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**Framing and Perceptions of Stalking: The Influence of Conduct Severity and the  
Perpetrator-Target Relationship**

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## **Abstract**

Research has demonstrated that the way in which questions are presented (i.e., framed) has the capacity to influence responses to subsequent questions (Tourangeau & Rasinski, 1988). In the context of stalking, perception research has often been framed in terms of whether or not particular behaviours constitute stalking. The current research investigates whether the framing of the opening question (question frame), conduct severity and the perpetrator-target relationship influence perceptions of stalking. Two studies employed experimental  $3 \times 3$  independent factorial designs: one to examine question frame and conduct severity, the other to examine question frame and the perpetrator-target relationship. Participants in both studies (total  $N = 449$ ) were presented with vignettes and asked to answer six questions relating to the behaviour described. Question frame was found to impact on the classification of behaviour, with a greater proportion of participants indicating that the behaviour represented harassment or stalking rather than an illegal act. Consistent with previous research, conduct severity and the perpetrator-target relationship influenced perceptions of stalking. However, there was no evidence to suggest that the framing of the opening question influenced these perceptions. The implications of these findings for previous perception research are discussed.

Keywords: Perceptions, stalking, framing, conduct severity, perpetrator-target relationship

## **Introduction**

Stalking is a serious and widespread problem that has a significant impact on those victimised by such behaviour. Research regarding the prevalence of stalking indicates that 12 percent of people living in England and Wales (Hall & Smith, 2011), 12 percent of people living in Germany (Dressing, Kuehner, & Gass, 2005), 11 percent of people living in Eastern Austria (Stieger, Burger, & Schild, 2008) and 17 percent of people living in the Netherlands (van der Aa & Kunst, 2009) have experienced stalking within their lifetime. Victims of stalking experience a range of social, psychological, physical and financial costs as a direct consequence of being stalked (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007). For example, victims often invest in additional security measures, socialise less and stop going to certain places through fear of encountering their stalker (Pathé & Mullen, 1997; Sheridan, Blaauw, & Davies, 2003; Spitzberg, 2002). Continued victimisation may also cause low self-esteem, a sense of helplessness and insomnia (Blaauw, Winkel, Arensman, Sheridan, & Freeve, 2002; Spitzberg, 2002).

The Protection from Harassment Act (PfHA) was introduced in England and Wales in 1997 to protect people from stalking and other forms of harassment. The PfHA distinguishes between two criminal offences, the low-level offence of harassment and the higher-level offence of putting people in fear of violence. However, it does not define or use the term stalking (HMSO, 1997). The adequacy of the PfHA to deal with stalking cases has recently been called into question, and in 2011 the British Home Office issued a consultation on stalking to seek opinion on how to protect victims more effectively (Home Office, 2011; Russell, 2012). On 8th March 2012 the Prime Minister David Cameron announced that stalking will be recognised as a criminal offence in order to protect victims and demonstrate that stalking is a crime. Despite this announcement, MPs and peers from all parties are concerned that the introduction of a new law will not be sufficient, and that ‘fundamental

reform' of the current system is required (Johnson & Cordon, 2012). These concerns emanate from criticisms regarding the ambiguities present in most legal definitions, and the potential influence of perceptions on the efficacy of anti-stalking laws.

Phillips, Quirk, Rosenfeld, and O'Connor (2004) highlight two outcomes that may result from ambiguous stalking legislation. The first is the potential for individuals to make false allegations of stalking behaviour. The second is the potential for victims to fail to recognise behaviour as stalking, resulting in the underreporting of stalking behaviour. It is therefore important that research continues to investigate perceptions of stalking, particularly given that research has reported contrasting findings regarding the classification of behaviour as stalking and the classification of the same behaviour as illegal. For example, Dennison and Thomson (2002) found a high level of correspondence between classifications of stalking and illegal behaviour. In contrast, Phillips et al. (2004) found that participants believed behaviour constituted stalking to a greater extent than they believed it constituted a crime.

A growing body of research has examined the influence of various personal and situational characteristics on perceptions of stalking in an attempt to identify which characteristics distinguish stalking from non-stalking behaviour in the public mind. This research has typically adopted a similar methodology, in which hypothetical vignettes are used to manipulate the characteristics under examination. These characteristics commonly include intent to cause fear or harm, the persistence and/or consequences of behaviour, the perpetrator-target relationship, and the sex of the perpetrator, the target and/or the participant. Collectively, the body of research indicates that behaviour is more likely to be considered stalking when the behaviour is persistent (Dennison, 2007; Dennison & Thomson, 2002; Phillips et al., 2004; Scott & Sheridan, 2011), when the perpetrator clearly intends to cause the target fear or harm (Dennison, 2007; Dennison & Thomson, 2002; Phillips et al., 2004; Scott & Sheridan, 2011), and when the perpetrator is portrayed as a stranger rather than an

acquaintance or ex-partner (Cass, 2011; Phillips et al. 2004; Scott, Lloyd, & Gavin, 2010; Scott & Sheridan, 2011; Sheridan, Gillett, Davies, Blaauw, & Patel, 2003). Research has also demonstrated that behaviour is more likely to be perceived to necessitate police intervention, and cause the target alarm, personal distress and to fear the use of violence when the behaviour is persistent and the perpetrator is portrayed as a stranger (e.g., Dennison, 2007; Hills & Taplin, 1998; Scott et al., 2010; Scott & Sheridan, 2011; Sheridan et al., 2003).

A potential limitation of this body of research is the consistent use of the term 'stalking' in questions that attempt to explore perceptions of the described behaviour. For example, "How far do you think this is a case of stalking?" and "To what extent do you consider [the offender's] behaviour to be stalking?" (see Dennison & Thomson, 2000, 2002; Phillips et al., 2004; Scott et al., 2010; Scott & Sheridan, 2011; Sheridan et al., 2003; Sheridan & Scott, 2010). As Dennison and Thomson (2005) highlighted, the use of the term stalking may in itself produce a confirmatory bias in which participants search for evidence that stalking has occurred whilst disregarding conflicting evidence. The potential for the use of the term stalking to influence perceptions is evident when considered in the context of research examining the influence of framing on decision making. Tversky and Kahneman (1981) demonstrated the powerful effect of framing in response to equivalent problems framed differently; irrespective of whether the problems related to monetary outcomes or the loss of human life.

The effects of framing have since been demonstrated in a wide variety of contexts. For example, research has demonstrated the impact of framing in medical contexts, influencing decisions about the resuscitation of premature newborns (Haward, Murphy, & Lorenz, 2008), treatment options for cancer (Almashat, Ayotte, Edelstein, & Margrett, 2008) and likelihood of engaging in preventive health practices such as obtaining a mammogram (Banks, Salovey, Greener, Rothman, Moyer, Beauvais, & Epel, 1995). Framing has been

found to be particularly influential when interpreting ambiguous situations. For example, Galesic and Tourangeau (2007) investigated the effect of framing when determining whether ambiguous behaviour represents sexual harassment. Participants were provided with one of two versions of a sexual harassment survey, in which the title and the sponsor of the survey were manipulated: one survey was entitled the 'Sexual Harassment Survey' and participants were led to believe that it was sponsored by a feminist group; the other survey was entitled the "Work Atmosphere Survey" and participants were led to believe that it was sponsored by a neutral research institute. Galesic and Tourangeau found that participants who received the 'Sexual Harassment Survey' were more likely to indicate that behaviours described in the survey constituted sexual harassment, were more likely to report experiencing sexual harassment in the workplace, and were more concerned by behaviours that may or may not constitute sexual harassment in comparison to participants who received the 'Work Atmosphere Survey'. Three explanations were proposed for the effect of framing. First, that the frame gave participants some indication of the researchers' motive and so, in wanting to please or cooperate with the researchers, participants used the frame as a basis for their responses. Second, that the frame primed participants to recall certain situations that are consistent with the frame. Third, that the frame provided participants with an interpretive framework to use when responding to an ambiguous issue.

These explanations provided by Galesic and Tourangeau (2007) highlight an important point made by Tversky and Kahneman (1981), that "The frame that a decision-maker adopts is controlled partly by the formulation of the problem and partly by the norms, habits and personal characteristics of the decision-maker" (p. 453). With regard to stalking, it is apparent that people hold preconceived ideas regarding stalking behaviour that do not reflect reality. For example, whilst research examining perceptions of stalking indicates that behaviour is more likely to be deemed stalking when perpetrated by a stranger, statistics

relating to the incidence and nature of stalking indicate that stalking is far more common among ex-partners than strangers (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007). Statistics further indicate that ex-partners represent the most persistent and dangerous relational subtype (McEwan, Mullen, & MacKenzie, 2009; McEwan, Mullen, MacKenzie, & Ogloff, 2009; Thomas, Purcell, Pathé, & Mullen, 2008). Despite this evidence, ex-partners are less likely to be convicted of stalking and cases of harassment are more likely to be dropped when the harassment involves an ex-partner rather than a stranger (Harris, 2000). Further, Scott and Gavin (2011) found that mock jurors were more likely to reach a guilty verdict when the perpetrator was portrayed as a stranger rather than an ex-partner. Evidently, preconceived ideas about the nature of stalking which are not reflective of the realities of the behaviour impact on decision making and criminal justice responses. Consequently, it is likely that these preconceived ideas also influence research findings which investigate perceptions of stalking.

In acknowledgement of concerns regarding the use of the term stalking, Dennison (2007) framed her research only in terms of the legality of behaviour. Although the findings still indicated that intent and persistence influenced perceptions of stalking, Dennison expressed the need for further research to examine the influence of framing on perceptions of this intrusive behaviour. There are a number of ways in which framing has been investigated. These include the way in which a problem is presented (Tversky & Kahneman, 1981) the order of questions in a survey (Tourangeau, Rasinski, Bradburn, & D'Andrade, 1989), as well as the title of the survey and the sponsor of the research (Galesic & Tourangeau, 2007).

The aim of this research is to address the specific concern raised by Dennison and Thomson (2005) regarding the framing of the opening question (question frame) used to assess perceptions of the described behaviour. Whilst previous research has included questions regarding stalking and questions regarding the legality of behaviour (e.g., Dennison & Thomson, 2002; Phillips et al., 2004), these studies utilised within-participant designs



whereby participants were first asked whether the behaviour constituted stalking before being asked whether it represented an illegal act. A significant body of research has demonstrated that the context provided by questions can influence responses to subsequent questions (see Tourangeau & Rasinski, 1988 for a review). Thus, suggesting that initial responses to whether behaviour constitutes stalking may influence subsequent responses to whether it represented an illegal act. In order to address this issue, the current research investigates whether question frame influences perceptions of the described behaviour using a between-participant design. This research also extends that of Scott and Sheridan (2011) using the same vignettes with a larger, more gender balanced sample.

The research employed two experimental  $3 \times 3$  independent factorial designs to investigate the influence of question frame (harassment, stalking and illegal) and conduct severity (ambiguous, low-level and higher-level); and the influence of question frame and the perpetrator-target relationship (stranger, acquaintance and ex-partner) on classifications and perceptions of behaviour. In Study 1, the different levels of conduct severity varied according to the persistence and intent of the perpetrator. Persistence and intent were chosen in light of previous research and their relevance to the two criminal offences of the PfHA: harassment and putting people in fear of violence. In Study 2, the different types of perpetrator-target relationship were chosen after consideration of previous research.

The research first examines the influence of question frame (Studies 1 and 2), conduct severity (Study 1 only) and the perpetrator-target relationship (Study 2 only) on *classifications* of the described behaviour, and whether it is considered to be harassment, stalking or illegal. As such, the framing of the opening question represents the independent variable and participant's responses to this question represent the dependent variable. The research then examines the influence of question frame, conduct severity, and the perpetrator-

target relationship on *perceptions* of the described behaviour and the extent to which it is considered to:

- (1) to necessitate police intervention,
- (2) cause the target alarm or personal distress, and
- (3) cause the target to fear the use of violence.

As well as the extent to which the target is considered to:

- (4) be responsible for encouraging the perpetrator's behaviour, and
- (5) be able to help resolve the situation.

## **Study 1**

### **Method**

**Participants.** Two-hundred and sixty-nine adults living in the UK participated in Study 1: 120 men and 149 women (45% and 55% respectively). The average age of participants was 23.66 years ( $SD = 9.34$ ). The majority of participants were students ( $n = 212$ , 79%) and were born in the UK ( $n = 224$ , 82%). Participant numbers ranged from 29 to 33 across the nine experimental conditions.

**Materials.** Participants were presented with a two-page questionnaire comprising a vignette, questions relating to the behaviour described in the vignette, and questions regarding demographic information. Nine versions of the questionnaire were developed, representing the three levels of the question frame manipulation (harassment, stalking and illegal) and the three levels of the conduct severity manipulation (ambiguous, low-level and higher-level).

The different levels of question frame were manipulated by varying the wording of the opening question so that participants were asked whether they considered the described behaviour to be harassment, stalking or illegal behaviour. The different levels of conduct

severity were manipulated by varying the persistence (low vs. high) and intent (non-threatening vs. threatening) of the behaviour described in the vignettes. The following vignette is for the low-level offence condition:

Katherine had known James for about a year when he asked her out. Although flattered, 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 more than 50 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 several bouquets of flowers to Katherine's work with cards expressing his interest in her. Katherine frequently 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 always 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. Most recently, Katherine saw James walking along the street where she lives one evening last week.

In the ambiguous offence condition, the persistence of the behaviour was low compared to the low-level and higher-level offence conditions where persistence was high. Specifically, James called three or so times and sent a single bouquet of flowers, while the Katherine occasionally saw James in cafés and he sometimes approached her when she was on her own. In the higher-level offence condition, intent was threatening compared to the ambiguous and low-level offence conditions where intent was non-threatening. Specifically, 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 final sentence was included in the low-level and higher-level offence conditions where Katherine thought she saw James walking along the street where she lives (low-level) or thought she saw him standing across the street from her house a couple of evenings the previous week (higher-level).

Having read the vignette, participants answered six questions relating to their classifications and perceptions of the described behaviour. Participants first responded to whether they considered James' behaviour to be harassment, stalking or illegal behaviour (dependent on the question frame manipulation). Participants were able to respond 'yes', 'no' or 'unsure'. Participants then completed the following five scale items; all measured on 11-point (0-10) Likert scales:

- (1) To what extent does James' behaviour necessitate police intervention? ('Not at all necessary' to 'Extremely necessary')
- (2) Do you think James' behaviour will cause Katherine alarm or personal distress? ('Definitely not' to 'Definitely')
- (3) Do you think James' behaviour will cause Katherine to fear that he will use violence against her? ('Definitely not' to 'Definitely')
- (4) To what extent is Katherine responsible for encouraging James' behaviour? ('Not at all responsible' to 'Totally responsible')
- (5) Do you think Katherine could help resolve the situation? ('Definitely not' to 'Definitely')

**Procedure.** Two methods were used to recruit participants for the research: students were asked to participate following timetabled lectures and members of the community were invited to participate on an individual basis. All participants were informed that they would

be required to read a one-paragraph vignette and answer six questions relating to their perceptions of the described behaviour. Participants who agreed to take part in the research completed one of the nine versions of the questionnaire and were debriefed afterwards. The research received approval from the university ethics committee and was conducted in accordance with the ethical requirements of the British Psychological Society.

## **Results**

All statistical analyses were performed using IBM SPSS Statistics 19. Multiple logistic regression analysis was performed to assess the relative impact of question frame and conduct severity on perceptions of whether the perpetrator's behaviour represented harassment, stalking or an illegal act. The assumptions of logistic regression were met, although it was necessary to dichotomise responses to the dependent variable as 'yes' or 'no/unsure' because there were insufficient participants in each cell to analyse the three categories of response separately. With regard to the independent variables, the stalking condition was the reference category for question frame and the higher-level offence condition was the reference category for conduct severity.

The logistic regression model was statistically significant,  $\chi^2(8, N = 268) = 117.63, p < .001$ , indicating that the model reliably distinguished participants' yes from no/unsure responses. The model as a whole explained between 36% (Cox and Snell R square) and 48% (Nagelkerke R squared) of variance in perceptions, and correctly classified 77% of cases. The model is provided in Table 1.

--- Table 1 about here ---

Table 1 shows that question frame and conduct severity made significant contributions to the model, but that the interaction effect was non-significant. Post-hoc comparisons were performed using chi-square analyses with Bonferroni adjusted alpha levels of .017. The analyses for question frame revealed a greater proportion of participants responded 'yes' when the first question was framed in terms of harassment (73%) or stalking (69%) compared to the legality of the behaviour (28%),  $\chi^2(1, N = 178) = 36.00, p < .001, \phi = .45$  and  $\chi^2(1, N = 182) = 30.07, p < .001, \phi = .41$  respectively. The difference in the proportion of participants who responded 'yes' when the first question was framed in terms of harassment compared to stalking was non-significant,  $\chi^2(1, N = 176) = .41, p = .523, \phi = .05$ .

Additional analyses revealed significant differences across all three levels of conduct severity: ambiguous and low-level offence conditions,  $\chi^2(1, N = 174) = 14.38, p < .001, \phi = .29$ ; ambiguous and higher-level offence conditions,  $\chi^2(1, N = 183) = 55.98, p < .001, \phi = .55$ ; low-level and higher-level offence conditions,  $\chi^2(1, N = 179) = 15.05, p < .001, \phi = .29$ . The greatest proportion of participants classified the perpetrator's behaviour as harassment, stalking or an illegal act in the higher-level offence condition (83%) followed by the lower-level (56%) and ambiguous offence conditions (28%).

A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was then performed to determine whether question frame and/or conduct severity influenced participants' perceptions in relation to the five scale items. Although the homogeneity of covariances assumption was not met, Tabachnick and Fidell (2007) pointed out that Box's M Test is very 'sensitive' and may be overly strict when used with a relatively large sample. The analysis revealed a significant main effect for conduct severity,  $F(10, 508) = 17.35, p < .001, \eta^2 = .26$ , but no significant main effect for question frame or interaction effect for question frame and conduct severity. The  $F$  ratios and significance are presented in Table 2.

--- Table 2 about here ---

Further univariate analyses of variance (ANOVAs) using Bonferroni adjusted alpha levels of .01 revealed that conduct severity influenced the extent to which participants considered the perpetrator's behaviour to necessitate police intervention,  $F(2, 258) = 61.31, p < .001, \eta^2 = .32$ , and to cause the target alarm or personal distress,  $F(2, 258) = 47.11, p < .001, \eta^2 = .27$ , and to fear the use of violence,  $F(2, 258) = 63.24, p < .001, \eta^2 = .33$ . Post-hoc comparisons (Tukey HSD) yielded significant differences across all three levels of conduct severity. The perpetrator's behaviour was perceived to necessitate police intervention and cause the target alarm or personal distress and to fear the use of violence to the greatest extent in the higher-level offence condition, followed by the lower-level and ambiguous offence conditions (all  $p < .01$ ). The corresponding means and standard deviations are provided in Table 3.

--- Table 3 about here ---

## **Discussion**

Question frame was found to impact on the classification of behaviour, with a greater proportion of participants indicating that the described behaviour represented harassment or stalking than represented an illegal act. This finding indicates a clear distinction in perceptions of behaviour that is considered 'unreasonable' and that which is considered 'illegal'. However, question frame did not influence perceptions of whether the situation necessitated police intervention nor whether the behaviour would cause the target alarm, personal distress or to fear the use of violence. Further, question frame had no effect on perceptions of whether the target was responsible for encouraging the behaviour or whether the target was able to help resolve the situation.

Conduct severity was also found to significantly influence the classification of behaviour. The proportion of participants who indicated that the described behaviour represented harassment, stalking or an illegal act increased as the severity of the behaviour increased. Further, conduct severity influenced perceptions of whether the situation necessitated police intervention and would cause the target alarm, personal distress or to fear the use of violence. These findings are in line with previous research (e.g., Dennison, 2007; Dennison & Thomson, 2002; Hills & Taplin, 1998; Phillips et al., 2004; Scott & Sheridan, 2011). Conduct severity did not have any effect on perceptions of whether the target was responsible for encouraging the perpetrator's behaviour or was able to help resolve the situation. The non-significant finding for responsibility is consistent with that of Scott and Sheridan (2011) who only found a significant effect for perpetrator-target relationship when investigating perceptions of target responsibility. The influence of target-perpetrator relationship is considered in Study 2.

## Study 2

### Method

**Participants.** Two-hundred and sixty-five adults living in the UK participated in Study 2: 120 men and 145 women (45% and 55% respectively). The average age of participants was 22.87 years ( $SD = 8.85$ ). Again, the majority of participants were students ( $n = 221$ , 83%) and were born in the UK ( $n = 229$ , 85%). Participant numbers ranged from 27 to 33 across the nine experimental conditions. Participants in the acquaintance condition ( $n = 85$ ) were the same participants used in the low-level offence condition of Study 1.

**Materials.** Participants were presented with a two-page questionnaire comprising a vignette and the same questions used in Study 1. Nine versions of the questionnaire were again developed, this time representing the three levels of the question frame manipulation



(harassment, stalking and illegal) and the three levels of the perpetrator-target manipulation (stranger, acquaintance and ex-partner).

Again, the different levels of question frame were manipulated by varying the wording of the opening question so that participants were asked whether they considered the described behaviour to be harassment, stalking or illegal behaviour. The different levels of the perpetrator-target relationship were manipulated by varying the wording of the opening sentence of the vignettes. Otherwise, the vignettes were the same as those used in the low-level offence condition of Study 1. James was either portrayed as: a stranger who had never met Katherine before he approached her at a friend's party; an acquaintance who had known her for about a year; or an ex-partner who had dated her for about a year.

**Procedure.** The procedure was the same as for Study 1.

## **Results**

All statistical analyses were performed using IBM SPSS Statistics 19. Multiple logistic regression analysis was performed, this time to assess the relative impact of question frame and the perpetrator-target relationship on perceptions of whether the perpetrator's behaviour represented harassment, stalking or an illegal act. The assumptions of logistic regression were met, although it was again necessary to dichotomise responses to the dependent variable as 'yes' or 'no/unsure' because there were insufficient participants in each cell to analyse the three categories of response separately. With regard to the independent variables, the stalking condition was the reference category for question frame and the ex-partner condition was the reference category for perpetrator-target relationship.

The logistic regression model was statistically significant,  $\chi^2(4, N = 263) = 83.20, p < .001$ , indicating that the model reliably distinguished participants' yes from no/unsure responses. The model as a whole explained between 27% (Cox and Snell R square) and 36%

(Nagelkerke R squared) of variance in perceptions, and correctly classified 76% of cases. The model is provided in Table 4.

--- Table 4 about here ---

Table 4 shows that question frame and the perpetrator-target relationship made significant contributions to the model, but that the interaction effect was non-significant. Post-hoc comparisons were again performed using chi-square analyses with Bonferroni adjusted alpha levels of .017. Similar to Study 1, the analyses for question frame revealed a greater proportion of participants responded ‘yes’ when the first question was framed in terms of harassment (75%) or stalking (67%) compared to the legality of the behaviour (20%),  $\chi^2(1, N = 171) = 52.80, p < .001, \phi = .56$  and  $\chi^2(1, N = 179) = 41.53, p < .001, \phi = .48$  respectively. The difference in the proportion of participants who responded ‘yes’ when the first question was framed in terms of harassment compared to stalking was non-significant,  $\chi^2(1, N = 176) = 1.24, p = .266, \phi = .08$ .

Although the perpetrator-target relationship made a significant contribution to the model, additional analyses revealed no significant differences across the three levels of perpetrator-target relationship at the adjusted alpha level: stranger and acquaintance conditions,  $\chi^2(1, N = 171) = .47, p = .493, \phi = .05$ ; stranger and ex-partner conditions,  $\chi^2(1, N = 178) = 5.19, p = .023, \phi = .17$ ; acquaintance and ex-partner conditions,  $\chi^2(1, N = 177) = 2.51, p = .113, \phi = .12$ . Nevertheless, the greatest proportion of participants classified the perpetrator’s behaviour as harassment, stalking or an illegal act in the stranger condition (62%) followed by the acquaintance (56%) and ex-partner conditions (45%).

A MANOVA was then performed to determine whether question frame and/or perpetrator-target relationship influenced participants’ perceptions in relation to the five scale

items. The homogeneity of covariances assumption was met and the analysis revealed a significant main effect for perpetrator-target relationship,  $F(10, 504) = 3.45, p < .001, \eta^2 = .06$ , but no significant main effect for question frame or interaction effect for question frame and perpetrator-target relationship. The  $F$  ratios and significance are presented in Table 5.

--- Table 5 about here ---

Further ANOVAs using Bonferroni adjusted alpha levels of .01 revealed that question frame influenced the extent to which participants considered the perpetrator's behaviour to necessitate police intervention,  $F(2, 256) = 6.04, p < .01, \eta^2 = .05$ , despite the absence of a significant main effect in the corresponding MANOVA. The perpetrator-target relationship also influenced the extent to which participants considered the perpetrator's behaviour to cause the target to fear the use of violence,  $F(2, 256) = 7.05, p < .01, \eta^2 = .05$ , as well as the extent to which the target was considered responsible for encouraging the perpetrator's behaviour,  $F(2, 256) = 7.71, p < .01, \eta^2 = .06$ , and able to help resolve the situation,  $F(2, 256) = 5.57, p < .01, \eta^2 = .04$ .

Post-hoc comparisons (Tukey HSD) revealed that participants perceived the perpetrator's behaviour to necessitate police intervention to a greater extent when the first question was framed in terms of the legality of the behaviour rather than harassment ( $p < .01$ ) or stalking ( $p < .05$ ). With regard to the perpetrator-target relationship, participants perceived the perpetrator's behaviour to cause the target to fear the use of violence more when the perpetrator and target were portrayed as strangers rather than ex-partners ( $p < .01$ ). The target was also perceived to be less responsible for encouraging the perpetrator's behaviour and less able to resolve the situation in the stranger condition compared to the ex-partner (both  $p <$

.01) and acquaintance conditions (responsibility  $p = .07$ , resolution  $p < .05$ ). The corresponding means and standard deviations are provided in Table 6.

--- Table 6 about here ---

## **Discussion**

Similar to Study 1, question frame was found to impact on the classification of behaviour, with a greater proportion of participants indicating that the described behaviour represented harassment or stalking rather than an illegal act. This again indicates a clear distinction in perceptions of ‘unreasonable’ and ‘illegal’ behaviour. In contrast to Study 1, question frame was also found to influence perceptions of whether the behaviour necessitated police intervention, with participants indicating a greater need when the opening question was framed in terms of the legality of behaviour rather than harassment or stalking. Similar to Study 1, question frame did not influence perceptions of whether the behaviour would cause the target alarm, personal distress or to fear the use of violence, whether the target was responsible for encouraging the behaviour or whether the target was able to help resolve the situation.

The perpetrator-target relationship was also found to significantly influence the classification of behaviour. A greater proportion of participants indicated that the behaviour represented harassment, stalking or an illegal act when the perpetrator was portrayed as a stranger rather than an acquaintance or ex-partner. This finding is in line with previous research which consistently demonstrates that behaviour is more likely to be considered unreasonable and/or illegal when the perpetrator is portrayed as a stranger rather than an acquaintance or ex-partner (Cass, 2011; Phillips et al. 2004; Scott et al., 2010; Scott & Sheridan, 2011; Sheridan et al., 2003).

Further, the perpetrator-target relationship was found to influence perceptions of whether the behaviour would cause the target to fear the use of violence, as well as perceptions of whether the target was responsible for encouraging the perpetrator's behaviour or was able to help resolve the situation. Specifically, behaviour was perceived to cause the target to fear the use of violence *more* when the perpetrator was portrayed as a stranger rather than an ex-partner. Conversely, the target was perceived to be *less* responsible for encouraging the perpetrator's behaviour and to be *less* able to help resolve the situation when the perpetrator was portrayed as a stranger rather than an ex-partner. The perpetrator-target relationship did not have any effect on perceptions of whether the situation necessitated police intervention, or would cause the target alarm or personal distress. Although there are variations in significance, the overall pattern of findings is consistent with previous research (e.g., Scott & Sheridan, 2011).

## **General Discussion**

The current research investigated the influence of question frame, conduct severity and the perpetrator-target relationship on classifications and perceptions of behaviour. It aimed to address the specific concern raised by Dennison and Thomson (2005) regarding the consistent use of the term 'stalking' to assess perceptions of this intrusive behaviour. The influence of conduct severity and the perpetrator-target relationship were also considered given their demonstrated importance in previous research.

### **Question Frame**

The framing of the opening question influenced classifications of behaviour in both studies, with a greater proportion of participants indicating that the described behaviour represented harassment or stalking as opposed to an illegal act. This finding indicates a clear

distinction in perceptions of behaviour that is considered ‘unreasonable’ and that which is considered ‘illegal’. However, it contrasts with that of Dennison and Thomson (2002) who found a high level of correspondence between classifications of stalking and illegal behaviour. Further research is needed to determine whether these contrasting findings reflect methodological differences or represent a cross-national difference given that Dennison and Thomson’s (2002) research was conducted in Australia. It is also important to acknowledge that ‘harassment’ and ‘stalking’ are difficult terms to define. Given the recent announcement that stalking will soon be recognised as a criminal offence in England and Wales for the first time, further research is required to clarify understandings of these terms and examine whether the change in legislation will have any impact on perceptions of stalking.

Although the framing of the opening question influenced classifications of behaviour it did not influence perceptions of whether the perpetrator’s behaviour would cause the target alarm, personal distress or to fear the use of violence. Nor did it influence perceptions regarding the target’s responsibility or ability to help resolve the situation. However, the framing of the opening question did influence perceptions of whether the perpetrator’s behaviour necessitated police intervention in Study 2 only. This inconsistency might be explained by the manipulation of conduct severity in Study 1 relative to the control of conduct severity in Study 2. The question frame manipulation in the current research was subtle, involving the manipulation of a single word in the opening question of the questionnaire. Therefore, it is possible that the escalation of conduct severity in Study 1 overshadowed the subtle question frame manipulation, while the consistency of conduct severity at a ‘low-level’ in Study 2 enabled the subtle question frame manipulation to influence participant responses.

The wording of the opening question was manipulated to address a concern raised by Dennison and Thomson (2005) regarding the use of the term ‘stalking’ in questions that

attempt to explore perceptions of the described behaviour. As such, there was a risk that the question frame could invoke pre-conceived ideas about the described behaviour and thus influence responses to subsequent questions. Although the current research suggests the subtle question frame manipulation did not activate pre-conceived ideas held by participants further research is needed to examine the influence of more prominent framing manipulations on perceptions of behaviour. Nevertheless, the manipulation in the current study addressed Dennison and Thomson's (2005) concern, revealing that the framing of the opening question had little or no impact on subsequent perceptions of the described behaviour. Thus, suggesting that the use of the term stalking does not produce a confirmatory bias and is unlikely to have influenced the findings of previous research on perceptions of stalking.

### **Conduct Severity**

Conduct severity was found to influence classifications of behaviour, as well as perceptions of whether the perpetrator's behaviour necessitated police intervention, and would cause the target alarm, personal distress or to fear the use of violence. The proportion of participants who indicated that the described behaviour represented harassment, stalking or an illegal act increased as the severity of the behaviour increased. Further, the perpetrator's behaviour was perceived to necessitate police intervention and cause the target alarm or personal distress and to fear the use of violence to the greatest extent in the higher-level offence condition, followed by the lower-level and ambiguous offence conditions. In contrast, conduct severity was not found to influence perceptions regarding the target's responsibility or ability to help resolve the situation. These findings are in line with previous research (e.g., Dennison, 2007; Dennison & Thomson, 2002; Hills & Taplin, 1998; Phillips et al., 2004; Scott & Sheridan, 2010), and suggest that there are clear behavioural indicators

which significantly influence perceptions of behaviour, its anticipated consequences and appropriate criminal justice responses.

However, the current research was limited to the manipulation of three levels of conduct severity. The persistence and intent of the perpetrator were manipulated in light of the PfHA to form an ambiguous offence condition (low persistence and non-threatening), a low-level offence condition (high persistence and non-threatening: representing the criminal offence of harassment) and a higher-level offence condition (high persistence and threatening: representing the criminal offence of putting people in fear of violence). Thus, further research is necessary to investigate the influence of a fourth level of conduct severity, where the persistence of the behaviour is low and the intent is threatening.

### **Perpetrator-Target Relationship**

The perpetrator-target relationship was also found to influence classifications of behaviour, with a greater proportion of participants indicating that the behaviour represented harassment, stalking or an illegal act when the perpetrator was portrayed as a stranger rather than an acquaintance or ex-partner. Further, the perpetrator-target relationship influenced perceptions of whether the perpetrator's behaviour would cause the target to fear the use of violence, as well as perceptions of whether the target was responsible for encouraging the perpetrator's behaviour or was able to help resolve the situation. The findings that behaviour was more likely to be considered unreasonable and/or illegal as well as being perceived to cause the target to fear the use of violence more when the perpetrator was portrayed as a stranger rather than an ex-partner is in line with previous research (Cass, 2011; Phillips et al. 2004; Scott et al., 2010; Scott & Sheridan, 2011; Sheridan et al., 2003). However, the latter finding is in direct contrast with reality, where ex-partner stalkers represent the most



persistent and dangerous relational subtype (McEwan et al., 2009; McEwan et al., 2009; Thomas et al., 2008).

The finding that the target was perceived to be less responsible for encouraging the perpetrator's behaviour and less able to help resolve the situation when the perpetrator was portrayed as a stranger rather than an acquaintance or ex-partner is also in line with previous research (e.g., Scott et al., 2010; Scott & Sheridan, 2011; Sheridan et al., 2003); and highlights the potential influence of preconceived ideas on perceptions of behaviour. However, the current research was limited to the manipulation of the perpetrator-target relationship in the absence of any contextual information regarding the nature of their interactions. By including this contextual information, further research will be able to explore the influence of subtle interactions between the perpetrator and the target within and between different perpetrator-target relationships.

### **Implications and Conclusions**

This research demonstrated that behaviour was more likely to be classified as harassment or stalking than an illegal act irrespective of whether the persistence of the behaviour was low or high, the intent was non-threatening or threatening, and whether the perpetrator and target were portrayed as strangers, acquaintances or ex-partners. Thus, harassing and stalking behaviour is not necessarily equated with illegal behaviour despite it being legislated against in the PfHA 1997. These findings suggest there may be instances where the perpetrator's behaviour presents a threat to the personal safety of the victim, but is not perceived to be serious enough to warrant a criminal remedy. As such, it is important that the public are aware of the civil remedies available (i.e., restraining orders), in order to provide protection to victims of stalking. As Häkkänen, Hagelstam, and Santtila (2003) pointed out, restraining orders can play a significant role in the protection of stalking victims provided the conditions of the order are respected by the victim as well as the perpetrator. It

is equally important that the public are educated that harassment and stalking constitute illegal acts that upon conviction can result in a custodial sentence.

In conclusion, the current research demonstrated that while the framing of the opening question influenced classifications of behaviour, it did not influence subsequent perceptions. Consequently, it is unlikely that the use of the term stalking in previous research has biased the findings. It is acknowledged that the question frame manipulation in the current research was subtle and therefore further research is needed to investigate the influence of more prominent framing manipulations. Finally, the current research demonstrated that while there are clear behavioural indicators that influence perceptions of stalking, the nature of the perpetrator-target relationship continues to influence perceptions counter to reality.

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Table 1

*Logistic regression predicting perceptions of whether the perpetrator's behaviour represented harassment, stalking or an illegal act*

Variable	<i>B</i>	SE	Wald	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	Odds Ratio	95% CI for Odds Ratio	
							Lower	Upper
Question frame			14.53	2	.001			
Illegal	-2.42	.82	8.78	1	.003	.09	.02	.44
Harassment	.63	1.25	.25	1	.617	1.87	.16	21.75
Severity			19.86	2	.000			
Ambiguous	-3.38	.83	16.71	1	.000	.03	.01	.17
Low-level	-1.64	.85	3.73	1	.053	.19	.04	1.02
QF × S			.57	4	.967			
Illegal by ambiguous	.35	1.16	.09	1	.764	1.42	.15	13.83
Illegal by low-level	-.13	1.37	.01	1	.925	.88	.06	12.78
Harassment by ambiguous	-.03	1.03	.00	1	.979	.97	.13	7.36
Harassment by low-level	-.63	1.40	.20	1	.654	.53	.04	8.24
Constant	2.74	.73	14.11	1	.000	15.50		



Table 2

*Multivariate and univariate analyses of variance for question frame × conduct severity*

Variable	ANOVA					
	MANOVA	Intervention	Alarm	Violence	Responsibility	Resolution
	<i>F</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>F</i>
Question frame	1.78	3.11	3.29	2.57	.33	4.11
Severity	17.35***	61.31***	47.11***	63.24***	3.16	.74
QF × S	.74	.63	.55	.97	.40	.52

*Note.* *F* ratios are Wilks' Lambda approximations of *F*s. MANOVA = multivariate analysis of variance; ANOVA = univariate analysis of variance. Bonferroni corrected alpha value = .01. \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

Table 3

*Means and standard deviations for the five scale items as a function of question frame and conduct severity*

Condition	Five scale items									
	Intervention		Alarm		Violence		Responsibility		Resolution	
	<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>
Question frame										
Illegal	5.52	2.57	7.80	1.80	5.65	2.50	1.93	2.22	5.87	2.33
Harassment	4.75	2.66	7.20	1.96	4.98	2.55	1.98	2.02	5.99	2.67
Stalking	5.14	2.77	7.52	1.93	5.53	2.71	2.18	2.32	6.83	2.32
Severity										
Ambiguous	3.37 <sub>a</sub>	2.25	6.23 <sub>a</sub>	2.09	3.87 <sub>a</sub>	2.27	1.62	1.99	6.33	2.42
Low-level	5.02 <sub>a</sub>	2.31	7.75 <sub>a</sub>	1.47	4.92 <sub>a</sub>	2.14	2.46	2.55	6.38	2.31
Higher-level	6.99 <sub>a</sub>	2.12	8.54 <sub>a</sub>	1.26	7.33 <sub>a</sub>	2.02	2.03	1.94	5.98	2.66

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

Table 4

*Logistic regression predicting perceptions of whether the perpetrator's behaviour represented harassment, stalking or an illegal act*

Variable	<i>B</i>	SE	Wald	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	Odds Ratio	95% CI for Odds Ratio	
							Lower	Upper
Question frame			13.22	2	.001			
Illegal	-1.04	.58	3.23	1	.072	.35	.11	1.10
Harassment	1.15	.53	4.70	1	.030	3.17	1.12	8.98
Relationship			13.89	2	.001			
Stranger	2.22	.64	11.93	1	.001	9.16	2.61	32.19
Acquaintance	1.40	.56	6.27	1	.012	4.07	1.36	12.22
QF × R			8.02	4	.091			
Illegal by stranger	-2.44	.93	6.90	1	.009	.09	.01	.54
Illegal by acquaintance	-1.40	.86	2.68	1	.101	.25	.05	1.32
Harassment by stranger	-1.63	.90	3.24	1	.072	.20	.03	1.16
Harassment by acquaintance	-1.15	.82	2.00	1	.157	.32	.06	1.56
Constant	-.31	.35	.75	1	.386	.74		

Table 5

*Multivariate and univariate analyses of variance for question frame × perpetrator-target relationship*

Variable	ANOVA					
	MANOVA	Intervention	Alarm	Violence	Responsibility	Resolution
	<i>F</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>F</i>
Question frame	1.67	6.04**	2.75	1.66	.25	.60
Relationship	3.45***	.87	2.67	7.05**	7.71**	5.57**
QF × R	.64	.23	.25	.16	.37	2.34

*Note.* *F* ratios are Wilks' Lambda approximations of *F*s. MANOVA = multivariate analysis of variance; ANOVA = univariate analysis of variance. Bonferroni corrected alpha value = .01. \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

Table 6

*Means and standard deviations for the five scale items as a function of question frame and the perpetrator-target relationship*

Condition	Five scale items									
	Intervention		Alarm		Violence		Responsibility		Resolution	
	<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>
Question frame										
Illegal	5.59 <sub>a,b</sub>	2.19	7.86	1.54	5.00	2.28	2.52	2.48	6.42	2.08
Harassment	4.46 <sub>a</sub>	2.37	7.33	1.59	4.40	2.20	2.32	2.06	6.15	2.45
Stalking	4.67 <sub>b</sub>	2.23	7.49	1.41	4.78	2.06	2.35	2.23	6.04	2.52
Relationship										
Stranger	5.08	2.37	7.69	1.57	5.25 <sub>a</sub>	2.26	1.70 <sub>a</sub>	1.91	5.54 <sub>a,b</sub>	2.53
Acquaintance	5.02	2.31	7.75	1.47	4.92	2.14	2.46	2.55	6.38 <sub>a</sub>	2.31
Ex-partner	4.65	2.24	7.27	1.50	4.08 <sub>a</sub>	2.01	2.99 <sub>a</sub>	2.11	6.67 <sub>b</sub>	2.10

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