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Assessing the link between stalking and domestic violence

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Abstract

Stalking may be defined as repeated following, communicating, and contacting a person in a threatening manner that causes the person to fear, on a reasonable basis, for his or her safety. Stalking is a recent legal construct, and social scientific research on stalking is in an early stage. Given that the most common victim of stalking is an ex-intimate partner, there may be an association between stalking and domestic violence. This paper evaluates this potential link. Specifically, the literature on stalking is reviewed by means of comparing it to existing literature on typologies of domestically violent persons. It is proposed that most stalkers who target ex-intimate partners are characterologically similar to a type of batterer labeled “borderline/cyclical.” Both domestic stalkers and borderline/cyclical batterers possess traits of Cluster B personality disorders. These traits include emotional volatility, attachment dysfunction, primitive defenses, weak ego strength, jealousy, anger, substance abuse, and early childhood trauma. Further, both groups have been observed to react with rage to perceived or actual rejection or abandonment. It is suggested that applying what is known about borderline/cyclical batterers to stalkers may aid in the investigation of this phenomenon. Implications for research are discussed. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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As Meloy (1998) states, “stalking is an old behavior, but a new crime” (p. xix). This statement indicates that while stalking has likely always been a part of human behavior, it is

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only recently that it has received legal recognition as an offensive behavior. In fact, the first anti-stalking law in North America was passed less than a decade ago in California (Penal Code Section 646.9). Most states followed suit shortly thereafter (Saunders, 1998). In Canada, anti-stalking legislation, termed criminal harassment, was promulgated in 1993 as Section 264 of the Canadian *Criminal Code*.

Stalking has been defined similarly in these legal settings. Classification of a stalking generally requires repeated direct or indirect acts of following, communicating, besetting, watching, contacting, and threatening in such a way as to cause the victim to fear, on reasonable grounds, for his or her safety. Although other terms have been used to denote this behavior, such as “obsessional following” (Meloy, 1997, 1998; Meloy & Gothard, 1995), and “criminal harassment” (Section 264 of the *Code*), the term “stalking” will be used throughout this paper.

Stalking is often accompanied by physical violence (Meloy, 1998) and as such, it is recognized that stalking can seriously effect the victim (Hall, 1998). Further, the largest victim group is female ex-intimate partners (Meloy, 1998), establishing, *prima facie*, an association between stalking and domestic violence. Although the extant research on stalking is in a very young stage, and little is truly known about it, the research on domestic violence is much more developed. As such, given this tentative connection between stalking and domestic violence, it may be that research and theory from the domestic violence corpus could be used to contribute to the study of stalking.

The purpose of this paper is to evaluate the potential link between stalking and domestic violence. The literature on stalking will be reviewed with the goal of abstracting patterns of stalking characteristics and juxtaposing these on well-defined typologies of domestically violent people. The rationale of this approach is to understand the functioning, behavior, emotional constitution, and psychological profile of stalkers. The goal is to enhance the existing information base concerning the phenomenon of stalking and to suggest testable hypotheses.

1. Nature and prevalence of stalking

There are several research projects that have assessed the prevalence of stalking. Kong (1996), in a report for Statistics Canada, reported that in 1994 and 1995, there were 7462 incidents of criminal harassment reported to police. The survey employed the Revised Uniform Crime Reporting Survey (UCRS). This method functions as a means for gathering information from participating police agencies. Close to half (43%) of all police agencies in Canada were involved. Hence, although this was a large-scale survey, it was neither comprehensive nor random.

If 100% of police agencies were involved in reporting their statistics for the UCRS, extrapolating from the statistic of 43%, (assuming no selection bias was present for reporting agencies that would serve to differentiate them from non-reporting ones), then the figure of 7462 would be 17,353. Based on a population of approximately 30 million, this represents a prevalence of 0.06, or six people per 1000 people. If the adult population (approximately 20 million) is used in this calculation, then the Canadian annual prevalence is approximately 0.09, or nine people per 1000 (about 1%).

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