Perceptions of stalking behavior vary tremendously, yet the factors that influence these perceptions are largely unknown. This article reports on two studies that analyzed individual and situational variables that may influence perceptions of stalking using hypothetical vignettes that varied the gender of the perpetrator and target. The first study varied the nature of the relationship between perpetrator and target while holding constant the stalking behavior. The second study manipulated the degree of seriousness of the stalking behavior according to New York’s stalking law. Gender of the perpetrator strongly influenced several of the safety variables, with male stalkers producing concern for the target’s safety. Determinations of stalking were more likely when the characters had no prior relationship and when the behavior was more serious. Findings suggest that situational variables may influence perceptions of whether behavior constitutes stalking and the assessments of risk or violence potential.

Keywords: stalking behavior; perceptions of stalking; situational variables in stalking

As public interest in stalking crimes grew during the past decade, critics have increasingly pointed to the ambiguity (“vagueness”) present in most legal definitions of stalking (e.g., Jordan, Quinn, Jordan, & Daileader, 2000; Mullen, Pathé, & Purcell, 2000). For example, California’s antistalking law specifies that the behavior must
“be such as would cause a reasonable person to suffer substantial emotional consequence” (California Penal Code, Section § 646.9, 1990). Even New York’s recent antistalking law, developed long after concerns regarding definitional ambiguity had been raised and litigated, requires that the victim must experience a “reasonable fear of material harm” from the stalker for the behaviors to qualify as “stalking” (New York Criminal Procedure Law, Section § 120.45, 1999; Pappas, 2000). But despite attempts to define the contours of stalking, these laws offer little, if any, guidance as to what behaviors would qualify as inducing a “reasonable fear” or engendering “substantial emotional harm.” Indeed, the same behaviors could be interpreted as frightening by one individual yet seem flattering or absurd to another (Jordan et al., 2000). How then does one determine whether a stalker’s actions meet the legal requirement for criminal prosecution or even constitute stalking in lay terms?

Despite the importance of understanding individual differences in perceptions of stalking, research has rarely focused on understanding the factors that influence these perceptions. At one extreme of this continuum are the occasional reports, although largely anecdotal, of false accusations of stalking (often termed “false victimization syndrome”; Mohandie, Hatcher, & Raymond, 1996; Pathé, Mullen, & Purcell, 1999; Sheridan & Blaauw, in press). On the other hand, many stalking victims fail to recognize or interpret the harassment they are subjected to as “stalking,” and therefore, they neglect to seek appropriate help or take protective measures that might be necessary. More critically, third-party observers, such as police officers or coworkers, may find it particularly difficult to perceive the behavior as sufficiently threatening to the target to constitute stalking. Even when stalking or harassment is accurately recognized, individual reactions vary tremendously, with some stalking victims moving to another state and changing their identity and others continuing their lives seemingly without significant interference. Clearly, perceptions of the risk posed by a stalker play a central role in determining how an

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individual should react. These same perceptions will also determine the efficacy of stalking laws as law enforcement officials, prosecutors, judges, and, ultimately, jurors must also evaluate whether particular behaviors rise to the level of unlawful stalking.

Although early attention to stalking focused largely on celebrity victims and gradually expanded to the general public, stalking has only recently been identified as a significant problem plaguing college students. Several studies have observed high rates of stalking among college students that far exceed the prevalence rates found in the general population (e.g., Bjerregaard, 2000; Fremouw, Westrup, & Pennypacker, 1997; Haugaard & Seri, 2000). For example, Fremouw and his colleagues (1997) reported that 27% of the women and 15% of men in their sample of West Virginia University students had been stalked. Bjerregaard found a comparable rate of stalking among college students; 25% of the women in her sample and 11% of the men reported this experience. Not surprisingly, female victims in Bjerregaard’s sample were more likely than males to be threatened by their stalker and were also more likely to express fear for their physical safety. In fact, female stalking victims reported twice the level of fear compared to male victims, even when they had received similar threatening communications.

Despite the importance of victim perceptions in both defining and reacting to stalking, very little research has attempted to identify factors that influence these perceptions. Hills and Taplin (1998) studied the perceptions of Australian adults in response to a stalking vignette that varied across two dimensions, the nature of the perpetrator/target relationship (“stranger,” “acquaintance,” or “former intimate”) and the presence or absence of an implicit threat (“if I can’t have you, no one else will”; p. 141). Interestingly, despite a growing body of research demonstrating that stalkers who were previously involved in an intimate relationship with the target of their harassment (i.e., “former intimates”) are more likely to be violent than are offenders who target strangers (e.g., Rosenfeld, in press), both categories of targets reported fear, but the likelihood of calling the police was significantly greater in response to the “stranger” vignette. The presence of a threat, on the other hand, had no impact on perceived fear, but it did correspond to an increased likelihood of calling the police. Hills and Taplin also observed a number of significant gender effects, but because par-
participant gender was confounded with gender of the perpetrator/target described in the vignette (i.e., male participants read a vignette describing a female perpetrator/male target, and female participants read a vignette describing a male perpetrator/female target), interpretation of these gender differences is not possible. For example, they observed that women were significantly more likely to report fear and inform the police of the harassment than were men, but whether this finding reflects a greater degree of concern for male stalkers (i.e., that would be shared by both men and women) or a more extreme response to the vignettes on the part of female participants (i.e., regardless of the gender of the stalker) cannot be determined from these data.

Dennison and Thomson (2000) also studied a large sample of Australian adults (N = 540) in their investigation of the influence of situational variables on determinations of stalking and perceptions of the perpetrator’s intentions. They, too, studied perpetrator/target relationship (strangers, acquaintances, or former intimates), the intent of the perpetrator (whether there was explicit evidence of actions that would instill fear or cause emotional harm), and the impact this behavior had on the victim (extreme fear, moderate fear, or no fear). Participants were presented with a lengthy (four-page) scenario that described a male persistently following and telephoning a female for a period of 5 months. Not surprisingly, given the information presented in the vignette, virtually all of the participants (530 of 540) identified this behavior as stalking, and as a result, none of the variables studied were associated with this determination. These authors did not investigate, however, whether participant characteristics (e.g., gender, prior experience having been stalked) influenced responses to the vignettes.

In a subsequent study, Dennison and Thomson (2002) expanded this methodology in a study of 1,080 Australian adults by adding an additional variable—that is, perpetrator persistence. Because their previous study utilized a vignette in which perpetrators were highly persistent, they added two additional conditions describing perpetrators whose actions reflected either moderate or low levels of persistence. As in their previous study, the vast majority of respondents (83%) characterized the behavior described in the vignette as stalking, but they found a significant difference across gender, with 86% of women labeling the vignette as stalking compared to 78% of men. Not surprisingly, degree of persistence and the presence of specific intent
were significantly associated with the determination that stalking had occurred. They also found that women were more likely than men to perceive the perpetrator as intending to inflict fear and cause physical or mental harm to the target. Although they also observed a number of effects for perpetrator/target relationship, these associations were more complex (often taking the form of interaction effects). However, because their vignettes only depicted a male perpetrator and a female victim, the extent to which these gender effects reflect a greater concern or awareness of stalking on the part of women in general versus a greater concern for the potential violence inflicted by males is unknown. Moreover, in many analyses, the magnitude of the gender effects they observed were relatively modest. Nevertheless, the authors concluded that the factors that influence perceptions of stalking may be more complex than had been previously thought.

Interestingly, analogous research literature focusing on sexual harassment perceptions has evolved over the past decade that has examined the influence of individual- and situational-level variables on determinations of whether behaviors were perceived as sexual harassment. Fairly consistently, gender of the participant plays a small but significant role in explaining sexual harassment judgments (e.g., Gutek et al., 1999; Rotundo, Nguyen, & Sackett, 2001; Wiener, Hurt, Russell, Mannen, & Gasper, 1997). But this gender effect may also be explained by sexist attitudes and perceptions of the target’s credibility (see Wiener & Hurt, 1999). Interestingly, a target’s prior personal experience with sexual harassment does not appear to influence sexual harassment perceptions (Stockdale, O’Connor, Gutek, & Geer, 2002).

The sexual harassment literature shares many similarities to the emerging research on perceptions of stalking and provides a context for understanding the gender effects found in both literatures. In an effort to supplement this small but growing body of research, the current investigations focused on whether behaviors would be more or less likely to be considered stalking depending on situational factors (the gender of the perpetrator and target and the perpetrator/target relationship) and participant characteristics (e.g., gender and personal experience with stalking). In the first of these studies, the behavior of the perpetrator was described in a relatively ambiguous manner to increase the variability of subjective perceptions as to whether the vignette described stalking and whether a risk of harm existed,
whereas the second study systematically manipulated the seriousness of the behavior.

Specifically, it was hypothesized that female participants and those who report having previously been the target of stalking would be more likely to label the vignettes as “stalking” and would associate greater risks to the perpetrators’ behavior. In addition, the impact of terminology (i.e., use of the term stalking versus a description of repetitive harassment behaviors) on reports of whether one has been stalked was explored. In the second study, similar effects regarding participant gender were hypothesized (i.e., female participants would be more likely than men to label the vignettes as stalking), although it was anticipated that the proportion of participants labeling the vignettes as stalking would increase as the severity of the behaviors increased. Both studies also hypothesized that vignettes describing a male perpetrator and a female target would be readily classified as stalking and would generate higher levels of safety concerns.

EXPERIMENT 1

METHOD

Participants were students in introductory psychology classes at a large private university in the northeast United States; the students volunteered for this study as a method of fulfilling the course research requirement. Participants were informed that they would be participating in a study of perceptions of behavior in which they would read a series of vignettes and answer several questions that pertained to each. Each participant received a questionnaire packet that contained one of six stalking vignettes, all of which described interactions between a male and a female using a $2 \times 3$ design to vary gender of the perpetrator and target (male perpetrator pursuing a female target and female perpetrator pursuing a male target) and the relationship between these individuals (stranger, acquaintance, and a previous romantic relationship or former intimate). Table 1 presents examples of these vignettes. Participants also completed a brief demographic questionnaire, and they read and responded to two additional vignettes with accompany-
ing questions that served as a filler to distract attention from the stalking vignette.

After reading the vignette, participants indicated their reactions to a series of questions using a Likert-type scale from 1 (definitely) to 5 (definitely not). These questions included whether the behavior described in the vignette constituted stalking (i.e., “Is Jane stalking Joe?” or “Is Joe stalking Jane?”), whether the target should be worried about his or her safety, whether the target should meet with the perpetrator, whether the perpetrator would become violent, whether the target should seek help from the police or security, and whether the perpetrator needs psychiatric treatment. To ease interpretation of the data, responses to several of these questions were reversed so that a higher score on all variables reflected a greater degree of concern over the perpetrator’s behavior.

Participants were also asked several questions that pertained to their personal experiences with stalking. The wording in the primary question used to assess prior stalking victimization was also varied to ascertain whether the term stalking influenced perceptions of one’s own experiences. Toward this end, half of the participants were asked whether they had “ever been stalked,” and the remainder were asked...
whether they had “ever been repeatedly followed (i.e., more than once) and/or harassed by another person.” Participants who responded affirmatively to this question were asked to provide details regarding the stalking experience, including the number of times they have been stalked (i.e., the number of different stalkers), the length of time this behavior continued, and the occurrence of several specific stalking behaviors (e.g., receiving unwanted gifts, waiting outside of work or school, etc.).

Statistical analyses. Frequency analyses and chi-square statistics were used to assess participant responses to the above questions, including whether responses to the question regarding personal experience having been stalked differed depending on the wording of the question. A two-way (Gender × Relationship) multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) model was used to analyze the relationships between vignette characteristics and the perception of stalking, with post hoc tests used to determine the nature of any observed effects. Two subsequent 2 × 3 × 2 MANOVA analyses were conducted that included (a) personal experience having been stalked and (b) the gender of the participant along with the vignette characteristics described above. This was done to determine whether these participant characteristics influenced perceptions of the vignettes.

RESULTS

Sample characteristics. The sample included 41 (34.2%) male and 79 (65.8%) female participants, with an average age of 18.7 years (SD = 1.0; range = 17 to 27). The sample was primarily Caucasian (n = 95, 79.2%), with 13 Hispanic participants (10.8%) and 11 (9.2%) of other (or multiple) racial backgrounds (data were missing for one participant). Twenty-seven participants responded affirmatively to the question pertaining to personal experience having been stalked (22.5%). Of these 27 respondents, 12 indicated that they had been stalked by more than one individual, and seven indicated more than two different stalking experiences. The proportion of respondents endorsing this question did not differ, regardless of whether they were asked if they had been “stalked” versus “repeatedly followed.
and/or harassed” (21.9% vs. 23.2%), $\chi^2(1, N = 120) = .03, p = .56$. Because wording did not appear to influence responses to this question, data were collapsed for subsequent analyses concerning the relationship of stalking experience to the interpretation of the vignettes. Gender of the participant was also unrelated to reported stalking experience, as 17.1% ($n = 7$) of males and 25.3% ($n = 20$) of females reported having been stalked or repeatedly harassed, $\chi^2(1, N = 120) = 1.05, p = .22$.

**Vignette influences.** A $2 \times 3$ MANOVA, including perpetrator/target relationship (stranger, acquaintance, or prior intimate) and victim/perpetrator gender (male perpetrator/female target or female perpetrator/male target) and the Relationship $\times$ Gender interaction effect, revealed a significant main effect for relationship, $F(12, 218) = 1.87, p < .05, \eta^2 = .09$; and gender, $F(12, 218) = 4.59, p < .01, \eta^2 = .20$; but not for the interaction effect, $F(6, 109) = 0.53, p = .89, \eta^2 = .03$. Subsequent univariate analyses demonstrated that perpetrator/target relationship was significantly associated with assessments of whether or not the perpetrator was stalking the target, $F(2, 114) = 3.07, p \leq .05, \eta^2 = .05$, and whether the target should meet with the perpetrator face-to-face, $F(2, 114) = 4.86, p < .01, \eta^2 = .08$. There were no significant differences by relationship found for any other dependent variable. Post hoc analyses revealed that participants were less likely to consider the vignette indicative of stalking when the perpetrator and target were prior intimates ($M = 3.43, SD = 0.8$) compared to acquaintances ($M = 3.88, SD = 0.8; p < .05$). The comparison of prior intimates and strangers ($M = 3.77, SD = 1.0$) also approached significance ($p = .07$), but there was no difference between ratings for stranger and acquaintance vignettes (see Table 2). Also, participants were significantly less likely ($p < .05$) to recommend that the target meet with the perpetrator in the stranger vignette ($M = 1.8, SD = 0.9$) compared to either the vignette describing acquaintances ($M = 2.37, SD = 1.3$) or a prior intimate relationship ($M = 2.5, SD = 1.1$).

Analysis of the perpetrator/target gender effects revealed a significant main effect for the question of whether the target should meet with the perpetrator, $F(1, 114) = 13.43, p < .01, \eta^2 = .11$; whether he or she should be worried for his or her safety, $F(1, 114) = 13.87, p < .01, \eta^2 = .11$; and whether the target should seek help from the police or
hospital security (the vignettes described both actors as physicians), $F(1, 114) = 4.47, p < .05, \eta^2 = .04$. In each of these comparisons, participants indicated more concern for the target’s safety in vignettes describing a male perpetrator and a female target compared to vignettes describing the reverse (female perpetrator/male target; see Table 2). Gender of the actors in the vignette was not related to responses to the question of whether the vignette described stalking, $F(1, 114) = 0.29, p = .59, \eta^2 = .003$; nor any of the remaining variables analyzed (i.e., whether the perpetrator would become violent and needed mental health treatment).

Sample influences. Two subsequent MANOVA analyses were conducted to ascertain whether the addition of (a) experience having been stalked or (b) gender of the participant influenced responses to the vignettes. When the question of whether an individual had been stalked was included in the MANOVA analysis, there were no significant main effect or relevant interaction effects for any of the dependent variables analyzed (data are not reported).

Participant gender had no direct association (i.e., main effect) with any of the variables analyzed, $F(6, 103) = 0.42, p = .86, \eta^2 = .02$. However, this analysis did reveal a significant three-way interaction effect, $F(12, 206) = 2.21, p < .05, \eta^2 = .11$ (see Table 3). Univariate analyses of the individual dependent variables revealed a significant three-way interaction effect for whether the vignette reflected

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Stranger MF</th>
<th>Stranger FM</th>
<th>Acquaintance MF</th>
<th>Acquaintance FM</th>
<th>Intimate MF</th>
<th>Intimate FM</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stalking</td>
<td>3.67</td>
<td>3.77</td>
<td>3.97</td>
<td>3.88</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>3.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meet in person</td>
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<td>3.76</td>
<td>3.51</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>3.73</td>
<td>3.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seek help from police/security</td>
<td>3.93</td>
<td>3.09</td>
<td>3.38</td>
<td>3.25</td>
<td>3.33</td>
<td>2.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worried about safety</td>
<td>3.57</td>
<td>2.66</td>
<td>3.29</td>
<td>3.03</td>
<td>3.07</td>
<td>2.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Become violent</td>
<td>2.77</td>
<td>2.75</td>
<td>2.97</td>
<td>2.84</td>
<td>3.03</td>
<td>2.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Need psychiatric help</td>
<td>3.60</td>
<td>3.61</td>
<td>3.79</td>
<td>3.63</td>
<td>3.67</td>
<td>3.56</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Numbers in the table reflect Likert-type ratings on a 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) scale. FM = female perpetrator, male target; MF = male perpetrator, female target.
stalking, $F(2, 108) = 7.45, p < .01, \eta^2 = .12$; and responses to whether the target should be worried and whether the perpetrator needs psychiatric help both approached significance, $F(2, 108) = 2.99, p = .06, \eta^2 = .05$; and $F(2, 108) = 2.93, p = .06, \eta^2 = .05$, respectively.

Analysis of responses to the stalking question revealed a complex pattern of results (as three-way interactions often are). Male participants were more likely than women to perceive the “stranger” vignette as indicative of stalking when the perpetrator was male ($M = 4.20, SD = 0.8$) rather than female ($M = 3.14, SD = 1.3$). The reverse pattern was true for women, as they rated the “stranger” vignette as more indicative of stalking when the perpetrator was a female ($M = 4.08, SD = 1.0$) rather than a male ($M = 3.67, SD = 0.6$). The opposite pattern emerged for the “acquaintance” vignette, with men rating the vignettes as more indicative of stalking when the perpetrator was a female ($M = 4.14, SD = 0.8$) rather than a male ($M = 3.29, SD = 0.5$); women, on the other hand, rated the “acquaintance” vignettes as more indicative of stalking when the perpetrator was a male ($M = 4.31, SD = 0.6$) rather than a female ($M = 3.62, SD = 0.5$). There were no gender differences in the ratings of the “relationship” vignette for either gender, regardless of the perpetrator/target gender described in the vignettes (see Table 3).

**DISCUSSION**

The results of this study contradicted our hypothesis that female participants would be more likely to label the vignettes as stalking compared to male participants. Moreover, there was no difference in

| TABLE 3: Influence of Participant Gender by Vignette Characteristics on Perceptions of Stalking: Experiment 1—Is Joe Stalking Jane? or Is Jane stalking Joe? |
|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|
| Participant Gender | Stranger | Acquaintance | Intimate |
| | MF | FM | MF | FM | MF | FM |
| Male | 4.20 | 3.14 | 3.29 | 4.14 | 3.50 | 3.56 |
| Female | 3.67 | 4.08 | 4.31 | 3.62 | 3.43 | 3.28 |

Note. Numbers in table reflect Likert-type ratings on a 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) scale. FM = female perpetrator, male target; MF = male perpetrator, female target.
perceptions of whether the behavior described constituted stalking between vignettes describing a male perpetrator and female target versus a female perpetrator and male target (although the three-way interaction effect suggests that some complex relationships between character gender and perpetrator/target relationship may exist). This interaction clearly requires further analysis before any conclusions can be drawn. Finally, there was no relationship between prior experience as a target of stalking and perceptions of stalking, again contradicting commonsense assumptions regarding the influence of past experience on perceptions of behavior. This null finding, however, is consistent with the emerging literature on perceptions of sexual harassment, which demonstrate that prior sexual harassment victimization does not influence perceptions of whether behaviors constitute sexual harassment (Stockdale et al., 2002).

Despite the compelling findings observed in this study, a number of questions arose, such as whether young, predominantly Caucasian undergraduates are an appropriate reference group against which to base conclusions regarding stalking perceptions. In addition, because the behaviors described in these vignettes were deliberately vague, it is unclear whether similar findings would emerge if the behaviors described were more strongly suggestive of stalking. These limitations were addressed in the subsequent study in which vignettes varied according to the severity of the stalking behaviors described (rather than the relationship between perpetrator and target). This study also included a substantially larger sample with considerably greater diversity in terms of ethnicity, age, and socioeconomic levels.

EXPERIMENT 2

METHOD

Participants in the second study consisted of 376 undergraduate and graduate students in an urban, public college that has the primary mission to provide undergraduate and graduate training in criminal justice and related fields. Participants were recruited through undergraduate and graduate classes. Each participant was given one of six possible vignettes that described an interaction between a man and a
woman (Tom and Mary) who met at a party. Based on the New York State antistalking law, three scenarios depicting potential stalking behavior were developed. One scenario depicted behaviors that did not meet the definition of stalking under New York State law, while a second scenario depicted behaviors that were consistent with stalking in the fourth degree (misdemeanor stalking), and the third scenario depicted behaviors that were consistent with stalking in the third degree (felony stalking). Each of these scenarios was built on the previous one such that the length of each scenario became slightly longer as the criminality of the perpetrator’s behaviors increased (Table 4). Finally, two versions of each of these three scenarios were created—one describing a male perpetrator and a female victim and a second describing the reverse scenario, thus resulting in a total of six conditions.

After reading the vignette, participants indicated their reactions to a series of questions using a 5-point, Likert-type scale where 1 = definitely and 5 = definitely not. These questions included whether the behavior described in the vignette constituted stalking (i.e., “Is Tom stalking Mary?” or “Is Mary stalking Tom?”), whether the behavior would be considered a crime (specifically, stalking under New York law), whether the perpetrator has a legitimate purpose for contacting the target, whether the target should be worried about his or her safety, whether the perpetrator would become violent, and whether the perpetrator suffered from mental illness. Participants were also asked about their own familiarity level with New York antistalking law along with a series of demographic questions.

Statistical analyses. Frequency analyses and chi-square statistics were used to assess participant responses to the above questions. A two-way (Gender × Stalking Severity) multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) model was used to analyze the relationships between vignette characteristics and perception of stalking, with post hoc tests used to determine the nature of any observed effects. Two 3-way (2 × 3 × 2) MANOVA analyses were then conducted, including gender of the participant along with the vignette characteristics described above to determine whether participant gender influenced perceptions of the vignettes.
TABLE 4: Study Two: Sample Vignettes With Conditions Embedded—
Tom Pursuing Mary

(Paragraph 1) All conditions. Tom met Mary at a party that a mutual friend hosted. They talked for a while at the party before going their separate ways. Mary worked at the local bank as a teller. Mary noticed that Tom began coming into the bank to make transactions.

(Paragraph 2) No stalking condition. Usually he would wave at Mary if he saw her, and a few times, he waited specifically for Mary to help him with his transaction. After a few weeks of the same pattern, Mary was beginning to question Tom’s intentions. She didn’t think that anyone could possibly have as much banking to do as Tom seemed to have.

(Added to Paragraph 2) Third- and fourth-degree stalking conditions. Within a few weeks, Tom started calling the bank to make sure Mary was working before he came in. Mary took a week off from work and went out of town. When she came back to work her manager was very angry with her. “Some guy named Tom keeps calling at least 6 or 7 times a day to see where you are at. I told him not to call here anymore.” The bank manager warned Mary that if this continued he would have to fire Mary.

(Paragraph 3) No stalking condition. Mary, not sure of how to reach Tom, called their mutual friend. Mary was informed that Tom is very shy but found her very easy to talk to and would like to take her out on a date. Mary called Tom and thanked him for his interest in her. She then explained that she was not interested in dating anyone but would like to remain friends with Tom. Tom agreed and told Mary that if she changed her mind to just call him.

(Added to Paragraph 3) Third- and fourth-degree stalking condition. Mary also told Tom that the bank that she works for does not like its employees to receive too many personal phone calls. Mary told Tom that if it is an emergency, he is welcome to call her at the bank, but she does not want to lose her job. Tom agreed.

(Paragraph 4) No stalking condition. Mary still saw Tom at the bank, but now she was seeing him when she went to the market, and he was on the same bus that Mary takes to and from work. When Tom would see Mary, he would wave or smile. Mary decided to tell Tom to stop following her. When she did, Tom told her that she was nuts. “This is a small town. What market would you like me to shop in? Where do you think I should do my banking?” Mary just shrugged her shoulders and told Tom that she didn’t care where he shopped or banked as long as she wasn’t around. Despite confronting Tom, Mary would still see Tom when she was working or running errands, but he would not acknowledge Mary.

(Added to Paragraph 4) Fourth-degree stalking condition. The next day Mary came to work to find a teddy bear holding a red rose with a card signed “your special friend Tom.” Later that morning, Tom called her to see if she received the gift. Mary thanked him and reiterated that she could not receive phone calls. Later that day Tom called just to say “Hi” and then called to find out if she would like to go to dinner. Mary turned Tom down and asked him to stop calling her. The next day Tom called Mary at the bank to apologize for his behavior and promised never to call again.

(Added to Paragraph 4) Third-degree stalking condition. The following week when Mary was leaving work, Tom was waiting in the bank parking lot. Mary ignored Tom when he said hello to her and just walked to her car. Tom became very angry and began to yell at Mary, “I don’t understand you Mary. . . . I am a really nice guy and would make you happy if you only let me. I only came here to apologize to you. Why won’t you go out with me? Do you really think that you are so much better than me. . . . Just wait. . . . It is only going to be a matter of time before you go out with me.” Tom then walked away. The next day Tom called Mary at the bank to apologize for his behavior.
RESULTS

Sample characteristics. The sample included 244 (66%) women and 130 (33%) men (2 participants did not indicate their gender), with an average age of 24.2 years (SD = 6.4; range = 18 to 60 years old). The racial and ethnic composition of the sample was 118 (30.6%) Caucasian, 109 (28.3%) Latino, 76 (19.7%) African American, 48 (12.5%) Other, 23 (5.9%) Asian, and 13 (3.3%) missing.

Vignette influences. A MANOVA including degree of stalking (no stalking, misdemeanor stalking, or felony stalking), victim/perpetrator gender (male perpetrator/female target versus female perpetrator/male target), and the two-way interaction effect revealed a main effect for degree of stalking, $F(10, 732) = 9.10, p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .11$; and gender, $F(5, 366) = 3.15, p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .04$; but not for the interaction effect $F(10, 732) = 1.38, p = .19$, $\eta^2 = .02$. Univariate analyses revealed that the severity of stalking behaviors described in the vignette was significantly associated with several of the dependent variables studied. Severity of stalking behaviors influenced participants’ perception that the behavior constituted stalking, $F(2, 370) = 33.71, p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .15$; that the behaviors constituted a crime, $F(2, 370) = 18.46, p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .09$; that the perpetrator might hurt the target, $F(2, 370) = 28.51, p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .13$; and whether the stalker’s behavior was caused by a mental illness, $F(2, 370) = 3.29, p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .02$. There was no significant effect for the question of whether the perpetrator should know his (or her) behavior is causing Tom/Mary to be afraid, $F(2, 370) = 1.44, p = .24$, $\eta^2 = .01$.

Post hoc analyses revealed that significant differences existed between all three conditions for both the question of whether the behavior constituted stalking and whether the perpetrator might hurt the target. Responses to the question of whether the behavior constituted a crime did not differ between the two conditions that described fourth- and third-degree stalking conditions, but both conditions generated significantly higher levels of confidence (that a crime had been committed) compared to the no stalking condition.

Gender of the perpetrator/stalker was not associated with perceptions of whether the vignette described stalking or whether the behaviors described were criminal, but it was significantly associated with
participants’ perceptions of whether the stalker would hurt the target, $F(1, 370) = 12.79, p < .01, \eta^2 = .03$; with violence being perceived as more likely when the vignette described a male perpetrator and female target compared to the reverse. There were no gender differences for the remaining two questions (whether the behavior was caused by a mental illness or whether the perpetrator should know that his or her behavior is causing fear). The two-way interaction effect was not significant in any of the univariate analyses.

_Sample influences._ Two MANOVA analyses were conducted to determine whether the gender and ethnicity of the participant influenced the responses to the scenarios. There was no significant MANOVA main effect for participant gender, $F(5, 358) = 1.59, p = .16, \eta^2 = .02$; but univariate analyses revealed a significant gender difference for determinations of whether the actions constituted stalking, $F(1, 362) = 5.63, p = .02, \eta^2 = .02$, “although this effect was quite small (see Table 5). Specifically, women rated the vignettes as significantly more likely to indicate stalking as compared to men. There were no other significant univariate effects for gender, although two other questions (“Will the perpetrator hurt the target?” and “Is the perpetrator’s behavior the result of a mental illness?”) approached significance, $F(1, 362) = 3.32, p = .07, \eta^2 = .01$; and $F(1, 362) = 3.07, p = .08, \eta^2 = .01$, respectively. A number of two- and three-way interaction effects were
also significant, but an examination of the group means revealed no observable group differences (see Table 5). A second MANOVA generated a significant main effect for ethnicity of the participant, $F(25, 928) = 2.20, p < .01, \eta^2 = .03$. Univariate analyses demonstrated that the ethnic background of the participant was significantly associated with ratings of the likelihood that the perpetrator would hurt the target, $F(3, 340) = 4.73, p < .01, \eta^2 = .04$, and perceptions of whether the perpetrator’s behavior was caused by a mental illness, $F(3, 340) = 4.23, p < .01, \eta^2 = .04$. Post hoc analyses did not reveal any clear pattern that would explain the differences in participants’ responses. For example, Caucasian participants were more likely than African American respondents to express concern that the perpetrator might harm the target but were less likely to consider the behavior indicative of a mental disorder than were respondents of Asian or other descent. In short, no clear pattern was evident to explain the ethnic differences in response to these vignettes.

**DISCUSSION**

This study further supported the earlier findings regarding the lack of any influence of either participant or perpetrator/target gender on perceptions of whether stalking has occurred. On the other hand, these data supported the previous finding that vignettes describing a male perpetrator and female target elicited greater concerns regarding safety than vignettes describing a female perpetrator and a male target. Contrary to the expectations, female participants were no more likely than male participants to label the vignettes as stalking. However, these results support the distinctions made by New York State’s antistalking law, as participants were more likely to correctly identify both of the vignettes describing fourth-degree stalking and third-degree stalking as stalking compared to the no-stalking condition (but no significant differences existed between the two stalking vignettes). Interestingly, although few differences in perceptions were observed across ethnic groups, there was no identifiable pattern to these findings, and the relatively small number of participants in some categories limits the ability to interpret these findings.
GENERAL DISCUSSION

With a growing number of antistalking laws defining stalking in terms of whether the individual had a “reasonable fear” of harm, the need to understand how individuals perceive stalking behaviors has become increasingly evident. These studies addressed several important aspects related to perceptions of stalking in complementary ways. In particular, these studies represent some of the first attempts to systematically analyze the extent to which stalking behaviors, victim-perpetrator relationships, and gender (of both the parties and the respondents) influence determinations of whether stalking has occurred and the potential risk posed to victims.

The first study utilized a vignette in which the determination of whether stalking had actually occurred was ambiguous. In this context, the relationship between target and perpetrator (i.e., strangers, coworker acquaintances, or former dating partners) and the gender of these actors (i.e., male perpetrator/female target vs. female perpetrator/male target) significantly influenced responses to the stalking vignettes. Specifically, participants were significantly less likely to characterize the vignette as stalking when the actors were described as having previously been involved in an intimate relationship compared to the vignette describing the two characters as having been merely acquaintances or having had no prior relationship (strangers). Interestingly, this apparent reluctance to characterize harassing behaviors as stalking when a prior relationship exists stands in contrast to the growing body of epidemiological data demonstrating that stalking is far more common among prior intimates compared to acquaintances or strangers (e.g., Budd & Mattinson, 2000; Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998).

On the other hand, although gender of the vignette characters did not influence determinations of whether stalking had occurred, it did influence perceptions of safety for the target of the behaviors. Several indicators of concern for safety differed significantly depending on the perpetrator/target gender, including whether the target should be concerned for his or her safety, should seek help from the police or hospital security, and should meet with the perpetrator. Interestingly, a question directly targeting the risk of violence (i.e., “How likely is it that Joe/Jane will be violent toward Jane/Joe?”) did not differ by
perpetrator/target gender, suggesting that the influence of gender on perceived risk may be somewhat subtle. Alternatively, participants may be more sensitive to fear-inducing behaviors when the target is a woman, even though they do not fear explicit assault or violence per se.

The perception of male stalkers as more dangerous than female stalkers, although clearly logical, is not consistent with the existing empirical data. Rates of violence among female stalkers have been comparable to those for males in several studies (Purcell, Pathé, & Mullen, 2001; Rosenfeld, in press; Rosenfeld & Harmon, 2002), and there is no evidence that the severity of violence inflicted by women stalkers is substantially less than males. Yet the finding that male stalkers engender more concern than female stalkers echoes the data presented by Sinclair and Frieze (2000), who observed that men generate more fear in those individuals whom they pursue than women do, even when they do not display overt indications of aggression.

The second study utilized a similar methodology, but instead of comparing responses to an ambiguous vignette, vignettes were systematically varied in terms of the severity of stalking behavior (i.e., vignettes that did not fulfill the New York State definition of stalking vs. vignettes characterizing misdemeanor and felonious stalking). In these analyses, in which gender of the perpetrator and target were varied in a similar manner to the first study (male perpetrator/female target vs. female perpetrator/male target), severity of stalking clearly influenced determinations of whether stalking had occurred (supporting the validity of the experimental manipulation). Participants were significantly more likely to consider the behaviors described to be criminal (i.e., reflecting stalking) in the vignettes describing third- and fourth-degree stalking (felony and misdemeanor, respectively) compared to the no-stalking vignette. There were no differences between the third- and fourth-degree stalking vignettes regarding criminality. As in the first study, perpetrator/target gender did not influence determinations of stalking but did influence safety concerns, as participants considered the stalker to be significantly more likely to harm the target when the perpetrator was male and the target was female versus the reverse scenario (female perpetrator/male target).

Gender of the participant, however, appears to have a more complex effect on stalking perceptions. In the second study, women partic-
Participants were somewhat more likely to perceive the vignettes as indicative of stalking than were men, regardless of the perpetrator/target gender. This finding is similar to the gender effect found by Dennison and Thompson (2002). Yet, in the first study, no such main effect emerged. Instead, a significant three-way interaction effect between participant gender, gender of the vignette characters, and relationship of the vignette characters was found. Both men and women appeared more likely to identify the behavior described in the stranger vignette as stalking when the perpetrator was of the same gender as the participant, whereas they rated the acquaintances vignettes as more indicative of stalking when the target was of their same gender. This pattern may reflect a tendency to identify with the behavior of the perpetrator in the stranger vignettes and the target in the acquaintance vignettes, decreasing the likelihood that participants would identify the behavior described in the vignette as inappropriate (i.e., stalking). Because perpetrator/target relationship was not varied in the second study, it is unclear whether these effects would have remained consistent in cases where the stalking behaviors were more clear-cut. Thus, although there may be some differences in how men and women perceive certain aspects of stalking, these differences are quite modest and inconsistent. Also observed in the second study was an unexpected influence of ethnicity on safety concerns and attributions for the stalking behavior. Because there was no consistent pattern to these findings, their implications are unclear. Furthermore, the first study was almost entirely composed of Caucasian participants, precluding the analysis of any ethnicity effects. Clearly, these findings, which have not emerged in any of the published research to date, require further exploration.

Interestingly, contrary to the expectations, participants who reported personal prior experience of having been stalked did not differ from those who reported no such experience in relation to perceptions of stalking or risk of harm in any of the vignettes used in the first study (these data were not available in the second study). Although it was anticipated that participants who had been previously stalked would be more attuned to this behavior and therefore be more likely to identify harassing behaviors as stalking, this pattern did not emerge. This null finding might reflect sample limitations, as stalking victimization among college students may be different in nature, intensity, and
impact from stalking victimization among the general population (hence, the substantially higher rates of stalking victimization reported by college students compared to the general population). Individuals who have experienced more severe types of stalking than that of typical college students might have more readily identified the vignettes as indicative of stalking, whereas the college students studied in this investigation did not reveal this pattern. Alternatively, this null finding may reflect a limitation of the study methodology, as more striking differences might emerge with different vignette characteristics (e.g., more overt or potentially dangerous stalking behaviors). Yet, similar null findings regarding the lack of influence of past experience on harassment perceptions have been reported in the context of sexual harassment (Stockdale et al., 2002). Thus, although commonsense assumptions often foster the belief that past experience with harassment may sensitize targets to future harassment, these null findings call such assumptions into question.

Despite the consistency across these two studies with regard to many aspects of stalking perceptions, several methodological limitations are noteworthy. First, although there is no doubt that stalking occurs among college undergraduates, the nature of these experiences may be quite different than among the general population. However, this criticism is substantially less valid for the data reported in the second study, in which participants ranged in age from 18 to 60 and reflected a broad diversity of ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds. Moreover, many of these findings supported and extended those of previous researchers who used samples drawn from the general public (i.e., Dennison & Thompson, 2000, 2002; Hills & Taplin, 1998), suggesting that sample differences may not have dramatically influenced the study results.

Also, although ecological validity concerns may apply to the analysis of ambiguous vignettes in the first study (i.e., the behaviors described were not indisputably reflective of stalking), this criticism does not apply to the second study, and yet similar results regarding gender effects emerged. The second study, however, utilized vignettes of varying lengths, as each vignette built on the previous one by adding additional stalking behaviors (to be consistent with the legal standards for stalking offenses in New York). Thus, the finding that increasing levels of stalking severity were associated with increased
likelihood of labeling the behaviors as stalking is confounded by the amount of information presented in the vignettes. Future research should evaluate the possibility that vignette length influences perceptions of stalking.

The analysis of the perpetrator/target relationship is also necessarily limited. First, this variable was only included in the first study, and in this vignette, the actors were described as physicians. The characterization of the actors as credible authority figures may have decreased the likelihood that some respondents would identify the behaviors as indicative of stalking, particularly among a college student sample in which respect for authority figures may be heightened. Because this variable was not included in the second study, it is unclear whether similar relationship influences would occur in a scenario in which stalking was less ambiguous, although the results of previous research (e.g., Dennison & Thompson, 2002) suggests that the influence of situational variables may be less pronounced as the ambiguity of the behaviors decreases. Nevertheless, by varying the perceived credibility and/or prestige of the vignette characters, this potentially important determinant of participant stalking perceptions may emerge as a significant factor, either in isolation (i.e., a main effect) or in conjunction with other variables (i.e., interaction effects).

Despite these limitations, the present investigations represent one of the few attempts to analyze the interrelationships between characteristics of the harassment and characteristics of the respondents in terms of perceived stalking and risk of harm. These findings demonstrate that both participant gender and the characteristics of the perpetrator and target influence perceptions of stalking and the risks associated with this behavior. The implications of these findings for the legal system are multiple, including the possibility that jurors’ perceptions may differ in a systematic manner whether a stalking victim’s claims of reasonable fear are justified. Also, the relatively lesser concern paid to female stalkers in these studies suggests an important avenue for clinical intervention, as male stalking victims may underestimate the risk of harm posed by a female stalker. Clearly, further attention is needed to better understand the perceptions and stereotypes that influence behavior in response to stalking.
NOTE

1. Perpetrator and target are the descriptive terms used in vignette-based research, including the present study, because many study participants may not identify the actors as offenders, stalkers, or victims.

REFERENCES


California Penal Code, Section § 646.9 (1990).


New York Criminal Procedure Law, Section § 120.45 (1999).


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