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Celebrity Stalking, Homicide, and Suicide

A Psychological Autopsy

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Despite the high-profile nature of many celebrity stalking cases, little is known about the offenders and even less is known about those who kill their celebrity victims. The case of an obsessed fan who attempted to kill a rock star and then committed suicide is presented. By analyzing his detailed diary, both insight into the motivational dynamics of this type of stalker and delineation of several warning signs, which help differentiate an enthusiastic fan from one who harbors a potentially dangerous obsession, is gained.

Keywords: celebrity; stalking; homicide; suicide

Stalking has received an enormous amount of attention in the scientific, legal, and public press since the mid-1990s. In fact, it has even been referred to as the quintessential crime of that decade (Goldstein, 2000). Although most stalkers are not violent, an estimated 3% to 36% of them do engage in various aggressive acts (Mullen, Pathé, & Purcell, 2000) including grabbing, fondling, punching, and using a weapon (Meloy & Gothard, 1995). And, among those stalkers who do become violent, most target former intimate partners rather than strangers (Harmon, Rosner, & Owens, 1995; Meloy, Davis, & Lovette, 2001; Palarea, Zona, Lane, & Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 1999).

Despite a substantial amount of research on violent stalkers, relatively little is known about stalkers who kill (Meloy, 1998) and even less is known about stalkers who kill strangers (Schlesinger, 2002). The relative dearth of information on stalking-homicide involving strangers is ironic because one of the cases that brought national attention to the problem—and that was an impetus for enactment of the first antistalking law in California—was the murder of actor Rebecca Schaefer by a stranger, an obsessed fan. The offender was 19-year-old Robert Bardo, whose early

Author’s Note: Many thanks to mystery writer Patricia Cornwell for her valuable insights, to ABC News for making the journal available for study, and to graduate students Joanna Fava and Claire Hadjikos who were very helpful in the content analysis of the diary. Please address correspondence to Louis B. Schlesinger, Ph.D., John Jay College of Criminal Justice, City University of New York, 445 W. 59th Street, New York, New York 10019, USA.
life was marked by suicide and aggressive threats, a psychiatric hospitalization, school failure, and few friends, either male or female. He first became obsessed with a celebrity teenager, then switched obsessions to Schaefer, whom he described to an evaluation psychiatrist as “a goddess . . . too sweet, clean, and pure for [sexual] fantasies.” But after Schaefer appeared in a movie that included a bedroom scene, Bardo became incensed. He eventually located her residence, rang the doorbell, and shot and killed her.

Celebrity stalkers are similar to noncelebrity stalkers in an important way: Only a small number become violent and even fewer kill. And because the number of individuals who do act out in an aggressive way is so small, little research has been carried out on these groups of offenders. In one of the few studies of celebrity stalking, Dietz et al. (1991) reviewed threatening and inappropriate letters sent to Hollywood celebrities. The authors identified 15 factors associated with offender approach behavior; however, none of the subjects of this sample assaulted or killed his or her celebrity victim. Leets, de Becker, and Giles (1995) also researched celebrity stalkers and found that those fans who had unreasonable expectations of the celebrity—as expressed in their various forms of communications—were at greatest risk of pursuing inappropriate, unwanted, or so-called hazardous encounters but not necessarily of perpetrating violence or homicide. McCutcheon, Lange, and Houran (2002) developed a psychometric scale to assess the degree of obsession (or so-called celebrity worship) a fan might have to determine whether an obsession is predictive of aggressive behavior. The authors contend their results indicate that overidentification with the celebrity may lead to a form of dissociation that could be connected to violent encounters. In an unpublished paper, de Becker (1990) specifically addressed the problem of fans who not only stalked but also attacked celebrities. He found this group of individuals to be quite heterogeneous, “as different as the spouse killer and the hired killer” (p. 7). Information obtained from a review of various press reports of fans who stalked, tried to kill, or killed celebrities seems to support de Becker’s conclusion.

The following case involves an obsessed fan who made a nearly successful attempt to kill a rock star and then committed suicide. Although he was unable to be directly evaluated, the offender left a detailed 803-page diary that was begun 2 years before the crime and a lengthy videotape of his planning of the murder and suicide. This information, particularly the diary, provides a unique opportunity to gain invaluable insight into the motivational dynamics and behavior patterns of a homicidal-suicidal celebrity stalker.

Although it is most desirable to personally evaluate a subject to draw conclusions, indirect personality assessment has been utilized for decades (Meloy, 2004). For example, the psychological autopsy—a form of indirect personality assessment—is “conducted without benefit of direct observation but often with greater access to behavioral data about a person than a [direct] evaluation [alone] would provide” (Ebert, 1987, p. 52). Although there is no standard procedure for conducting a psychological autopsy (Litman, Curphey, Shneidman, Farberow, & Tabachnick, 1963; Selkin, 1994; Shneidman & Farberow, 1961), guidelines suggest analyzing various aspects of the deceased’s background such as family, relationships, psychiatric and
substance abuse treatment, employment, education, and, most notably for this case, suicide notes, writings, and diaries.

Psychological Autopsy

Background

A. A. was 21 years old when he sent rock star B. B. a bomb concealed in a hollowed-out book. He intended the explosive device to spray sulfuric acid that would either kill, burn, or severely disfigure her. After mailing the bomb, he committed suicide by shooting himself in the head with a .38 revolver while listening to the singer’s music. Several days after his death, a neighbor noticed a foul odor coming from A. A.’s apartment and called the police. The authorities discovered that his assembling, packaging, and mailing of the bomb—along with his suicide—were memorialized in 22 hours of videotape. After watching some of the video, the police contacted Scotland Yard, which intercepted the bomb just before it arrived at the victim’s London home.

A. A.’s life, in many ways, could be considered rather ordinary. He had no criminal record and, despite being an introvert, did have a few male friends. His middle-class family emigrated from a South American country and settled in a southern state, where A. A. was raised. At the time of the incident, the offender lived by himself in a garden apartment, working only sporadically as an exterminator at his brother’s pest-control company. There was an enormous difference between A. A.’s outward demeanor and personality, as described by those who knew him, and his internal life—revealed in his diary—that was dominated by aggressive fantasies and pronounced feelings of inadequacy that extended into the sexual area. Family members and friends—even the psychiatrist who briefly treated him for anxiety—had no idea that he was capable of such violent conduct.

The Obsession

About 2 years prior to the attempted homicide and completed suicide, A. A. began keeping a diary. On the very first page, he made a reference to suicide (“a few years from now... if I’m still here”), and on the next few pages he wrote about his obsession with a well-known female film star. He then became angry over press reports that the movie star had abruptly ended a long-term relationship and had quickly become intensely involved with another man. A. A.’s anger and accompanying disapproval of her conduct quickly dissipated, however, when he switched obsessions from the film star to 30-year-old B. B., a singer whose off-beat, rebellious music has been described as erotic with a dark side, involving, for example, images of animals killing hunters in a gothic forest.

Soon after the obsession with B. B. began, A. A. researched all aspects of her background; he sent her fan letters and closely followed her career. He fantasized about using a time machine to travel back to the mid-1970s to become friends with B. B.’s family and somehow get involved in her upbringing. The future offender desperately
wanted “to have an effect on her life.” He did not describe his fixation with B. B. primarily in sexual or even romantic terms; instead, he wanted mostly to be accepted by her and to be an important part of her life. He also referred to the madonna-prostitute syndrome in describing his obsession (“I couldn’t have sex with B. B. because I love her”). A. A. did not keep his fascination with B. B. completely private; he told a few friends, who advised him to “get a real woman; you’re obsessed.”

Interspersed with his idealized thoughts about B. B. were his description of disturbing feelings of inadequacy that extended into the sexual area. He referred to himself as

a loser who never even learned to drive . . . . I don’t respect myself . . . . I never held a girl in my arms [and have never been] loved or even liked by a girl . . . . [I feel] completely alone . . . . Someone said I smell like a dog . . . . You can’t begin to realize how weird I feel.

He also believed he had gynecomastia (the development of breasts in a male) and was repulsed by his own body.

At other points in the journal, the polarity of A. A.’s inner life became painfully clear. For example, he expressed his desire to become a famous artist but realized that this goal was unrealistic: “I won’t be taken seriously, no formal training.” He went on, “What if I’m rejected by art school? They are not used to seeing someone so deformed and young . . . . I am terribly deformed.” He also fantasized about being a presenter at the MTV Video Music Awards but then quickly switched the topic to his financial problems, such as his inability to pay the rent, and to his ignominious work as a bug exterminator.

An additional analysis of the journal reveals A. A.’s preoccupations. For example, in the 803 pages, he made 14 (direct and indirect) references to homicide and 34 references to suicide. He referred to various other celebrities 52 times and described deep feelings of inadequacy and low self-esteem 168 times. But, by far, the most frequent reference (408 times) was to B. B.

**Homicidal Plan**

The trigger for the homicide was when A. A. discovered that B. B. had left her long-time boyfriend and had quickly become romantically involved in an interracial relationship with another musician, a relationship A. A. considered unacceptable. Here, the exact pattern that occurred in his prior obsession with the film star repeated itself, but it occurred after a lengthier obsessive fixation and with much stronger emotions. A. A. angrily wrote, “I wasted 8 months and she has a fucking lover.” Day after day he described his anger and feelings of betrayal over B. B.’s conduct. He then slowly developed the idea to punish her. The time from when A. A. first became angry with the singer to the time he mailed the bomb was 15 months. But once he decided to kill the victim, he proceeded relatively quickly, taking less than 3 months.

At the point when he determined to kill her, A. A. stopped writing and began videotaping. He initially thought of sending B. B. a hollowed-out book containing a device that, when the book was opened, would release several needles designed to pop out
and inject her with AIDS-tainted blood (which he hoped to obtain from a prostitute). In this way, B. B. would not die, but she would have a fatal disease and A. A. would be a part of the rest of her life. The offender quickly abandoned this plan because he concluded it was not possible to create such a contraption. Instead, he decided to assemble a bomb and place it in a hollowed-out book. When the book was opened, the bomb would explode and spray sulfuric acid in B. B.’s face. While assembling the bomb, he played the singer’s music and referred to himself as her “angel of death.”

Toward the end of the videotaping, A. A. placed the explosive device in an envelope, held it up to the camera—displaying the victim’s London address—and said, “I’m going to mail this.” A short time later he returned stating, “I mailed it.” He marked the final video, “Last day . . . A. A.” On the wall behind him he had written, “The 8 mm videos are documentation of a crime, terrorist matter, and are for the FBI.” He finally put a gun in his mouth and shot himself while the video camera kept rolling. Fortunately, the police intercepted what they considered to be a viable bomb, and no one else was killed.

Discussion

Analysis

This celebrity stalker had many characteristics of the typical (noncelebrity) stalker as listed by Meloy (1998): unemployed (or underemployed) at the time of the criminal acts; an immigrant to the United States, which Meloy has found to be a nonspecific risk factor in some stalking cases; having both an axis I diagnosis (depression) and an axis II personality disorder (probably schizotypal); fairly intelligent (consistent with research indicating that stalkers are smarter than many other criminals); not in a relationship at the time of the crime or at any time previously; switched obsessions from one person to another; and engaged in interstate (and even international) stalking, which is not uncommon. In addition, the obsession was not brief; it lasted about 2 years. Although A. A. never met B. B., he was intimately involved with her in his mind, and his primary interest in B. B. was not sexual. And finally, the victim was of a higher social status than was the stalker.

However, A. A. also evidenced several traits that are not typical of many (noncelebrity) violent stalkers. For instance, he did not have a criminal, psychiatric, or drug-abuse history, and he was not previously involved with weapons. The offender also never made a direct threat to his victim, which is a risk factor for violence in some cases, and he had no background of interpersonal or property violence.

Most individuals who stalk do not become lethally violent; however, a few individuals stalk and do kill. Identifying the factors that distinguish these groups is critical in understanding such cases and in preventing tragedy (Davis, 2001). The concept of catatymic process is especially useful in unraveling the motivational dynamics of stalkers who kill their victims (Meloy, 1992; Schlesinger, 2002, 2004). Wertham (1937) first used the concept of catathymia to explain homicides that result from the resurrection of strong, underlying, emotionally charged conflicts. Here, the conflicts
produce a change in thinking so that the future offender acquires a fixed idea that he or she must carry out a violent act. Revitch and Schlesinger (1981, 1989) and Schlesinger (2004) differentiated an acute and a chronic form of the catathymic process. In the acute case, a sudden loss of control results in violence when an underlying conflict (usually involving sexual inadequacy) is triggered by an external circumstance of symbolic significance. For stalking, however, the chronic form of the process is more relevant.

In the chronic catathymic homicide, three stages occur: incubation, violent act, and subsequent feeling of relief. During the incubation period—which may last from several days to more than a year—the future offender (almost always a male) becomes obsessively preoccupied with the future victim. The future offender then develops the idea that he or she must carry out a violent act against his or her target, someone he or she professes to love or to have loved, such as a current or former intimate partner (Revitch, 1980; Schlesinger, 1996). Meloy (1992) believes that the offender attributes malevolent and controlling characteristics to the future victim and seeks to end the disturbing symbiotic attachment by eliminating the source. The idea to kill begins as an ego-dystonic thought and is initially resisted, but it then becomes a root like fixation. The individual cannot shake it, and he or she develops a tremendous urge to act. Following the deadly encounter, the perpetrator frequently feels a distinct sense of relief accompanied by a change in attitude toward the victim, who is often remembered with sympathy rather than anger. Thus, catathymic homicides are a way to secure liberation from deep-seated conflicts—such as fear of control, intimacy, and sexual inadequacy—that the offender is otherwise unable to resolve.

In A. A.’s case, the fantasy he had developed—in which he viewed B. B. as “so angelic, elegant and sweet”—was shattered when he learned of her new interracial relationship, which he considered unacceptable. His long-standing conflicts regarding sexuality overwhelmed his defenses, and he shifted emotions (“If there is any mention of promiscuity [by B. B.] that will be it—the end!”) During the incubation phase, which lasted about 3 months, he carefully planned the attack and his suicide. (Homicide-suicide is common in chronic catathymic murders.)

Prevention

The prevention of stalking-homicide—particularly involving celebrity victims—is challenging because many of the behavior patterns of celebrity stalkers who become violent are counterintuitive. For example, Dietz et al. (1991) found that letters written to celebrities containing inappropriate and bizarre content, which would seem to indicate danger, usually do not result in violence. A. A.’s letters to B. B. did not involve threats or bizarre or inappropriate content, and he did become violent. And consultation with a mental health professional—so often viewed as one of the best ways to prevent tragedy—did little in this case. Just before the attempted homicide-suicide, A. A. consulted a psychiatrist, who prescribed medication for anxiety and provided supportive counseling. The psychiatrist did not detect any danger, primarily because A. A. did not tell him of his obsession with B. B. or his plans.
However, analysis of this case does reveal three important factors that should serve as red flags for identifying fans who might act out violently toward a celebrity. First, people should be aware that the thinking and behavior indicative of a typical fan are different in degree from those of an obsessed fan, particularly when the celebrity replaces a real person in the fan’s life. Although the degree of A. A.’s obsession with B. B. was known to those around him, the ominous significance of his obsession was not understood. Second, fans who are likely to become violent often exhibit Leets et al.’s (1995) unreasonable expectations of the celebrity (reflecting a slight break with reality). A. A. had such expectations, specifically his wanting to become a part of B. B.’s life. Third, a pathological and dangerous level of attachment is revealed if a fan becomes personally affected by the celebrity’s behavior, such as being inappropriately angry or feeling betrayed by something the celebrity may have done. These three red flags might be found in the content of fan letters or might perhaps be revealed in comments made to friends, teachers, coworkers, or family members. Alerting the general public and mental health professionals to these warning signs—and intervening directly—is one step in the prevention of this form of severe interpersonal violence.

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