This article aims to clarify two issues relating to stalking: how potential victims perceive the crime and the prevalence of stalking and stalking-related acts among the British female population. Three hundred forty-eight women were invited to classify which of a range of intrusive behaviors were exemplars of stalking. They were then asked to indicate whether they had first-hand experience of any of these behaviors and, if so, to describe the worst episode. Of the sample, 24% reported at least one incident of stalking. The women held clear ideas on what they felt did and did not constitute stalking behaviors. Cluster analyses provided subtypes of stalking behaviors as perceived by respondents and subtypes of actual stalking as experienced by the sample. The findings suggest that a final legislative definition of stalking may not be necessary and that the high prevalence rate requires serious academic and legal attention.

Stalking
Perceptions and Prevalence

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England and Wales implemented its first antistalking legislation, the Protection From Harassment Act, in June 1997. This followed an increase in public concern over stalking due to media attention, celebrity stalking cases, and pressure from groups of stalking victims. It became widely accepted that stalking was a serious social problem in England and Wales and that there was clear justification for criminalizing this type of harassment. However, a legal description of stalking was never provided, and no accepted definition of stalking currently exists. There are no figures detailing the extent of the problem or detailed explanations of the motives of stalkers. Likewise, there are few data on who stalkers or their victims are likely to be. It may be said, then, that those countries that have initiated antistalking legislation are attempting to deal with an essentially unknown quantity. This article seeks to investigate two stalking-related issues: how English and Welsh women perceive the crime and the prevalence of stalking and stalking-related acts in a female population.

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Definition and Public Perception of Stalking

Since the world’s first antistalking law was introduced in California in 1990, there has been much debate over what the term *stalking* actually means and what acts constitute stalking behaviors. As far as the general public is concerned, it may be that stalking is like great art: They cannot define it but know what it is when they see it. For the purposes of this article, however, a working definition of stalking is that it is a series of actions directed at one individual by another that taken as a whole amount to unwanted persistent personal harassment.

In recent years, the number of cases exhibiting characteristics congruent with this definition of stalking and that were reported to the police has risen. It became increasingly evident that existing legal remedies were unable to deal with the rising number of complaints. The previous British government recognized that stalking was a serious problem of unknown scale and introduced the Protection From Harassment Act in England and Wales in 1997. The act was broad in scope and could be applied to a wide range of situations including neighborhood nuisance, bullying at work and in school, sexual and racial harassment, political demonstration, and even intrusive news reporting. Its main aim, however, was to deal with stalkers. The new act sought to intervene before actual physical or serious psychological harm took place, and a unique feature was the power it gave police to intervene at an early stage and to recognize that a series of acts, innocuous in themselves, could constitute a serious punishable offense.

Because the new act acknowledged that a series of innocuous behaviors could when taken together constitute criminal harassment, it was not deemed appropriate to tightly define stalking. The act did not fully define *harassment* but stated that “references to harassing a person include alarming the person or causing the person distress” (Home Office, 1997, s7(2)). Its effects on the victim determined whether a course of conduct amounted to harassment. This level of flexibility allowed that any persistent unwanted behavior could amount to harassment—permitting police to intervene before behavior escalated into violence (Metropolitan Police Service, 1997).

So, although legislation exists, the definitions of *stalking* employed can be rather nebulous. Furthermore, there is very little evidence concerning public perception of the crime such that there is no way of knowing whether the existing legislation addresses the kinds of activities that the public believes should be unlawful. Sheridan, Gillett, and Davies (1997) investigated whether members of the public (the potential victims of criminal stalking) held shared ideas on what constituted a prototypical stalking act. In a preliminary study, a
random sample of 80 women was asked via a simple yes/no format to indicate which of a continuum of 40 intrusive behaviors were believed to be exemplars of stalking activities. Participants’ responses were subjected to cluster analysis, which revealed the presence of two main clusters. The interpretation was straightforward in that one cluster represented behaviors that gave rise to a high degree of consensus as exemplars of stalking, whereas the second cluster represented a range of behaviors that were perceived by few participants as representing stalking. Respondents agreed at a level of 70% or higher that 20 of the 40 intrusive behaviors represented acts of stalking.

The stalking cluster comprised three subdivisions, which were labeled as contact, violent, and proximity-seeking behavior clusters. It was not possible, however, to compare these clusters with subtypes of stalking generated in other studies due to the vastly differing methodologies employed. For instance, the focus of victim-stalker typologies has been either on the victims (e.g., Holmes, 1993) or the stalkers themselves (e.g., Zona, Sharma, & Lane, 1993) or on the various relationships between the two (e.g., Meloy & Gothard, 1995). Some of the classifications, such as Dietz and colleagues’ (Dietz, Matthews, Martell, et al., 1991; Dietz, Matthews, Van Duyne, et al., 1991), deal with the stalking of public figures only, whereas others (e.g., Geberth, 1992) have their focus on mental illness in the perpetrator. No typology of stalking to date has been developed via women’s actual experiences of particular harassing behaviors.

Prevalence

Sheridan et al. (1997) further asked the members of their sample to indicate which of the list of 40 intrusive acts they had personally experienced and then asked them to relate the “worst incident(s).” Of the total sample, 20% were judged to have experienced stalking. There are as yet no official statistics on the incidence of stalking in Britain, mainly because the phenomenon has only recently been criminalized. Despite this, there appears to exist a general feeling that stalking is more commonplace now than in the past, although this could be due to the increase in sensationalist reporting by the media or a greater readiness of victims to talk publicly about their experiences. An English telephone survey (NOP Research Group, 1997), however, produced similar findings to the Sheridan et al. study. Twenty-five percent of 1,013 people younger than the age of 35 interviewed said that they knew someone who had been a victim of stalking or persistent pestering, either face to face or through nuisance telephone calls. More than twice as many women as men said they had personally experienced threatening behavior of this kind (19% vs. 8%).
In North America, Faulkner and Hsiao (1993) estimated that 5% of American women in the general population will be victims of stalking at some time in their lives. A recent report by Tjaden and Thoennes (1998) estimated that approximately 8% of American women have been stalked at some time and that more than 1 million are stalked annually. Corwin (1993) estimated the number of cases of stalking in the United States to be at least 200,000 each year, and Furio (1993) estimated that one in six women in the United States who are murdered each year have first been stalked. The issue of prevalence remains undetermined, however, and given the disparity between the amount of relevant research and the amount of legislation, there is an urgent requirement for more data.

The present study aims to expand on Sheridan et al.’s (1997) study and has two main objectives. It first investigates whether female members of the British public hold clear ideas on what is and is not a stalking act in the absence of any formal legal definition of criminal harassment. This was explored through the presentation of a list of 42 intrusive acts, with respondents required to indicate which acts they felt constituted stalking. Second, the respondents sample were shown the same continuum of intrusive behaviors and asked to indicate any they had experienced personally. Cluster analyses were conducted on both women’s perceptions of the 42 behaviors and women’s experiences of the same in an attempt to discover whether perceived and actual subtypes of stalking overlapped. Finally, the women were asked to record in detail their worst harassing or intrusive episode if they had experienced one. The aim here was to obtain further insight into women’s experiences of stalking and harassment.

**METHOD**

**Participants**

Questionnaires were distributed among female members of the trade union UNISON in England and Wales during the first six months of 1999. Three hundred forty-eight were returned by the conclusion of the study, and all were included in the analysis. UNISON members were specifically selected so that women from a wide range of socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds could be sampled. UNISON is Britain’s biggest trade union, with 1.4 million members working in local government; the health service; the electricity, gas, transport, and water industries; schools; colleges; universities; housing; the police service; and the voluntary and community sectors.
The socioeconomic status of the women, as defined by their occupational title, was as follows: 147 (42.2%) were clerical workers, 75 (21.6%) were professionals, 57 (16.4%) were students, 30 (8.6%) were employed in the nursing/caring professions, 16 (4.6%) were unskilled workers, 12 (3.4%) were technicians, 6 (1.7%) were retired, and 5 (1.4%) were unemployed.

The majority of respondents (307 or 88.2%) described themselves as White in ethnic origin. Nineteen (5.5%) were Asian, and 16 (4.6%) were Black. Six more participants (1.7%) described themselves as Latin. Participants were bracketed into three age groups: 18 to 27 \((n = 91)\), 28 to 45 \((n = 174)\), and 46 and older \((n = 83)\).

Some 149 (42.8%) were single, a further 148 were married, and the remaining 51 (14.7%) were either separated or divorced. More than half (197 or 56.6%) lived with a partner, 105 (29%) resided in another form of shared accommodation, and 46 (13.2%) lived alone.

**The Stalking Questionnaire**

The questionnaire consisted of an introduction and four main sections and took the following format.

**Section 1.** Here, participants were asked to state their age, job title, marital status, living arrangements (e.g., alone or with partner), and ethnic origin via a selection of choices.

**Section 2.** Participants were requested to read through a list of 42 intrusive behaviors and select all those that they personally considered to be exemplars of stalking behaviors. Participants were asked to think of the behaviors being carried out exclusively by males toward a female “target.”

**Section 3.** The list of 42 behaviors was repeated but with a more personal emphasis, and participants were now invited to indicate which, if any, they had personally experienced. Thus, this section was constructed to provide a measure of how far the women had firsthand experience of the various behaviors—regardless of whether they considered them to be stalking.

A working definition of *stalking* was provided on the questionnaire: “a series of actions directed at one individual by another which, taken as a whole, amount to unwanted persistent personal harassment.” It is obviously difficult to supply a global definition in a study that in itself is seeking to discover what definitive stalking behaviors constitute. However, it was felt necessary to provide the respondents with a guideline to ensure that they understood the questionnaire’s instructions.
Section 4. The final section of the questionnaire asked participants to describe in some detail, if they had experienced any of the behaviors noted in Section 3, what they considered to be the worst incident, with particular reference to the behavior of the “man involved.”

The list of 42 behaviors. The 42 behaviors included on the questionnaire were designed to represent a continuum of likely stalking and nonstalking acts. The list of items was designed such that it would be unrealistic if a participant indicated that she had not experienced any of the behaviors. The inclusion of behaviors such as “’wolf-whistling’ in the street” was designed to create an environment that made it easier for participants to volunteer having experienced some of the more serious and distressing behaviors (e.g., “Confining the target against her will”).

RESULTS

Acts That Were and Were Not Perceived as Stalking

Participants’ yes/no responses to all 42 questionnaire items were subjected to cluster analysis using Ward’s (1963) hierarchical agglomerative method. The resulting dendrogram yielded two main clusters. The interpretation of these was simple: One cluster represented behaviors on which there was high consensus that these were stalking, and the second represented a range of behaviors not perceived as stalking by most participants.

The two major clusters were found to comprise several subdivisions. These could be interpreted as follows (the percentage in parentheses indicates the number of participants marking that behavior as representative of stalking).

Stalking Clusters

Classic stalking behaviors. The behaviors in this cluster were dubbed as classic stalking behaviors. This is because these items were identical to those most commonly featured in both the media coverage of stalking cases and in the academic research that has recorded the behavior of stalkers (see Sheridan & Davies, in press, for a brief overview). They include

- hanging around/telephoning the target’s workplace continuously after being expressly told not to do so (96.5%);
- following the target (95.7%);
**Threatening stalking behaviors.** The seven behaviors in this second cluster were given the label of *threatening* behaviors because five of them had an overtly threatening/violent theme:

- making obscene, threatening, or mysterious telephone calls while remaining unknown (90.2%);
- sending inappropriate sexually explicit letters to the target (87%);
- making death threats (86.5%);
- confining the target against her will (85.6%);
- intercepting mail/deliveries (85.3%);
- behaving threateningly toward the target’s family and/or friends (83.6%);
- causing criminal damage/vandalism to the target’s property (77.2%).

**Unpredictable stalking behaviors.** The three items in this cluster were found to center around acts that may be described as both threatening and unpredictable (compare with the threatening but more controlled acts listed in the previous cluster):

- continuously acting in an uncontrolled, aggressive, or insulting manner on seeing the target out with other men (friends or partners) (81.7%);
- threatening suicide if the target refuses to go out with him (71.5%);
- using obscene and/or threatening language when such is entirely inappropriate, for example, not during an argument (61.7%).

**Attachment stalking behaviors.** This final cluster of behaviors that most respondents viewed as stalking had their focus on *attachment*—that is, means by which a stalker may seek to maintain maximally close contact with a target:

- sending bizarre or sinister items to the target’s home or workplace (91.1%);
- although not involved with target, moving (house) closer to where she lives or places she frequents—just to be nearer to her (70.6%);
- coming around to visit, uninvited, on a regular basis (63.4%).
Nonstalking Clusters

The following three clusters contain those activities that relatively few participants believed to be stalking.

Courtship behaviors. The items in this first cluster of behaviors not widely believed to be stalking related were collectively labeled courtship behaviors. The common characteristic of these activities was that they could comprise part of the early stages of courtship:

- engaging the target as a stranger in an unsolicited conversation in a public place, such as at a bus stop (17.6%);
- telephoning the target after one initial meeting (15.6%);
- talking about the target to mutual friends after meeting her just once (9.8%);
- agreeing with the target’s every word (even when she is obviously wrong) (8.4%);
- “wolf-whistling” in the street (7.8%);
- offering to buy the target a drink in a public house or cafeteria as a stranger (6.9%).

Verbally obscene behaviors. The label for this small cluster of behaviors perceived only by a minority as representative of stalking is self-explanatory:

- engaging the target in “inappropriate” personal and intimate discussion as a casual acquaintance (39.5%),
- making obscene comments as a stranger (36.3%).

Overbearing behaviors. The common theme among the behaviors that form the following cluster was that they illustrate ways by which a person may attempt to interfere in the affairs of another but not to a degree that unequivocally constitutes harassment:

- trying to become acquainted with the target’s friends in an attempt to get to know her better (34.6%);
- asking the target for a date more than once (having previously been refused) (31.1%);
- making arrangements including the target without consulting her first (e.g., booking a table at a restaurant) (28.2%);
- being seen by the target at roughly the same time each day (27.7%);
- “outstaying welcome” in the target’s house (25.1%).
• making unsolicited offers of help: lifts in his car, DIY (do-it-yourself home improvements), and so on (21.3%);
• after having met at a pub/nightclub/party, asking the target if she is interested in sexual intercourse (21%);
• ex-partner insulting the target when he finds out she is in a new relationship (20.5%).

**Actual Incidence of the Questionnaire**

**Items Perceived as Stalking**

Participants’ firsthand experiences of those behaviors most strongly felt to represent stalking were examined next, and findings are illustrated by the following rank-ordered list. The figure placed after each item indicates the percentage of the sample having personally experienced that behavior:

• making obscene, threatening, or mysterious telephone calls while remaining unknown (30.2%);
• following the target (29.4%);
• making excessive unwanted telephone calls—regardless of content (25.1%);
• refusing to accept that a prior relationship with the target is over (22.2%);
• often purposefully visiting places he knows that the target frequents (21.9%);
• coming around to visit, uninvited, on a regular basis (20.5%);
• using obscene and/or threatening language when such is entirely inappropriate, for example, not during an argument (19.6%);
• repeatedly approaching target personally, remaining a stranger (15.9%);
• often loitering in the target’s neighborhood (15%);
• continuously acting in an uncontrolled, aggressive, or insulting manner on seeing the target out with other men (friends or partners) (14.7%);
• threatening suicide if the target refuses to go out with him (14.4%);
• constantly watching/spying on the target (13%);
• sending the target excessive, unwanted notes or letters (12.7%);
• persistently driving past the target, her house, workplace, etc. (“drive-bys”) (12.4%);
• constantly sending the target unwanted gifts (11.2%);
• hanging around/telephoning the target’s workplace continuously after being expressly told not to do so (10.4%);
• confining the target against her will (9.8%);
• standing and staring regularly at the target’s home and/or workplace (8.1%);
• causing criminal damage/vandalism to the target’s property (6.3%);
• behaving threateningly toward the target’s family and/or friends (5.8%);
• sending bizarre or sinister items to the target’s home or workplace (4.3%);
• making death threats (3.5%);
• intercepting mail/deliveries (2.3%);
• sending inappropriate sexually explicit letters to the target (2.3%);
• furtively taking photographs of the target without her knowledge (2%).
although not involved with target, moving (house) closer to where she lives or places she frequents—just to be nearer to her (0.6%).

Cluster Analysis on Actual Experiences

A further cluster analysis was carried out to investigate the patterns of the women’s experiences of the 42 behaviors. Stalking by its very nature involves a course of conduct and multiple forms of harassment (Meloy, 1997; Pathé & Mullen, 1997). Because of this, it was predicted that when one of the intrusive items listed on the questionnaire had been experienced, it would not have been experienced alone but rather in conjunction with several others. All responses to Section 3 of the questionnaire ("Have you yourself experienced any of the 42 questionnaire items?") were placed into a hierarchical cluster analysis, again employing Ward’s (1963) method, and the results supported the prediction. As before, two major clusters were found: one composed of stalking behaviors and one composed primarily of nonstalking behaviors. These in turn were made up of several subdivisions and could be interpreted as explained next. The term in parentheses beside each questionnaire item relates to the labels given to the clusters produced earlier—those based on the sample’s perceptions of what did and did not exemplify stalking. Thus, the way in which the perceptions cluster and the actual experiences clusters mapped onto each other is demonstrated.

Stalking Clusters

Classic actual stalking behavior: This first cluster relating to actual intrusive occurrences experienced by respondents was labeled as classic because six of the seven items that made up this cluster were also constituents of the classic cluster described earlier. This means that participants’ views on what constituted classic stalking were mirrored by the sample’s actual experiences of classic-type harassment:

• constantly watching/spying on the target (classic),
• standing and staring regularly at the target’s home and/or workplace (classic),
• persistently driving past the target, her house, workplace, etc. ("drive-bys") (classic),
• hanging around/telephoning the target’s workplace continuously after being expressly told not to do so (classic),
• often loitering in the target’s neighborhood (classic),
• often purposefully visiting places he knows that the target frequents (attachment),
• following the target (classic).

*Threatening actual stalking behavior.* This cluster was labeled as such because six of the nine behaviors within it were also found in the threatening stalking cluster described earlier. Thus, perceptions of the types of acts that make up stalking cases that involve threat and actual behaviors seen in instances of harassment involving a threat element were closely linked:

• furtively taking photographs of the target without her knowledge (classic),
• although not involved with target, moving (house) closer to where she lives or places she frequents—just to be nearer to her (attachment),
• intercepting mail/deliveries (threatening),
• sending inappropriate sexually explicit letters to the target (threatening),
• making death threats (threatening),
• sending bizarre or sinister items to the target’s home or workplace (attachment),
• causing criminal damage/vandalism to the target’s property (threatening),
• behaving threateningly toward the target’s family and/or friends (threatening),
• confining the target against her will (threatening).

*Mixed actual stalking behavior.* This final cluster of actual experiences of stalking-related behaviors did not clearly map onto any of the clusters generated by participants’ perceptions of types of stalking. Instead, this cluster contained a mixture of three of the four perceived stalking subtypes. The only subtype not covered by this cluster was the threatening subtype:

• continuously acting in an uncontrolled, aggressive, or insulting manner on seeing the target out with other men (friends or partners) (unpredictable);
• ex-partner insulting the target when he finds out she is in a new relationship (overbearing);
• sending the target excessive, unwanted notes or letters (classic);
• constantly sending the target unwanted gifts (classic);
• threatening suicide if the target refuses to go out with him (unpredictable);
• coming around to visit, uninvited, on a regular basis (attachment);
• refusing to accept that a prior relationship with the target is over (attachment).

Nonstalking Clusters

*Courtship actual nonstalking behavior.* This first cluster of the women’s experiences of nonstalking behaviors mapped primarily onto the cluster of
perceived nonstalking behaviors labeled as *courtship*. The remaining five behaviors in this cluster were from the two remaining clusters of behavior also perceived as nonstalking (the verbally obscene and overbearing clusters):

- engaging the target as a stranger in an unsolicited conversation in a public place such as at a bus stop (courtship),
- offering to buy the target a drink in a public house or cafeteria as a stranger (courtship),
- “wolf-whistling” in the street (courtship),
- asking the target for a date more than once (having previously been refused) (overbearing),
- “outstaying welcome” in the target’s house (overbearing),
- making obscene comments as a stranger (verbally obscene),
- talking about the target to mutual friends after meeting her just once (courtship),
- telephoning the target after one initial meeting (courtship),
- engaging the target in “inappropriate” personal and intimate discussion as a casual acquaintance (verbally obscene),
- asking the target if she is interested in sexual intercourse after having met at a pub/nightclub/party (overbearing).

*Overbearing actual nonstalking behavior*. Five of the seven behaviors in this cluster had been classified by respondents as nonstalking behaviors, and four of these are also seen in the overbearing nonstalking perceived subtype. Inasmuch as this cluster does contain two behaviors that were perceived by the majority of the sample to represent stalking behaviors, it may be that if these types of behaviors were directed at a target persistently then they may be construed as stalking acts:

- repeatedly approaching target personally, remaining a stranger (classic);
- being seen by the target at roughly the same time each day (overbearing);
- making arrangements including the target without consulting her first (e.g., booking a table at a restaurant) (overbearing);
- trying to become acquainted with the target’s friends in an attempt to get to know her better (overbearing);
- agreeing with the target’s every word (even when she is obviously wrong) (courtship);
- using obscene and/or threatening language when such is entirely inappropriate, for example, not during an argument (unpredictable);
- making unsolicited offers of help: lifts in his car, DIY (do-it-yourself home improvements), and so on (overbearing).
Prevalence of Actual Cases of Stalking

The final part of the questionnaire asked participants to describe in some detail, if they had experienced any of the 42 questionnaire items, what they considered to be their most serious ordeal. Of the 348 women, 189 (54.3%) responded. The researcher and five independent raters separately judged whether each transcript detailed a case of stalking. The definition provided to the raters was that which had been provided earlier to the sample: “a series of actions directed at one individual by another which, taken as a whole, amount to unwanted persistent personal harassment.” Transcripts were recorded as stalking or not stalking if four or more of the six raters were in agreement. Using this methodology, it was found that 82 (23.6%) of the total sample of 348 had experienced at least one episode of stalking.

The six raters also judged the same transcripts as stalking or nonstalking in accordance with the theoretical requirements for prosecution under the Protection From Harassment Act 1997. The act includes the following requirements:

a. The suspect has pursued a course of conduct (note that a course of conduct must involve conduct on at least two occasions). Furthermore, conduct is not limited to actions but includes speech.

b. This amounts to harassment of another (note that the act does not fully define harassment but states that references to harassing a person include alarming them or causing them distress; its effects on the victim determine whether a course of conduct amounts to harassment).

c. The suspect knows or ought to know that this is so (note that the offense of causing harassment is unusual in that it is not always necessary to prove that a person actually knew the conduct amounted to harassment).

Using these requirements as a guide, the raters now agreed that 33% of respondents (115) had described cases that could (in theory at least) be prosecutable under the act.

DISCUSSION

The present study has confirmed the high incidence of stalking behaviors reported by Sheridan et al. (1997) in a much larger and more representative sample. For instance, 30.2% of the women said they had been the victim of obscene or threatening telephone calls from an unknown caller, 29.4% had at some time been followed in a public place, and 15% had had a man loiter regularly in their neighborhood. Ex-partners of the women had refused to accept
that a prior relationship was over in 22.2% of cases. Fewer women had experienced the perhaps more serious or distressing behaviors, but all of the questionnaire items had been experienced by at least two of the women. For instance, 9.8% had been confined against their will, 2% had had photographs taken of them furtively, and 0.6% had had a male with whom they were not involved move (house) closer to where they lived to achieve maximal proximity.

However, merely because an individual has experienced one or more behaviors that may be perceived as harassing, this does not automatically mean that she has been stalked. Stalking refers to persistent harassment over time and is rarely confined to one type of activity. As such, the incidence of harassing behaviors in the sample was assessed separately from the prevalence of actual cases of stalking in the sample. A high prevalence figure was found (23.6%), again supporting previous work (e.g., NOP Research Group, 1997; Sheridan et al., 1997). As such, these data go some way toward addressing the need for additional reliable prevalence figures. However, the stalking criterion employed by this study was relatively strict, and so transcripts were also assessed in line with the requirements for prosecution under the England and Wales Protection From Harassment Act 1997. The act offers no strict guidelines on what kinds of activities make up a case of criminal stalking. The finding from the present work suggests that according to the act’s requirements, one in three British women will theoretically be able to prosecute a stalker at least once during their lifetime.

More work is necessary to determine whether the high incidence and prevalence rates reported in this study are also to be observed in other countries. Researchers are likely to experience difficulties that reflect the degree to which stalking is legally defined in the country from which the research originates. Where stalking is tightly defined and individual behaviors are criminalized, then survey participants may judge their own experiences of harassment against such a definition and as a consequence refrain from detailing relevant information, believing their own case to be of peripheral relevance to a study of stalking. The result would be that the findings of such a survey would not be comparable with those of the present work. As such, the wording of any research instrument should be intended to tap experiences of harassment and not necessarily any legal descriptions of stalking per se.

Despite the lack of definition in English and Welsh law, our respondents held clear ideas on what were and were not constituent behaviors of criminal harassment. The sample was consistent in classifying a range of intrusive acts to form identifiable subgroups of stalking and nonstalking behaviors. This work has supported earlier work (Sheridan et al., 1997). A minimum of 70% of the sample agreed that 22 of the 42 behaviors provided on the question-
naire depicted stalking behaviors. So, although people may not be able to define stalking exhaustively, they do have a shared understanding of what types of behaviors constitute a case of stalking. Both actual and potential victims were able to recognize stalking behaviors to the extent that stalking behaviors were perceived as belonging to four separate clusters or stalking subtypes. These were labeled as classic, threatening, unpredictable, and attachment subtypes. Nonstalking behaviors were viewed as forming three subtypes, and these were labeled courtship, verbally obscene, and overbearing. Thus, respondents were able to distinguish between the actions of a man who is trying too hard to secure a date with a woman and the actions of a man that may reasonably be considered obsessive and possibly dangerous.

The real-world relevance of these perceived clusters was tested by conducting a cluster analysis on the sample’s actual experiences of the same behaviors. The four stalking subtypes generated by participants’ perceptions of stalking were found to partially map onto the clusters of subtypes generated by the same participants’ actual experiences of harassing behaviors. A strong overlap was seen between the perceptions of and experiences of the classic and threatening subtypes. This means that the sample’s perceptions of the types of acts that make up classic and threatening stalking cases were well founded in reality, mirroring real-life harassment made up of classic and threatening acts. However, for the unpredictable and attachment subtypes that the sample perceived as constituent of stalking, no real-life equivalents were found. Instead, a mixed cluster of real-life experiences emerged, with attachment behaviors split between this cluster and the classic and threatening clusters. Examination of the behaviors contained within the mixed cluster would suggest that it is a category of harassing activities primarily carried out by an ex-partner of the target or a current partner from whom the target is trying to escape. More research is necessary to clarify this.

Do the findings provide a basis for recommending that stalking should be legally defined? The results could add weight to the argument for defining stalking in England and Wales. Certainly there was a widespread consensus in this large sample about the types of activities that constitute criminal stalking. Further support for this argument can be added in that the subtypes of stalking perceived by participants were to a large extent matched by subtypes generated by actual experiences of harassment.

The results may, however, also add value to the argument against providing a legal definition of stalking. It is possible to conclude that stalking can only ever be defined to a limited degree: Perceived and actual subgroups of stalking did not match entirely. Instead, a mixed actual subtype of stalking was generated. This finding would suggest that not all of the behaviors of stalkers are consistent and predictable. Some cases of stalking may not fall
into the strict categories produced by forensic science but will, rather, consist of a series of actions that appear random and disorganized.

Further rationale for the case against defining criminal stalking comes from a criticism of the methodology used. A finite list of 42 harassing behaviors formed the basis for this study. It is certain that these are not the only behaviors in which a stalker may indulge. If criminal harassment were defined in terms in which these behaviors were made unlawful, then many stalkers might base their campaign on alternative legal acts. The recommendation from this study, then, is that the constituents of criminal stalking should not be made explicit in law. Rather, the present work has offered the positive finding that members of the British public are well able to recognize criminal harassment. If this is the case, then the authorities should similarly experience little difficulty in deciding whether individual cases represent cases of criminal harassment.

This work has led to several firm findings. First, high prevalence rates of stalking were found. This confirmed earlier work with a much larger, more broadly representative sample. The same sample identified 22 stalking behaviors as forming three clear categories. These categories in turn mapped partly onto categories generated directly from the women’s self-reports of harassment. The broad implication of this work is that it would be dangerous to prescribe explicit stalking behaviors and put into place sanctions against these and these alone. Rather, it would be more beneficial to prescribe intent and leave antistalking legislation widely drafted. Stalking is an extraordinary crime given that it may often consist of no more than the targeted repetition of ordinary behavior. As such, this highly prevalent phenomenon requires extraordinary sanctions.

REFERENCES


Lorraine Sheridan is a lecturer in forensic psychology at the Centre for Applied Psychology, University of Leicester, United Kingdom. She has studied psychological aspects of stalking since 1996, particularly the course and nature of personal stalking, exacerbating and alleviating factors, and the effectiveness of various antiharassment sanctions. She is currently preparing an internationally authored text on stalking along with Dr. Julian C. W. Boon.

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