997) labeled their sample psychotic and nonpsychotic. Persons whose stalking was associated with psychotic thinking and delusions were placed in the psychotic group. Stalkers who did not exhibit psychotic symptoms were placed in the nonpsychotic group.

Cupach and Spitzberg (1997) proposed a four category continuum of behavior that they call "obsessional relational intrusion" with stalking viewed as an extreme form of intrusive behavior. These four categories are labeled erotomantic, borderline erotomantic, obsessional acquaintances, and obsessional estranged lovers. The authors define erotomania and borderline erotomania as above, but limit these categories to individuals who only pursue strangers. Obsessional acquaintances are defined as those who tend to pursue persons with whom they have only had brief contact or a casual

relationship such as friends or co-workers. This type of stalking is described by Romans, Hays, and White (1996) in a survey of college counseling staff members who were stalked by a former client or had a supervisee stalked by a client. This category also includes people who may have dated casually but have no history of sexual intimacy. Obsessional estranged lovers are persons who are unable to accept the end of a romantic relationship. These individuals are trying to reunite with a former partner and are thought to suffer from characterological disorders rather than psychotic features.

Wright et al. (1996) developed the Stalking Incident Checklist in an effort to find a framework for distinguishing between types of stalkers. They proposed three categories of stalking. Information from the National Center for Analysis of Violent Crime regarding stalking cases was used to develop the instrument. The instrument was then piloted on 30 cases of stalking and stalkers were subdivided into domestic and nondomestic categories. Nondomestic stalkers were those who had no personal relationship with the victim and were further divided into organized and delusional. The pattern of the organized stalker involved anonymously observing the subject for a period of time before communicating with the victim by letter, telephone, and leaving gifts. The initial tone of love may likely turn to a threatening and angry presentation as the stalker is frustrated by the lack of contact. The delusional stalker is motivated by fantasy to pursue someone perceived as of higher status. Often this involves erotomanic delusions. The domestic stalker pursued a former lover or possibly a family member. Initial attempts to win back a partner turn to anger and revenge. It is likely that the relationship was wrought with conflict prior to the end of the relationship.

Certainly the variety of ways researchers divide their stalking samples makes it difficult to assemble the results of these various studies in a consistent way. Yet the behaviors exhibited by these different types of stalkers are quite similar. Such individuals may tirelessly pursue their victims with repeated and unwanted phone calls, letters, gifts, and personal visits. By watching and following the victim, a stalker may be able to determine even intimate details about the victim's life making it easier to follow along and survey their comings and goings. Over time, the stalker may become frustrated by his or her unrequited love and grow progressively more violent. He or she may make threats of harm, damage the victim's property, or become physically or sexually assaultive. This violence may be directed at the victim, their family, or anyone perceived to be in the way of their love (Goldstein, 1987; Mullen & Pathe, 1994b; Zona et al., 1993).

One difference that has emerged between stalker subtypes relates to threatening and assaultive behavior. Zona et al. (1993) reported that their simple obsessional group, which consisted of persons stalking a former partner, were more likely to make threats, physically harm the victim, or destroy the victim's property than the two erotomaniac groups in their sample. Kurt (1995) also noted that the subjects in her sample who stalked a former partner, but had no evidence of erotomania, had more significant histories of aggression and domestic violence than the erotomaniac subjects. Research results have shown repeatedly that stalkers who pursue former intimates are more likely to act out violently toward their victim than are stalkers who pursue strangers (Kienlen et al., 1997; Meloy, 1996).

Many questions still remain to be answered. Stalking samples first need to be subdivided in a consistent and coherent manner. Information regarding the demographic, behavioral, and clinical profile of these subtypes needs to be gathered with larger samples and drawn from a variety of settings. This information is urgently needed to help legal and mental health professionals identify stalking populations and determine effective legal and treatment interventions.

The present study is designed as an exploratory investigation to assess multiple questions regarding stalking in order to develop a clearer demographic and behavioral profile of stalkers. Mental health practitioners were surveyed in order to determine various attributes of stalkers seen in mental health settings. These characteristics included demographic information, criminal history, mental health history and diagnosis, alcohol or drug history, and relationship history.

PREVIEW

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Stalking research traces its roots back to a syndrome called De Clerambault's (DeClerambault, 1921/1942). This syndrome described the behavior of persons all the way back to the 1870's who believed members of the French monarchy or other nobles secretly loved them. Today this is known as erotomania and is thought to explain the behavior of the modern day stalker (Goldstein, 1987; Meloy, 1989; Rudden, Sweeney, & Frances, 1990). Erotomania is classified in the DSM-IV as a subtype of delusional disorder and is characterized by the belief that the erotomaniac individual is secretly loved by another. Diagnostic criteria for erotomania include the presence of non-bizarre delusions in the absence of schizophrenic symptoms such as hallucinations, disorganized speech or behavior, or affective flattening. Functioning is not significantly impaired and the individual's behavior is not otherwise odd or unusual. This condition cannot be otherwise accounted for by a medical condition or by the effects of drugs or alcohol (American Psychiatric Association, 1994).

The erotomaniac is convinced that the object of his or her affections secretly returns the love, although there is no evidence to support this belief. In fact, rejection or other indications that the beloved is not interested is believed simply to be a test of the erotomaniac's love. The delusion may include ideas that the pursued party must keep his or her love a secret and communicates with the erotomaniac in unusual and covert ways that others do not see or hear. Public evidence of rejection, such as the issuance of a protective order, is considered a pretense while the love object's true feelings are known

only to the erotomaniac. Often the victim is a person of significance in the community or a celebrity on whom the erotomaniac has become fixated. No actual relationship may have existed previously or the two may have only been acquaintances. Love may be intensely idealized by the erotomaniac and the desire may be for a spiritual rather than sexual bond (American Psychiatric Association, 1994; Goldstein, 1987; Rudden et al, 1990).

Erotomania can be subdivided into primary and secondary forms. Secondary or symptomatic erotomania is thought to occur when the erotomaniac delusions are part of an underlying mental disorder such as schizophrenia, schizoaffective disorder, or bipolar disorder. The erotomaniac delusions arise from the underlying disorder and may subside when the disorder resolves. Primary or pure erotomania is thought to occur when no other psychotic disturbance is present. The erotomaniac delusions are the essential clinical issue and the delusions are believed to stem from the individual's personality structure and the lack of satisfying social connections. Pure erotomania is more often associated with personality disorder (Mullen & Pathe, 1994a; Rudden et al., 1990).

Modern day stalking, though, is not limited to the delusional. Another type of stalking exists in which the victim and stalker have had a personal relationship. Often this is a romantic relationship that has ended to the dismay of one partner. The stalking may begin as a desperate attempt to win the rejecting partner back. The more times the pursuer is rejected, though, the more angry he may become. While the initial motivation may have been love and affection, it may turn to anger, hate, and revenge. Once the stalker sees that the partner cannot be won back, she or he may simply try to make sure that no one else can have her or him either. Anecdotal and limited research evidence suggests

that this type of stalking often occurs during the dissolution of violent romantic relationships (Coleman, 1997; Kurt, 1995).

One of the first studies to examine the modern day erotomaniac stalker involved the analysis of 86 case files compiled by the Intelligence Unit of the State Capitol Police (Dietz, Matthews, Martell, et al., 1991). Files contained letters and other materials sent to members of Congress that were of a threatening or unusual nature. Communications ranged from postcards to lengthy manuscripts expressing rage over perceived injustices, professing love, or making pleas for some type of assistance. The larger the number of communications an individual sent, the more likely he or she was to approach the victim in person. If the perpetrator made telephone contact in addition to sending written materials, the likelihood of approach was high as well. Analysis of letter content suggested that the authors were suffering from disorders of a delusional or obsessional nature, although the subjects were not personally assessed or interviewed.

In a similar study, Dietz, Matthews, Van Duyne, et al. (1991) examined threatening and inappropriate letters sent to Hollywood celebrities by 214 individuals. Files were collected by the Los Angeles Police Department's Threat Management Unit. Communications focused on topics such as love for the victim, a desire to seek retribution for injustices, or a need for help. Over half of the sample enclosed other items with the letters such as photographs, poetry, and even biological secretions (i.e., blood, semen). Individuals who made the most contact or who sent letters accompanied by phone calls, were more likely to approach the victim in person. Stalkers in each of these studies

appeared to believe that some type of relationship existed between themselves and the victim, although there had been no prior contact or relationship.

Rudden et al. (1990) compared a sample of erotomaniac patients to a group of delusional patients seen for treatment at a medical school clinic. The erotomaniac sample included 21 women and seven men with an average age of 31.6 years. The comparison sample of delusional patients consisted of 42 men and 38 women with an average age of 31.8 years. Erotomaniac patients had a higher number of manic symptoms and many had additional diagnoses including major depression, schizophrenia, schizoaffective disorder, manic type, bipolar disorder, and paranoid delusions. Eighty-six percent of the erotomaniac sample and 88% of the delusional sample had never been married or were divorced.

Zona et al. (1993) also examined case files of the LAPD's Threat Management Unit to provide a descriptive analysis of stalkers. Cases were referred by the entertainment industry, the mental health community, or by other detectives. A total of 74 cases were divided into three groups: erotomaniac, love obsessional, and simple obsessional. The erotomaniac group consisted of pure erotomaniac patients while the love obsessional group included secondary erotomanics. Both of these groups pursued strangers or celebrities. The simple obsessional group pursued persons with whom they had a prior relationship ranging from acquaintances to former lovers. None of these included cases of domestic violence.

Eighty-six percent of the erotomaniac stalkers were female, while 71% of their victims were male. Erotomaniac stalkers maintained contact with the victim for an average