

1-1-2013

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10.1108/JCP-09-2012-0005

This is an Author's Accepted Manuscript of: Duff, S., & Scott, A. J. (2013). Understanding perceptions of stalking: the impact of additional contextual information regarding the breakdown of relationships. *Journal of Criminal Psychology*, 3(2), 136-144. Available [here](#)

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Understanding perceptions of stalking: The impact of additional contextual information regarding the breakdown of relationships

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Brief biography

Simon C. Duff is a chartered forensic psychologist working as a lecturer at the University of Nottingham and as a forensic psychologist at the Mersey Forensic Psychology Service, part of Mersey Care NHS Trust. His current research interests include perceptions of stalking.

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Abstract

Purpose – Perception research has demonstrated that people view stranger stalkers to be more persistent and dangerous than ex-partner stalkers. Although these findings are consistent the outcome of legal processes where stranger stalkers are more likely to be convicted, they contrast with the findings of national surveys and applied research where ex-partner stalkers represent the most persistent and dangerous relational subtype. The aim of the current study is to further examine the influence of prior relationship on perceptions of stalking by considering the impact of additional contextual information regarding the breakdown of ex-partners' relationships for the first time.

Methodology - In this vignette study 180 women were asked to provide a range of ratings of another person's behaviour where the relationship between that person and themselves was manipulated across seven conditions: stranger, acquaintance, ex-partner and ex-partner with additional contextual information regarding the breakdown of the relationship.

Findings - Participants were *less* likely to perceive behaviour as stalking or as requiring police intervention, and were *more* likely to perceive themselves as responsible, when the other person was portrayed as an ex-partner rather than a stranger. However, perceptions of ex-partners differed considerably when contextual information regarding the breakdown of the relationship was provided.

Implications - The findings have important implications in considering how on-going victims of stalking behaviour may perceive their circumstances in relation to the perpetrator and the likelihood that they might seek assistance. Additionally, there might be implications for how the legal system understands and deals with ex-partner stalking cases.

Keywords: stalking, perceptions, prior relationship, relationship breakdown.

Introduction

Psychology has examined various aspects of the stalking phenomenon since the inception of the first anti-stalking law in 1990 in California and research has demonstrated that perceptions often fail to reflect the reality of stalking (e.g., Phillips, Quirk, Rosenfeld, & O'Connor, 2004; Scott, Lloyd, & Gavin, 2010; Sheridan, Gillett, Davies, Blaauw, & Patel, 2003). A failure that is particularly worrisome given that estimates from the British Crime Survey suggest 19% of women have experienced stalking victimisation at some point during their lifetime (Hall & Innes, 2010). Perhaps of greatest concern is the apparent lack of understanding regarding the risk of violence during stalking. Studies investigating the influence of prior relationship and likelihood of violence have shown that previously intimate individuals who subsequently stalked their partners were twice as likely to threaten their victims than stalkers whose previous relationship with the victim was non-intimate (Palarea, Zona, Lane, & Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 1999). Similar findings in the UK led Farnham, James, and Cantrell (2000) to state that, "the greatest danger of serious violence from stalkers in the UK is not from strangers or from people with psychotic illness, but from non-psychotic ex-partners" (p. 199). Rosenfeld (2004) reviewed the stalking violence literature and identified a number of variables related to violence in stalking situations including a prior intimate relationship between the victim and the perpetrator along with the presence of threatening communications, a history of substance abuse on the part of the perpetrator, and the absence of a psychotic mental disorder. In later work three factors were found to be predictive of violence during stalking by an ex-partner: threats of violence, drug abuse by the former partner, and jealousy (Roberts, 2005). Finally, the importance of prior relationship in understanding the link between stalking and violence has been highlighted by the work of Rosenfeld and Lewis (2005) who include prior relationship in models used to predict violence in real stalking situations. However, this relationship does not appear to have been informing legal decision making as demonstrated by studies of victims in the UK (e.g., Harris, 2000), showing that ex-partners who stalk exhibit the greatest aggression to victims, yet strangers who stalk are most frequently convicted of stalking. Thus, contrary to the experience of victims and recent evidence, stranger stalkers appear to be considered more persistent and dangerous than ex-partner stalkers.

Research examining the perceptions of students and the general public concerning stalking from both the perspective of the 'victim' and the perspective of an 'observer' provides at least a partial explanation for why this mismatch occurs. For example, an Australian study by Hills and Taplin (1998) asked community members to respond to vignettes describing stalking behaviour from the perspective of the victim where, amongst other attributes, the relationship between the perpetrator and participant was manipulated as being one of either stranger, acquaintance, or ex-partner. They showed that people report feeling less scared and being less likely to call the police if the person stalking them is described as an ex-partner rather than a stranger. However, research by Dennison and Thomson (2000, 2002) examining perceptions from the perspective of an observer with community samples in Australia did not find this same relationship. Prior relationship was not found to influence perceptions of stalking in their 2000 study, whilst the behaviour of ex-partners was more likely to be perceived as stalking than the behaviour of acquaintances in their 2002 study. However, ceiling effects were observed in Dennison and Thomson's (2000) study and the ex-partner in Dennison and Thomson's (2002) study was described as having been possessive in the relationship, thus adding additional contextual information compared to similar studies.

More recently, several studies examining perceptions from the perspective of an observer with student samples in the US, Australia and the UK have found that the behaviour of strangers is more likely to be perceived as stalking than the behaviour of ex-partners (Cass, 2011; Phillips et al., 2004; Scott et al., 2010; Scott & Sheridan, 2011; Sheridan et al., 2003). Police intervention was

also considered more necessary when the stalker was described as a stranger rather than an ex-partner, and the victim was perceived to be more responsible for the perpetrator's behaviour when they were described as ex-partners rather than strangers (Scott et al., 2010; Scott & Sheridan, 2011; Sheridan et al., 2003).

The finding that the victim was perceived to be more responsible for the perpetrator's behaviour when they were ex-partners mirrors research concerned with victim responsibility in the context of rape. For example, Bridges and McGrail (1989) found that victims are considered to be more responsible for having been raped when the rapist is described as a dating partner as opposed to a stranger. Similarly, rapes perpetrated by acquaintances are less likely to be construed as rape, compared to rapes perpetrated by strangers (Bell, Kuriloff, & Lottes, 1994) and the rated severity of the rape is inversely proportional to the closeness of the current relationship (e.g., neighbour, ex-partner, current partner; Ben-David & Schneider, 2005).

The aim of the current study is to further examine the influence of prior relationship on perceptions of stalking. Previous research in the US, Australia and the UK concerned with perceptions of stalking (e.g., Phillips et al., 2004; Scott et al., 2010; Scott & Sheridan, 2011) has considered three main types of prior relationship between a perpetrator and a victim; namely stranger, acquaintance (e.g., a work colleague) and ex-partner. This study, by comparison, replicates these earlier studies while also considering the impact of additional contextual information regarding the breakdown of ex-partners' relationships for the first time. In these novel conditions the relationship is described as breaking down due to i) the participant having been subject to physical violence during the relationship, ii) the participant having been subject to verbal abuse during the relationship, iii) the participant relocating due to taking a new job or iv) the participant having been unfaithful during the relationship. The inclusion of this additional contextual information allows for the influence of factors that could be considered external to the participant (e.g., due to the perpetrator's behaviour, such as physical violence), neutral to the participant and perpetrator (e.g., due to neither the participant's nor the perpetrator's behaviour directly related to the relationship, such as relocation for employment), and internal to the participant (e.g., due to the participant's behaviour, such as unfaithfulness) to be considered. In contrast to the majority of perception research (e.g., Phillips et al., 2004, Scott et al., 2010; Scott & Sheridan, 2011) this study placed participants in the role of the victim, where the vignette asks that they consider the described behaviour as happening to themselves.

Research questions

This study investigates whether prior relationship influences the extent to which the perpetrator's behavior is perceived to:

- (1) constitute stalking;
- (2) necessitate police intervention;
- (3) cause alarm or personal distress; and
- (4) cause fear of the use of violence.

The study also investigates whether prior relationship influences the extent to which participants perceived themselves to be:

- (5) responsible for encouraging the behaviour.

Method

Design

The design of this study was based on the work of Sheridan and colleagues (e.g., Scott & Sheridan, 2011; Sheridan et al., 2003) and extends this previous work through the random assignment of participants to one of seven prior relationship conditions. In three conditions

participants were asked to imagine they were the victim of behaviour perpetrated by a stranger, an acquaintance or an ex-partner. In the remaining four conditions participants were also asked to imagine they were the victim of behaviour perpetrated by an ex-partner, but additional contextual information was provided regarding the breakdown of the relationship.

Participants

Participants comprised 180 women, who received no reward for taking part. The average age was 29.98 years ($SD = 9.57$) with a range of 18 years to 55 years. The majority of participants were from the UK ($n = 159$, 88%) followed by other countries within the European Union ($n = 11$, 6%) and the rest of the world ($n = 10$, 6%). Participant numbers ranged from 22 to 33 across the seven experimental conditions.

Materials

Participants completed a questionnaire containing a brief vignette, five scale items and three questions concerning demographic information (age and nationality). The vignettes provided the following information and were identical in each condition:

You have recently been receiving a number of text messages over the last two weeks from someone who has also been leaving small gifts at your work place. You have noticed this person quite often at places that you go to, like the supermarket and the gym, both when you are on your own and with your current partner. You have also seen them coming out of a flat that is quite close to your own.

The final sentence then provided a description of the relationship, and, in the four conditions described above, additional contextual information regarding the breakdown of the relationship. As such, the person was described as either a stranger; an acquaintance; an ex-partner; an ex-partner who you left because they were physically violent towards you on a number of occasions. (Ex-partner 'physical violence'); an ex-partner who you left because they were verbally abusive towards you on a number of occasions. (Ex-partner 'verbal abuse'); an ex-partner who you left because you were moving to a new job and a new city. (Ex-partner 'relocation'); or an ex-partner who you left because you got involved in another relationship whilst in a relationship with this person. (Ex-partner 'unfaithful')

Consistent with previous research (e.g., [Scott et al., 2010](#); [Scott & Sheridan, 2011](#); [Scott & Tse, 2011](#); [Sheridan et al., 2003](#)) participants rated the following items on 11-point Likert scales:

- (1) To what extent do you think this person's behaviour constitutes stalking? (Stalking)
- (2) To what extent does this person's behaviour necessitate police intervention and/or criminal charges? (Intervention)
- (3) Do you think this person's behaviour will cause you alarm or personal distress? (Alarm)
- (4) Do you think this person's behaviour will cause you to fear that they will use violence against you? (Violence)
- (5) To what extent are you responsible for encouraging this person's behaviour? (Responsibility)

Procedure

The materials and procedure were first piloted with a separate sample of 30 participants to make sure that the materials were suitable. Participants indicated that there were no issues with understanding the task or responding to the scale items and demographic information. The sample of 180 participants were recruited through a variety of on-line advertisements and presentations in major UK cities. The research received approval from the university ethics committee and was conducted in accordance with the ethical requirements of the British Psychological Society.

Results

Five one-way analyses of variance (ANOVAs) utilizing Bonferroni corrected alpha values of .01 were performed to determine the influence of prior relationship on the individual stalking items. Correlations were performed on the five scale items and coefficients ranged from -.45 for the intervention and responsibility scale items to .67 for the alarm and violence scale items. Parametric analyses are reported despite several normal distribution and homogeneity of variance assumption violations because ANOVA is reasonably robust to violations when sample sizes are similar across conditions (Pallant, 2006). Furthermore, the findings were consistent when non-parametric Kruskal-Wallis tests were performed. The associated F ratios, significance values and effect sizes are provided in Table 1.

--- Table 1 about here ---

The one-way ANOVAs identified five significant differences: stalking, $F(6, 173) = 11.19, p < .001, \eta^2 = 0.28$; intervention, $F(6, 173) = 5.87, p < .001, \eta^2 = 0.17$; alarm, $F(6, 173) = 3.80, p = .001, \eta^2 = 0.12$; violence, $F(6, 173) = 9.16, p < .001, \eta^2 = 0.24$; and responsibility, $F(6, 173) = 5.02, p < .001, \eta^2 = 0.15$. Post-hoc analyses, using Tukey's HSD test, were performed as part of the ANOVAs to determine where the specific statistically significant between-condition differences lay. The means, standard deviations and significant post-hoc analyses for the five stalking items are provided in Table 2.

--- Table 2 about here ---

Stalking

Participants were more likely to identify behaviour as stalking in the ex-partner 'physical violence' condition ($M = 9.18, SD = 1.63$) compared to the acquaintance ($M = 7.17, SD = 1.77, p < .001$), ex-partner ($M = 6.00, SD = 1.60, p < .001$) and ex-partner 'relocation' ($M = 7.65, SD = 1.77, p = .031$) conditions. Participants were also more likely to identify behaviour as stalking in the stranger ($M = 8.59, SD = 1.40, p < .001$), ex-partner 'verbal' ($M = 8.45, SD = 1.68, p < .001$), ex-partner 'relocation' ($M = 7.65, SD = 1.77, p = .009$) and ex-partner 'unfaithful' ($M = 8.17, SD = 2.13, p < .001$) conditions compared to the ex-partner condition ($M = 6.00, SD = 1.60$).

Intervention

Police intervention was considered more necessary in the ex-partner 'physical violence' condition ($M = 6.61, SD = 2.59$) compared to the acquaintance ($M = 4.00, SD = 2.09, p = .001$), ex-partner ($M = 4.45, SD = 2.46, p = .012$), and ex-partner 'relocation' ($M = 4.35, SD = 2.62, p = .019$), conditions. Police intervention was also considered more necessary in the stranger condition ($M = 6.64, SD = 2.52$) compared to the acquaintance ($M = 4.00, SD = 2.09, p = .003$), ex-partner ($M = 4.45, SD = 2.46, p = .022$) and ex-partner 'relocation' ($M = 4.35, SD = 2.62, p = .030$) conditions. Finally, police intervention was considered more necessary in the ex-partner 'verbal abuse' condition ($M = 6.36, SD = 2.36$) compared to the acquaintance condition ($M = 4.00, SD = 2.09, p = .013$).

Alarm

Participants believed they would experience more alarm and distress in the ex-partner 'physical violence' condition ($M = 9.18, SD = 1.93$) compared to the ex-partner ($M = 7.00, SD = 1.98, p = .005$) and ex-partner 'relocation' ($M = 6.83, SD = 2.98, p = .006$) conditions.

Violence

Participants believed they would experience more fear of the use of violence in the ex-partner 'physical violence' condition ($M = 8.61, SD = 2.10$) compared to the stranger ($M = 6.18, SD = 2.30, p = .005$), acquaintance ($M = 5.21, SD = 2.19, p < .001$), ex-partner ($M = 4.88, SD = 2.03, p < .001$), ex-

partner 'relocation' ($M = 5.00, SD = 3.05, p < .001$) and ex-partner 'unfaithful' ($M = 5.48, SD = 2.02, p < .001$) conditions.

Responsibility

Finally, participants believed they would be more responsible for encouraging the behaviour in the ex-partner 'unfaithful' condition ($M = 4.04, SD = 2.44$) compared to the stranger ($M = 1.77, SD = 1.02, p < .001$), acquaintance ($M = 2.45, SD = 1.80, p = .023$), ex-partner 'physical violence' ($M = 2.14, SD = 1.63, p = .003$), ex-partner 'verbal abuse' ($M = 2.14, SD = 1.52, p = .006$) and ex-partner 'relocation' ($M = 2.39, SD = 1.75, p = .027$) conditions. Participants also believed they would be more responsible for encouraging the behaviour in the ex-partner condition ($M = 3.33, SD = 1.78$) compared to the stranger condition ($M = 1.77, SD = 1.02, p = .024$).

Discussion

Based on the data from the conditions involving strangers, acquaintances, and ex-partners (with no context), the pattern of means is in line with previous findings suggesting that strangers are considered to be more dangerous and worrying than acquaintances and ex-partners (e.g., Hills & Taplin, 1998; Scott et al., 2010; Scott & Sheridan, 2011; Sheridan et al., 2003). Participants also consider themselves more responsible for the behaviour of an individual as a function of greater levels of intimacy (Scott et al., 2010; Scott & Sheridan, 2011; Sheridan et al., 2003). Interestingly, the change in perspective in this study, where participants imagine themselves as the victim of the behaviour, does not impact on the pattern of the data when compared to studies where participants imagine themselves as an observer of the behaviour. This finding has important implications in considering how on-going victims of stalking behaviour may perceive their circumstances in relation to the perpetrator and the likelihood that they might seek assistance. This disparity between how ex-partners are perceived and the reality of the threat they pose, even as stalking and harassment have become more salient in the media, may also play a role in the conviction rates as reported by Harris (2000).

The fact that participants' responses change with the added contextual information indicates that participants are considering this new information in their decision making. Interestingly, it is not always the case that the new information produces statistically different ratings in comparison to strangers suggesting that concern regarding strangers who behave in this way is quite powerful. For example, despite the impact of the manipulation of context it is interesting to note that strangers are considered to be comparable for stalking and alarm items as all other ex-partner conditions, even those characterised by physical violence and verbal threats. The only marked differences were for the intervention item where it was deemed more necessary in the physical violence and relocation conditions, and fear of violence where it was deemed greater in the physical violence condition. As Hills and Taplin (1998) suggested in explaining their findings, perhaps strangers are considered as being less predictable and in stalking scenarios unpredictability may equate to dangerousness. The earlier described rape literature supports this view as the behaviour of strangers is more likely to be construed as rape than the same behaviour by a known person (Bell et al., 1994).

When participants are provided with contextual information the ratings regarding whether the perpetrator's behaviour constituted stalking were higher for all of the ex-partner conditions in which additional contextual information was provided compared to the ex-partner condition with no context, and they did not differ from ratings for the stranger condition. This is irrespective of whether the reason given is external to the victim (i.e., physical abuse or verbal abuse), neutral to both victim and perpetrator (i.e., relocation), or internal to the victim (i.e., unfaithful). Clearly the additional contextual information is impacting on how participants are thinking about the behaviour of someone described as their ex-partner but this does not equate

to an increased sense of alarm or perceived need for intervention in all cases. Indeed only a physically violent ex-partner causes more alarm than someone simply described as an ex-partner. It is therefore important to examine what factors might be mitigating the effect of contextual information such as an ex-partner who has been verbally abusive and, perhaps more surprisingly, an ex-partner who has been noticed in the area despite the victim having moved to a new town for a new job. In this latter case it is interesting how unthreatening this situation is perceived as being given that proximity seeking behaviours are stereotypical of stalking and often portrayed in the media (Sheridan, Gillett, & Davies, 2000). Further studies are necessary to determine if participants fully understood the implications of this condition or if they brought their own assumptions about ex-partners to their responses. Furthermore, it would be useful to examine the impact of variations in the pervasiveness of abusive behaviour. Given that this is the first study to systematically vary the contextual information given about the breakdown of a relationship in a stalking situation further studies need to examine the replicability of the current findings.

As suggested earlier, the fact that participants are not reliably influenced by contextual information may be of importance in understanding how victims respond to stalking and harassment. Previous studies have considered the impact of prior relationship in the deliberations and verdict decisions reached by mock juries. Scott and Gavin (2011) undertook a small scale study and found that juries were more likely to convict strangers than ex-partners. In a thematic analysis of their deliberations jurors were more likely to find excuses for ex-partners who stalked and the behaviour of the victims was more likely to be criticised or perceived as provocative in cases against ex-partners. Clearly these findings are important in understanding why real juries might behave in the same way (see Sheridan & Davies, 2001). It is an empirical question as to whether contextual information has a similar impact on mock jury decision making as it does on individual decision making and this is an area currently being researched (Duff, Scott, Bisbee, Birchall, Gavin, & Wheatcroft, in prep.). However, if mock juries are similarly influenced by information concerning the breakdown of the relationship in their decision making regarding stalking and harassment there may be important implications for the courts. For example, it may be important to stress the value of this additional information in the context of jury deliberations and disposal decisions by judges to redress the current imbalance that appears to exist with respect to conviction rates. Furthermore, consideration of ex-partners' behaviour during relationships and the reasons they broke down, may help identify possible concerns at an early stage, before there is a greater risk of violence.

The data from the current study raise further intriguing questions concerning understandings of another's behaviour in light of the connection with that other. However, it is possible that other factors are at play. Perhaps most important is the extent to which a short vignette can convey the experience of being stalked. By design the vignettes do not contain information about emotional responses yet the real experience is unlikely to be emotion free. Further work needs to specifically examine the emotions that may be elicited by different kinds of stalkers (e.g., strangers and ex-partners) and by the different contexts for relationships ending (e.g., a physically abusive ex-partner and an ex-partner one has been unfaithful to). Similarly the current study has examined the responses of female participants, taking the perspective of the victim, being stalked by a male. Further studies should consider the responses of both male and females and consider circumstances where the perpetrator is either the same or the opposite gender. Finally the vast majority of the participants contributing to the data are from the UK and it would be useful to determine the extent to which these perceptions are shared cross-nationally.

The current study has replicated previous findings demonstrating that prior relationship influence perceptions of stalking. By including conditions where contextual information concerning the

reason why the relationship broke down it has also demonstrated that this additional information plays a role in changing how perceptions of ex-partners can be manipulated. This may be important for understanding both why ex-partners are favoured in the legal system, in comparison to stranger stalkers, and considering the ways in which the legal system and potential victims may become better informed so as to reduce the risk of serious harm.

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Table 1
One-way analyses of variance for the effects of prior relationship on the five stalking items

Variable and source	SS	MS	F (6, 173)	η^2
Stalking				
Between groups	198.44	33.70	11.19 ***	.28
Within groups	511.54	2.96		
Intervention				
Between groups	207.98	34.66	5.87 ***	.17
Within groups	1021.22	5.90		
Alarm				
Between groups	119.52	19.92	3.80 **	.12
Within groups	907.47	5.25		
Violence				
Between groups	291.65	48.61	9.16 ***	.24
Within groups	918.33	5.31		
Responsibility				
Between groups	92.70	15.45	5.02 ***	.15
Within groups	532.82	3.08		

Note. Bonferroni corrected alpha value = .01. ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Table 2
Means and standard deviations for the five stalking items by prior relationship condition

Condition	Stalking		Intervention		Alarm		Violence		Responsibility	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Stranger	8.59 _a	1.40	6.64 _{a,b,c}	2.52	8.32	2.17	6.18 _a	2.30	1.77 _{a,b}	1.02
Acquaintance	7.17 _b	1.77	4.00 _{a,d,e}	2.09	7.52	2.15	5.21 _b	2.19	2.45 _c	1.80
Ex-partner	6.00 _{a,c,d,e,f}	1.60	4.45 _{b,f}	2.46	7.00 _a	1.98	4.88 _c	2.03	3.33 _a	1.78
Physical violence	9.18 _{b,c,g}	1.63	6.61 _{d,f,g}	2.59	9.18 _{a,b}	1.93	8.61 _{a,b,c,e,f}	2.10	2.14 _d	1.63
Verbal abuse	8.45 _d	1.68	6.36 _e	2.36	8.64	2.59	6.73	2.47	2.14 _e	1.52
Relocation	7.65 _{e,g}	1.77	4.35 _{c,g}	2.62	6.83 _b	2.98	5.00 _e	3.05	2.39 _f	1.75
Unfaithful	8.17 _f	2.13	4.96	2.36	8.04	2.31	5.48 _f	2.02	4.04 _{b,c,d,e,f}	2.44
Total	7.79	1.99	5.27	2.62	7.89	2.40	5.99	2.60	2.64	1.87

Note. Column means sharing subscripts are significantly different. The five scale items relating to participant perceptions of the behaviour described in the vignettes utilized 11-point (0-10) Likert-type scales.