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**‘Reasonable’ perceptions of stalking:
The influence of conduct severity and the perpetrator-target relationship**

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Abstract

Ex-partner stalkers are more persistent and dangerous than stranger stalkers, but are less likely to be convicted of an offence. This research considers whether the just world hypothesis (JWH) can account for this apparent contradiction. An experimental 3×3 independent factorial design was used to investigate the influence of conduct severity and the perpetrator-target relationship on perceptions of stalking. Three-hundred and thirty-four students were presented with one of nine vignettes and asked to complete five scale items relating to the situation described. Conduct severity and the perpetrator-target relationship produced significant main effects for the combined scale items. The perpetrator's behaviour was perceived to constitute stalking, necessitate police intervention and/or criminal charges, and cause the target alarm or personal distress to a greater extent when the perpetrator and target were depicted as strangers rather than ex-partners. Conversely, the target was perceived to be less responsible for encouraging the perpetrator's behaviour in the stranger condition compared to the ex-partner condition. The JWH provides a possible explanation for the influence of the perpetrator-target relationship on perceptions of stalking. Future research could utilise more realistic vignettes to increase the impact of the perpetrator's behaviour.

Keywords: stalking legislation; perceptions of stalking; conduct severity; perpetrator-target relationship; JWH

Introduction

Stalking-like behaviours have been documented in legal case reports dating back to the early 18th century, but stalking legislation is a relatively new phenomenon. The first anti-stalking law was passed in California in 1990 following a number of highly publicised celebrity stalking cases (Anderson, 1993). Subsequently, all US states and other countries including Australia and the UK have introduced stalking legislation. One of the main issues surrounding the introduction of stalking legislation is how to differentiate between 'reasonable' and 'unreasonable' behaviours (Dennison, 2007; Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007). Stalking does not comprise a single distressing event, but encompasses a series of intrusions over a prolonged period of time that may appear routine and harmless in isolation (Sheridan & Davies, 2001a; Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007). It is not surprising therefore that there is no definitive anti-stalking law and that stalking is prohibited in a variety of ways (Sheridan, Blaauw, & Davies, 2003).

Anti-stalking laws in the US typically focus on the intentions of the perpetrator, the fear experienced by the victim, and the pattern of behaviour (Beatty, 2003, as cited in Dennison, 2007). Australian legislation, by comparison, tends to centre on the repetition of a range of behaviours and the intention of the perpetrator to arouse fear in or cause harm to the victim (Dennison, 2007). In England and Wales, the Protection from Harassment Act (PfHA) 1997 was introduced to provide protection against behaviours associated with stalking (Harris, 2000). Unlike many US and Australian anti-stalking laws the PfHA does not use the term stalking, nor does it require proof of intent to cause fear or harm (Dennison & Thomson, 2005). Instead the PfHA utilises a 'reasonable person' test whereby a course of conduct amounts to harassment if another reasonable person (i.e., juror or magistrate) would consider the particular pattern of behaviour to constitute harassment of another (Petch, 2002). The

PfHA distinguishes two criminal offences: the low-level offence of 'harassment' (s.2) and the higher-level offence of 'putting people in fear of violence' (s.4) (HMSO, 1997).

A meta-analysis of 103 studies of stalking and stalking related phenomena revealed that stalkers are more likely to be ex-partners than strangers or acquaintances (Spitzberg, 2002). Furthermore, research in the US, Australia and the UK utilising perpetrator-victim pairs (e.g., Palarea, Zona, Lane, & Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 1999), perpetrators of stalking (e.g., Farnham, James, & Cantrell, 2000; James & Farnham, 2003; Meloy, Davis, & Lovette, 2001; Rosenfeld & Lewis, 2005) and victims of stalking (e.g., Pathé & Mullen, 1997; Sheridan & Davies, 2001b) have all demonstrated that ex-partner stalkers are more persistent and more likely to use violence than stranger or acquaintance stalkers. These findings are particularly concerning as research has shown that violent ex-partner stalkers are less likely to incur criminal convictions compared to violent stranger stalkers (Sheridan & Davies, 2001b). An evaluative study of the PfHA has also demonstrated that cases sent to the Crown Prosecution Service for a decision on prosecution are more likely to be dropped when the harassment involves an intimate or acquaintance compared to a stranger (41%, 38% and 0% respectively) (Harris, 2000).

The Association of Chief Police Officers are currently piloting a risk assessment instrument to address common misperceptions held by police officers in the context of harassment, including the unfounded assumption that intimate stalkers pose less of a risk to their victims compared to stranger stalkers (L. Sheridan, personal communication, March 23, 2009). If the piloting process is successful, the risk assessment instrument will be applied to all harassment cases investigated in England and Wales.

Perceptions of Stalking

The difficulties associated with defining and legislating against stalking have led to the development of research into the identification of personal and situational characteristics that influence people's perceptions of stalking. An early study by Hills and Taplin (1998) investigated the impact of threat of harm and the perpetrator-target relationship on perceptions of stalking with an Australian community sample (n = 172). Participants were presented with a one-page vignette and asked to imagine they were the target of a series of events instigated by an ex-partner, an acquaintance, or a stranger of the opposite sex. Participants were more likely to call the police when vignettes contained an explicit threat of harm, although it did not impact significantly on their likelihood of experiencing fear. Furthermore, participants were less likely to be frightened or to call the police when vignettes described an ex-partner rather than a stranger despite evidence to suggest that ex-partners are often more persistent and violent in reality (Farnham et al., 2000; McEwan, Mullen, & Purcell, 2007; Meloy, 2005).

More recently, Sheridan, Gillett, Davies, Blaauw, and Patel (2003) examined the influence of the perpetrator-target relationship and perpetrator-target sex on perceptions of stalking among a sample of 168 UK students. Participants were presented with a one-paragraph vignette describing a 'typical' case of stalking that had been ongoing for a year. Again, participants were less likely to perceive behaviour as stalking or as necessitating police intervention when the perpetrator was portrayed as an ex-partner, rather than a stranger or acquaintance. Furthermore, participants were more likely to perceive the target as responsible for encouraging the perpetrator's behaviour when he or she was portrayed as an ex-partner. Similar findings were reported by Phillips, Quirk, Rosenfeld, and O'Connor (2004) who investigated the impact of the perpetrator-target relationship, conduct severity and perpetrator-target sex on perceptions of stalking in two separate studies with a combined

sample of 496 US students. Participants in the first study were more likely to perceive ambiguous vignettes as stalking and less likely to believe that the target should meet the perpetrator face-to-face when the perpetrator and target had no prior relationship; while participants in the second study were more likely to believe the perpetrator's behaviour constituted stalking, constituted a crime, and that the perpetrator might hurt the target as the severity of the behaviour increased.

It is important to note that not all studies have demonstrated this relationship between the perpetrator-target relationship and perceptions of stalking. Dennison and Thomson (2002) presented detailed four-page vignettes describing the behaviours of a man accused of stalking a woman to an Australian community sample (n = 1,080), and found that the same behaviour was more likely to be construed as stalking when persistence was low and the perpetrator was depicted as an ex-partner rather than an acquaintance or stranger. Furthermore, Kincade, Burns, and Fuentes (2005) found no evidence that the perpetrator-target relationship influenced perceptions of stalking with ambiguous vignettes and a sample of 356 US students. Dennison and Thomson (2005) acknowledged that the perpetrator in the ex-partner scenario of their research was described as having been possessive in the relationship, however, so it was possible that the findings reflected stereotypical perceptions of the domestic situation. In addition, the use of a yes/no measure for the prior relationship between the perpetrator and target in the study by Kincade et al. (2005) prevented the comparison of ex-partner and stranger stalkers.

With regards to the influence of intent and persistence in Dennison and Thomson's (2002) study, behaviour was more likely to be perceived as stalking and to create fear and apprehension in the target when there was explicit evidence of intent. Behaviour was also more likely to be perceived as stalking in the absence of explicit evidence of intent when there was moderate persistence (four silent hang-up phone calls in a month) compared to low

persistence (no silent hang-up phone calls). Similar findings were also reported by Dennison (2007), who examined the influence of intent, persistence, perspective and perpetrator-target sex on perceptions of stalking with an Australian community sample (n = 868). Participants received a one-paragraph vignette describing the behaviour of a person following the break up of a relationship. Although less than one fifth of participants perceived the behaviour to be illegal, the behaviour was almost only perceived to be illegal when there was explicit evidence of intent. Furthermore, participants' perceived the foreseeability of fear to be greater when explicit evidence of intent was present and the behaviour occurred on more than one occasion.

Just World Hypothesis

According to Sheridan, Gillett et al. (2003), the just world hypothesis (JWH) proposed by Lerner and Simmons (1966) offers an explanation for the finding that the perpetrator-target relationship influences perceptions of stalking. The JWH asserts that people need to believe in a 'just world' in which people get what they deserve, or conversely, 'deserve what they get' (Lerner & Simmons, 1966). Lerner and Miller (1978) asserted that there is considerable evidence to suggest that the need to believe in a just world can influence people's reactions to the innocent suffering of others. Most research to date has focused on the applicability of the JWH to peoples' reactions to victims of sexual assault and illnesses such as HIV/AIDS and cancer (Hafer & Bègue, 2005). In the context of stalking, the JWH provides an explanation for the real-world finding that intimate stalkers are less likely to incur criminal convictions compared with stranger stalkers (Harris, 2000; Sheridan & Davies, 2001b). Because former intimate stalkers share a history with their victim, an observer may surmise that the victim must have done something to upset the stalker, and therefore is more likely to deserve their fate than a victim who has never met their harasser and therefore

cannot possibly have upset him or her (see Sheridan, Gillett et al., 2003). This (often flawed) reasoning allows the observer to maintain a feeling of safety and a belief in a just world, where people only experience negative events if they deserve to.

The current study extends previous research on perceptions of stalking by considering the influence of both conduct severity and the perpetrator-target relationship. Although Sheridan, Gillett et al. (2003) explored the influence of the perpetrator-target relationship on perceptions of stalking in a 'typical' case of stalking, the severity of the stalking behaviour was not manipulated. Furthermore, when Phillips et al. (2004) investigated the influence of the perpetrator-target relationship and conduct severity on perceptions of stalking the variables were manipulated in separate studies. Consequently, it was not possible to determine whether the effects of the perpetrator-target relationship would remain constant beyond an ambiguous case of stalking.

This research utilised an experimental 3×3 (conduct severity \times the perpetrator-target relationship) independent factorial design in which participants received one of nine written vignettes recounting the behaviour of a man seeking the attention of a woman. Conduct severity has been manipulated in a variety of ways in previous research. Phillips et al. (2004) used the New York State anti-stalking law to differentiate non-stalking, misdemeanour stalking and felony stalking vignettes; increasing severity through the addition of unwanted telephone calls and the delivery of a gift (misdemeanour and felony stalking) and an aggressive face-to-face interaction (felony stalking). Other researchers have manipulated the threat of behaviour depicted in vignettes through the inclusion or exclusion of threatening telephone calls and answering machine messages (e.g., Dennison & Thomson, 2002; Hills & Taplin, 1998). In the current study, the PfHA was used in the development of the different levels of conduct severity, which varied according to the persistence and intent of the perpetrator. Persistence and intent were chosen in light of previous research (e.g., Dennison,

2007; Dennison & Thomson, 2002; Phillips et al., 2004) and their relevance to the two criminal offences of the PfHA: harassment and putting people in fear of violence.

Two sets of hypotheses were proposed. First, increasing the conduct severity depicted in the vignette will increase the extent to which the perpetrator's behaviour is perceived to:

1. constitute stalking;
2. necessitate police intervention and/or criminal charges;
3. cause the target alarm or personal distress;
4. and cause the target to fear the perpetrator will use violence against her.

Consideration is also given to the impact of conduct severity on the extent to which the target is perceived to be responsible for encouraging the perpetrator's behaviour. No directional hypothesis was proposed as this research is the first to investigate the influence of conduct severity.

Second, increasing the intimacy of the perpetrator-target relationship depicted in the vignette will decrease the extent to which the perpetrator's behaviour is perceived to:

1. constitute stalking;
2. necessitate police intervention and/or criminal charges;
3. cause the target alarm or personal distress;
4. cause the target to fear the perpetrator will use violence against her.
5. and increase the extent to which the target is perceived to be responsible for encouraging the perpetrator's behaviour.

Method

Participants

Three-hundred and twenty-eight students participated in the study: 263 females and 65 males (80% and 20% respectively). The average age of participants was 20.68 years ($SD = 3.12$). The majority of participants were from the UK ($n = 265, 81\%$), followed by other countries within the European Union ($n = 32, 10\%$) and the rest of the world ($n = 31, 9\%$). Participant numbers ranged from 35 to 38 across the nine experimental conditions. Students volunteered to take part in the research and received no credit for their participation. The research was conducted in accordance with the ethical requirements of the British Psychological Society.

Materials

The research utilised a two-page questionnaire comprising a vignette, five scale items relating to the behaviour described in the vignette, and questions concerning demographic information (gender, age and nationality). Nine versions of the vignette were constructed, representing the combination of the different levels of conduct severity and the perpetrator-target relationship. The vignettes described the behaviour of James who was seeking the attention of Katherine following her declining his offer of a date or ending a relationship with him. The vignette depicted below is for the stranger-ambiguous offence condition:

Katherine had never met James before he approached her at a friend's party and asked her out. She declined his offer on the grounds that she was not interested in a relationship. That was six months ago, and since then James has tried to call Katherine three or so times at work. On the occasions when Katherine has not answered the phone James has left messages asking her to go out with him. James has also sent a bouquet of

flowers to Katherine's work with a card expressing his love for her. Katherine occasionally sees James in the various cafés where she goes for lunch during the week, and although he keeps his distance when she is accompanied by friends or colleagues he sometimes approaches her when she is on her own. James usually starts by saying 'hi, how are you' and then proceeds to ask Katherine why she will not go out with him.

In the acquaintance condition James was portrayed as knowing Katherine for about a year when she declined his offer of a date, while in the ex-partner condition James and Katherine were portrayed as dating for about a year when she decided to end the relationship. The different levels of conduct severity were represented by varying the persistence (low vs. high) and intent (non-threatening vs. threatening) of the perpetrator. The persistence of the perpetrator was greater in the low-level and higher-level offence conditions compared to the ambiguous offence condition: James called more than 50 times and sent several bouquets of flowers, while Katherine frequently saw James in cafés and he always approached her when she was alone. With regards to the intent of the perpetrator, the higher-level offence condition contrasted with the ambiguous and low-level offence conditions: James left voice messages warning Katherine that if he could not have her no-one else could, sent cards warning her that he would not go away easily, and told her that it was not safe to be alone, especially at night. An additional sentence was also included in the low-level and higher-level offence conditions whereby Katherine thought she saw James walking along the street where she lives one evening the previous week (low-level) or thought she saw him standing across the street from her house a couple of evenings the previous week (higher-level).

The following five scale items were measured on 11-point (0-10) Likert scales:

1. To what extent does James' behaviour constitute stalking? ('Definitely not stalking' to 'Definitely stalking')

2. To what extent does James' behaviour necessitate police intervention and/or criminal charges? ('Not at all necessary' to 'Extremely necessary')
3. Do you think James' behaviour will cause Katherine alarm or personal distress? ('Definitely not' to 'Definitely')
4. Do you think James' behaviour will cause Katherine to fear that he will use violence against her? ('Definitely not' to 'Definitely')
5. To what extent is Katherine responsible for encouraging James' behaviour? ('Not at all responsible' to 'Totally responsible')

Pilot Study

The questionnaires were first piloted with a separate group of 24 students to ensure the vignettes and Likert scales were intelligible. The timeframe depicted in the vignettes was clarified following the pilot study as a consequence of the original wording causing confusion. With regards to the appropriateness of the Likert scales, participants were provided with three versions of the vignette – reflecting the different levels of conduct severity – and there were no floor or ceiling effects, irrespective of the order in which the vignettes were presented.

Procedure

Students were invited to participate in a study on perceptions of behaviour following timetabled lectures. They were informed that participation would involve the reading of a one-paragraph vignette and the answering of five scale items regarding their perceptions of the behaviour described in the vignette. Participants received a copy of the questionnaire containing one of the nine versions of the vignette. The questionnaire took approximately 10

minutes to complete and participants were debriefed once the questionnaires had been collected.

Results

A 3×3 (conduct severity \times the perpetrator-target relationship) multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) revealed significant main effects for both conduct severity, $F(10, 632) = 26.72, p < .001, \eta^2 = .30$, and the perpetrator-target relationship, $F(10, 632) = 2.54, p < .01, \eta^2 = .04$ on the combined scale items; the interaction effect was non-significant, $F(20, 1272) = .50, p = .97, \eta^2 = .01$. Subsequent univariate analyses of variance (ANOVAs) demonstrated that the conduct severity and the perpetrator-target relationship depicted in the vignettes were significantly associated with a number of the individual scale items. The MANOVA and ANOVA F ratios and significance for conduct severity and the perpetrator-target relationship are displayed in Table 1.

--- Table 1 about here ---

Conduct severity was found to influence participants' perceptions of whether the perpetrator's behaviour constituted stalking, $F(2, 319) = 85.37, p < .001, \eta^2 = .35$, necessitated police intervention and/or criminal charges, $F(2, 319) = 96.01, p < .001, \eta^2 = .38$, caused the target alarm or personal distress, $F(2, 319) = 97.01, p < .001, \eta^2 = .38$, and caused the target to fear the perpetrator would use violence against her, $F(2, 319) = 96.37, p < .001, \eta^2 = .38$. Conduct severity did not influence participants' perceptions of whether the target was responsible for encouraging the perpetrator's behaviour, $F(2, 319) = .73, p = .48, \eta^2 = .01$.

Post-hoc analyses revealed significant differences across all three levels of conduct severity for the stalking, intervention, alarm and violence scale items. The perpetrator's behaviour was perceived to constitute stalking, necessitate police intervention and/or criminal charges, cause the target alarm or personal distress, and cause the target to fear the perpetrator will use violence against her to the greatest extent in the higher-level offence condition, followed by the lower-level offence and ambiguous offence conditions (all $p \leq .001$). The means and standard deviations for the five scale items across the different levels of conduct severity and the perpetrator-target relationship are presented in Table 2.

--- Table 2 about here ---

With regards to the perpetrator-target relationship, significant associations were found for participants' perceptions of whether the perpetrator's behaviour constituted stalking, $F(2, 319) = 4.01, p < .05, \eta^2 = .03$, necessitated police intervention and/or criminal charges, $F(2, 319) = 6.81, p < .01, \eta^2 = .04$, caused the target alarm or personal distress, $F(2, 319) = 3.97, p < .05, \eta^2 = .02$, and whether the target was responsible for encouraging the perpetrator's behaviour, $F(2, 319) = 4.68, p < .05, \eta^2 = .03$. The perpetrator-target relationship was not associated with participants' perceptions of whether the perpetrator's behaviour would have caused the target to fear the perpetrator would use violence against her, $F(2, 319) = 1.95, p = .14, \eta^2 = .01$.

Post-hoc analyses revealed that participants perceived the perpetrator's behaviour to constitute stalking to a greater extent in the stranger condition compared to the ex-partner condition ($p < .05$); while police intervention and/or criminal charges were considered more necessary when the perpetrator and target were depicted as strangers rather than ex-partners ($p < .01$). Participants also believed that the target was more likely to experience alarm or

personal distress in the stranger condition compared to the ex-partner condition ($p < .05$). In contrast, the target was perceived to be less responsible for encouraging the perpetrator's behaviour when the perpetrator and target were depicted as strangers rather than ex-partners ($p < .01$). No comparisons between ex-partner and acquaintance conditions or between acquaintance and stranger conditions were found to be significant.

Discussion

The current study found that conduct severity and the perpetrator-target relationship significantly influenced participant perceptions of stalking. Four hypotheses were proposed regarding the influence of conduct severity and all were supported. The perpetrator's behaviour was perceived to constitute stalking, necessitate police intervention and/or criminal charges, cause the target alarm or personal distress, and cause the target to fear the perpetrator will use violence against her to a greater extent as the conduct severity depicted in the vignettes increased. With regards to the influence of the perpetrator-target relationship, five hypotheses were proposed and four were supported. The perpetrator's behaviour was perceived to constitute stalking, necessitate police intervention and/or criminal charges, and cause the target alarm or personal distress to a greater extent in the stranger condition compared to the ex-partner condition. The target was also perceived to be less responsible for encouraging the perpetrator's behaviour when the perpetrator and target were depicted as strangers rather than ex-partners.

The significant findings for the influence of conduct severity on perceptions of stalking are consistent with previous research (e.g., Dennison, 2007; Dennison & Thomson, 2002; Hills & Taplin, 1998; Phillips et al., 2004) and provide support for the validity of the experimental manipulation. The finding that perceptions varied across all three levels of conduct severity suggests that both the persistence and the intent of the perpetrator are central

in differentiating between 'normal' and 'stalking' behaviours. The perpetrator's behaviour was not only considered to constitute stalking to a greater extent when persistence was high (low-level and higher-level offence conditions) compared to low (ambiguous offence condition), but also when the intent was threatening (higher-level offence condition) rather than non-threatening (ambiguous and low-level offence conditions). The impact of intent over and above that of persistence supports the distinction made by the PfHA between the offence of harassment and the offence of putting people in fear of violence. While it is not 'reasonable' to persistently harass someone, it is even less 'reasonable' to threaten them. The finding that there were no significant differences for the responsibility scale item across the three levels of conduct severity suggest that perceptions of responsibility are independent of the persistence or intent of the perpetrator. Perceptions of the responsibility of the target were low across all levels of conduct severity, so it is unclear whether this finding would extend to situations in which the target's perceived level of responsibility is greater.

The significant findings for the influence of the perpetrator-target relationship on whether the perpetrator's behaviour was perceived to constitute stalking, necessitate police intervention and/or criminal charges, and cause the target alarm or personal distress are consistent with the findings of Hills and Taplin (1998), Phillips et al. (2004), and Sheridan, Gillett et al. (2003). Thus, participant perceptions failed to reflect the reality that ex-partner stalkers pose a greater threat to the personal safety of the victim than stranger stalkers (Farnham et al., 2000; McEwan et al., 2007; Meloy, 2005). The findings also contrast with those of Dennison and Thomson (2002); further research is required to determine whether this contrast represents a cultural difference in perceptions or reflects variations in the vignettes and samples used (Dennison & Thomson, 2005). It may be that an older community sample is more aware of the potential dangers associated with ex-partners compared to a younger student sample.

The significant finding for the influence of the perpetrator-target relationship on the target's perceived level of responsibility is consistent with the research of Sheridan, Gillett et al. (2003) and the real world finding that ex-partners and acquaintances are less likely to be convicted for stalking related activities than strangers (Sheridan & Davies, 2001b). Furthermore, the categorisation of 'ex-partner' appears to be a broad one in which dating for a period of 12 months is sufficient to impact on perceptions of stalking. In the context of the JWH, police intervention is less likely to be required when the perpetrator and target are ex-partners compared to strangers as the target is considered more responsible for the perpetrator's behaviour and as such should be left to resolve the situation themselves (Sheridan, Gillett et al., 2003). Consequently, there appears to be a real danger that inaccurate perceptions undermine the effectiveness of the PfHA, as evidenced by the high attrition rate for cases involving 'intimates' (Harris, 2000). It is perhaps necessary that law officials and members of the general population are educated in the aspects of stalking where perceptions differ markedly from reality. Further research is necessary to determine whether investigators, the judiciary and victim support agencies share the misperceptions demonstrated in this and similar research utilising student samples.

It is important to note that the amount of variance explained by the perpetrator-target relationship was low and further research is needed to examine the influence of other personal and situational characteristics on perceptions of stalking. The JWH is unlikely to provide a full explanation. The development of vignettes based on the real-life experiences of stalking victims may also increase the amount of variance explained. As Lerner (1997, 2003) pointed out, the reinterpretation of unjust situations is an automatic response and is unlikely to be fully aroused by the use of vignettes describing 'low impact' situations; the lack of experimental realism and corresponding emotional involvement allows participants to respond in accordance with 'conventional norms' rather than their initial thoughts (Lerner,

2003; Lerner & Miller, 1978). It may also be that participants were responding to other fundamental biases. Findings from evolutionary psychology offer evidence that jealousy and possessiveness, both major antecedents of ex-partner stalking, serve an adaptive function to maintain close proximity to a sexual mate (whether she desires this or not), and to warn off other potential mates (see Buss, 2007). This evolutionary adaptation could have unconsciously biased participants towards the ex-partner stalkers. Future work needs to examine this possibility by examining personal experiences of jealousy, possessiveness and identification with stalking behaviours. The adaptive significance of stalking is currently under-researched, even though it is known that stalking behaviours exist along a continuum and that the line between reasonable and unreasonable behaviour in initiating or maintaining a relationship is very difficult to draw.

The current study was limited to a predominantly female student sample. Some research suggests that women are more likely than men to perceive behaviour as stalking (e.g., Dennison & Thomson, 2002; Hills & Taplin, 1998), and it is uncertain whether student perceptions reflect those of the general public. This latter issue should not undermine the importance of this research, however, as there is evidence to suggest that students experience comparatively high rates of stalking compared to members of the general public (Phillips et al., 2004; Sheridan, Gillett et al., 2003).

Further research could increase the generalisability of the current findings through the use of a gender balanced community sample. Another area of research concerns the potential impact of framing on perceptions of stalking. Dennison and Thomson (2005) pointed out that questions framed in terms of whether or not the perpetrator's behaviour constitutes stalking may produce a confirmatory bias in which participants search the vignettes for evidence that stalking has occurred while overlooking evidence to the contrary. Although the current study was 'framed' as a study on perceptions of behaviour, the first scale item asked participants

the extent to which the perpetrator's behaviour constituted stalking. Consequently, future work could consider whether simple manipulations to the wording of the opening question are sufficient to influence perceptions of the behaviour described in the vignettes.

The current study considered the influence of conduct severity and the perpetrator-target relationship on perceptions of stalking. As expected, the severity of stalking behaviour influenced whether the perpetrator's behaviour was perceived to constitute stalking, necessitate police intervention and/or criminal charges; cause the target alarm or personal distress; and cause the target to fear that the perpetrator will use violence against her. With regards to the perpetrator-target relationship, the perpetrator's behaviour was perceived to constitute stalking, necessitate police intervention and/or criminal charges, and cause the target alarm or personal distress to a lesser extent when the perpetrator and target were depicted as ex-partners rather than strangers. However, the target was perceived to be more responsible for encouraging the perpetrator's behaviour in the ex-partner condition compared to the stranger condition. Overall, the results suggest that perceptions of stalking do not reflect the reality that ex-partner stalkers are more dangerous than stranger and acquaintance stalkers. Although the JWH offers an explanation for this disparity, further research is required to develop a better understanding of how it operates in the context of stalking.

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Table 1

Multivariate and Univariate Analyses of Variance F Ratios for Conduct Severity × the Perpetrator-Target Relationship.

Variable	ANOVA					
	MANOVA <i>F</i> (10, 632)	Stalking <i>F</i> (2, 319)	Intervention <i>F</i> (2, 319)	Alarm <i>F</i> (2, 319)	Violence <i>F</i> (2, 319)	Responsibility <i>F</i> (2, 319)
Severity	26.72 ^{***}	85.37 ^{***}	96.01 ^{***}	97.01 ^{***}	96.37 ^{***}	0.73
Relationship	2.54 ^{**}	4.01 [*]	6.81 ^{**}	3.97 [*]	1.95	4.68 [*]
S × R	.50	.55	.75	.70	.16	.38

Note. *F* ratios are Wilks' Lambda approximations of *F*s. MANOVA = multivariate analysis of variance; ANOVA = univariate analysis of variance. ^{*}*p* < .05. ^{**}*p* < .01. ^{***}*p* < .001.

Table 2

Means and Standard Deviations for the Five Scale Items as a Function of Conduct Severity and the Perpetrator-Target Relationship.

Condition	Five scale items									
	Stalking		Intervention		Alarm		Violence		Responsibility	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Ambiguous	5.87	1.87	3.22	2.26	6.32	2.03	3.97	2.06	2.05	1.90
Low-level	6.90	1.85	4.98	2.20	7.68	1.94	5.03	2.07	2.44	2.11
Higher-level	8.59	1.06	7.14	1.78	9.21	1.32	7.51	1.77	2.18	1.83
Stranger	7.47	1.80	5.58	2.65	8.04	2.03	5.77	2.35	1.88	1.87
Acquaintance	6.93	2.15	5.04	2.61	7.66	2.26	5.23	2.49	2.17	2.04
Ex-partner	6.90	1.96	4.65	2.58	7.45	2.12	5.44	2.53	2.61	1.91

Note. The five scale items relating to participant perceptions of the behaviour described in the vignettes utilised 11-point (0-10) Likert scales.