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Understanding Female-Perpetrated Stalking

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Abstract

Stalking refers to intrusive acts experienced on two or more occasions (according to most definitions and legislation) which create apprehension and/or fear. Statistically, most victims of stalking are female, and most stalkers are male. Female-perpetrated stalking has been explored less, even though it has a significant effect on victims. Rigid societal beliefs that female-perpetrated crime is not worthy of being taken seriously or is somehow less intrusive has contributed to lower rates of research, reporting, and understanding of female-perpetrated stalking. Victims often experience a lack of support, and therefore many female-perpetrated cases go unreported. This paper reviews the literature on female-perpetrated stalking and provides commentary on violence, mental health, and victimization. Analysis of the empirical literature suggested that female stalkers pose a similar level of violence risk as their male counterparts, although this risk is often perceived as nonthreatening. Mental illness was identified in both male and female stalkers, with mental illness commonly linked to violence among stalkers. Females were found to target acquaintances and engage in different stalking behaviors. Implications of these findings are further discussed.

Understanding female perpetrated stalking

The growth of scientific studies on stalking over the past two decades has provided evidence about the nature of stalking behavior, including who stalks, who the victims are, and the prevalence rates in different societies (McEwan et al., 2011). Stalking is defined as “repeated acts, experienced as unpleasantly intrusive, which create apprehension and can be understood by a reasonable fellow citizen to be grounds for becoming fearful.” (Mullen et al., 2000, p.11) The persistent and repeated pattern of pursuit and harassment associated with stalking has led to it being referred to as “obsessional following.” (McCann, 1998; Petherick, 2008) Stalkers commonly pursue their victims in a variety of ways, ranging from phone calls, letters and cards, facsimiles, internet, graffiti, unwanted gifts, and other materials, following, approaching, maintaining surveillance, ordering goods or services on the victim’s behalf, initiating spurious legal action against the victim, spreading false rumors to discredit the victim, threats, damage of property and pets, assault, and stalking-by proxy (Pathé, 2002; Petherick, 2009; Schlesinger, 2002).

It is estimated that between 7% and 19% of women and 2% and 12% of men are victims of stalking during their lifetime (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013; Basile et al., 2006; Johnson & Thompson, 2016; Walby & Allen, 2004). The impact of stalking on victims is varied and can include negative effects on psychological well-being, social freedom, and physical health (Johnson & Thompson, 2016; Purcell et al., 2001). The relationship between the perpetrator and the victims can take many forms, ranging from strangers to acquaintances to former intimate partners. Most commonly, females are the victims of stalking, targeted 75–80% of the time, with males perpetrating 75–80% of offences (Spitzberg et al., 2010). Although women engage in less stalking than men, the rates of female stalking are worth noting, with estimates ranging from 10% to 33% of stalkers across community and forensic mental health settings (Meloy & Boyd, 2003; Meloy et al., 2011; Mullen et al., 2000; Purcell et al., 2001; Strand & McEwan, 2012). Due to the large number of stalking offences committed by males, significant research has been dedicated to understand this phenomenon (Catanesi et al., 2013; Mullen et al., 2009). As a result, little is known about female stalkers. Although the lower rate of female stalking contributes to the lack of knowledge of this phenomenon, there are broad social factors which influence the perception of women as stalkers. These social factors include gender-socialization scripts, which regard women as less dangerous and men as more capable of defending themselves, men being less likely to self-identify as victims of crime or report crime, men not receiving adequate victim support, and men being less likely to feel or admit fear for their safety (which is often a necessary component to stalking definitions; Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 2012; Logan, 2020b; Mullen et al., 2009; Scott et al., 2015; Wigman, 2009). Female victims of female-perpetrated stalking often have their sexuality questioned, as same-gender stalking is often incorrectly assumed to involve a homosexual relationship (Meloy et al., 2011; Stefanska et al., 2021).

Some of the challenges in adequately managing and apprehending female stalkers have included societal perceptions, dismissal by law enforcement, victim shame, perception of masculinity and masculine power, and a lack of education (Chan & Sheridan, 2020; DuPont-Morales, 1999; Scott et al., 2015). While risk of violence is a crucial concern, Sheridan and Scott (2010) found that male victims were viewed as being less vulnerable than female victims. Notably, men were less likely to perceive their most recent episode of stalking by a female as a crime compared to a situation where they may be stalked by a man

(Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017). These findings suggest that the perpetrator's gender may have a strong influence on perceptions of risk, with greater concern in instances of male stalking (Catanesi et al., 2013; Phillips et al., 2004).

A study of Australian relational stalkers found that both males and females were more supportive of female justifications of violence than male. Interestingly, stalkers who were more violent showed greater support for female justifications (but not male justifications) than the less or nonviolent stalker groups (Thompson et al., 2012), indicating they view male violence as less acceptable. Similar beliefs have been found in community and victim samples. Within community samples, Scott et al. (2015) found that the victim was perceived to experience more distress and fear when the victim was female identified or the perpetrator was a male, with these perceptions stronger among female participants than male participants. Female victims of stalking showed higher levels of stalking-related fear and belief that the perpetrator could harm them (regardless of whether the perpetrator was male or female), whereas male victims of female stalking were significantly less concerned about being harmed (Logan, 2020b). Moreover, Sheridan and Scott (2010) found that violence among female stalkers was considered less dangerous than male-stalker-perpetrated violence.

The increasing acknowledgement of female criminality and violence has highlighted the importance of increasing research and understanding of factors relevant to the assessment and treatment of female stalkers (Nicholls et al., 2015). It is imperative that this phenomenon be thoroughly examined to ensure that more competent risk assessment, management, and legal action are implemented moving forward.

In addition to the potential for violence, a review of research, risk assessment, and policy suggests that victimology and mental health are important areas of study for understanding female stalking (Johnson & Thompson, 2016; Meloy et al., 2011). Without adequately understanding these areas and their specific contribution to stalking trajectories in women, professionals tasked with managing and preventing the risk posed by female stalkers will be ill-equipped and uninformed. The features of female-perpetrated stalking canvassed in this review may help challenged biases present regarding the role gender plays in stalking perpetration and victimization.

This paper contributes to the literature on female stalking by examining the differences between male and female stalkers. The review is broken into four sections, with the first analyzing the behavior and motivation of female stalkers. The second section discusses the occurrence of violence among female perpetrators, whilst the third section highlights the mental health psychopathology across studies investigating female stalkers. Lastly, considerations are provided in relation to the common targets and victimology of female-perpetrated stalking.

Behavior and Motivation

To date, many of the studies on female stalkers have focused on understanding the characteristics and motivations of female stalkers, although there has been an increase in commentary on differences between female and male stalking. These studies have examined case files of female stalking (Meloy & Boyd, 2003; Meloy et al., 2011; Purcell et al., 2010), female stalkers in person (Purcell et al., 2001; Strand & McEwan, 2012; Thompson et al., 2012), victims of female stalking (Logan, 2020a, 2020b; Wigman, 2009), and community perspectives (Lippman, 2018; Scott et al., 2015). The research has typically included both male and female stalkers and victims (with Purcell et al., 2010 also examining juveniles)

and has ranged across countries including the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia. Common characteristics of female stalkers include being single or divorced/widowed, an average age between 35 and 38 years, being employed, and having a confirmed or suspected psychiatric diagnosis (Meloy & Boyd, 2003).

Compared to male stalkers, female stalkers have “less frequent criminal histories” and violent criminal history (Meloy et al., 2011, p. 1; Strand & McEwan, 2012), although male and female stalkers were similar with regard to being subject to a restraining order with their current victim (28% for females compared to 35% for males; Strand & McEwan, 2012). Female stalkers generally have lower rates of substance abuse than male stalkers, with rates ranging from 7.5% to 33% and 28% to 67%, respectively (Meloy & Boyd, 2003; Meloy et al., 2011; Purcell et al., 2001). As with male perpetrators, stalking duration by females varies, lasting between 1 day and 20 years, with an average of 21 weeks to 2.8 years cited across studies (Logan, 2020b; Meloy et al., 2011; Purcell et al., 2001; Strand & McEwan, 2012). Meloy et al. (2011) found recidivism rates of 57% among female stalking cases, defined as recontacting the target after being directly told not to. The pattern of continuing contact after arrest was not significantly different from that of male stalkers (Meloy et al., 2011).

While many of the behaviors of females committing stalking offences are similar to that of males, studies comparing genders have identified different behaviors, approaches, and motivations. Across much of the research, high-frequency female stalking behaviors include unwanted contact by phone, letters, email, text messages, or social media websites, following, sending unsolicited material, threatening the victim, driving by the victim’s home, office, or school, trespassing on the victim’s property, and accosting the victim (Meloy & Boyd, 2003; Purcell et al., 2001, 2010, juveniles; Strand & McEwan, 2012). A number of these are high-frequency behaviors for male stalkers as well, as similar rates for both men and women were found in unwanted approach and threats (Purcell et al., 2001, 2010, juveniles, Strand & McEwan, 2012), sending unsolicited items (Purcell et al., 2001; Strand & McEwan, 2012), and other lower frequency behaviors. In contrast, Meloy et al. (2011) review of case files found personal contact and threats to have higher frequency among male stalkers. However, their research included a significant number of celebrity stalking cases, with females more likely than males to pursue celebrities. It may be a feature of the celebrity’s lifestyle and status (such as private security) that make intrusive approaches and threats uncommon.

Stalking behaviors more common among women than men have included telephone calls (Purcell et al., 2001, 2010) and letters, emails, or faxes (Meloy et al., 2011; Purcell et al., 2001; Strand & McEwan, 2012), whereas men have been found to have higher rates of following (Purcell et al., 2001; Strand & McEwan, 2012) and property damage (Purcell et al., 2010, juveniles; Meloy et al., 2011). Female stalker communication was found to be less confronting than that of men; while men threatened the target themselves, women were more likely to threaten those close to the target instead (Meloy et al., 2011). Meloy et al. (2011) found that women did not employ third parties, though this was a more common characteristic among juvenile female stalker, as was spreading malicious rumors (Purcell et al., 2010). However, Purcell et al. (2010) found that female juvenile stalking was frequently a component of bullying, which may account for the noted behavioral differences.

Overwhelmingly, female stalkers target someone known to them (Logan, 2020a, 2020b; Meloy & Boyd, 2003; Purcell et al., 2001, 2010; Strand & McEwan, 2012). Although female stalkers also target ex-intimate partners, men are more likely to target strangers or

prior sexually intimate partners (Meloy et al., 2011; Purcell et al., 2001, 2010; Strand & McEwan, 2012). Interestingly, women were more likely than men to pursue people of the same gender (Meloy et al., 2011; Purcell et al., 2001, 2010; Strand & McEwan, 2012), although not all cases of same-gender stalking are associated with sexual orientation (Mullen et al., 2009). In a study comparing same and opposite-gender stalking, Strand and McEwan (2011) found a higher frequency of stalking an ex-intimate partner when the victim and perpetrator were of the same gender.

Based on Mullen et al.'s (2009) stalking typologies, common classifications of female stalkers include intimacy-seeking, with a desire to establish a close relationship with the target, rejected, after a relationship breakdown, and resentful, with a desire to punish the victim after a perceived slight (Meloy & Boyd, 2003; Meloy et al., 2011; Purcell et al., 2001, 2010; Strand & McEwan, 2012). Almost no cases of sexual predatory stalking among female stalkers have been observed. There have been few differences noted between males and females regarding frequency of type, although Strand and McEwan (2012) found that females were more likely to be classed as a resentful while Purcell et al. (2001) found slightly more females classed as intimacy seeking. Furthermore, Purcell et al. (2010) found that within juvenile stalkers, males were more likely to be motivated by rejection or sexual predation, whereas females were more likely to stalk as a means of retaliation or bullying. Ultimately, stalking typologies serve to provide a useful heuristic for practitioners and law enforcement, providing knowledge pertaining to the motivations, characteristics and risks associated with various forms of stalking; however, there is no best-suited stalking typology, with perpetrator and victim factors requiring case by case consideration (McEwan, 2021).

Violence

Although most stalkers commit what can be considered unwanted nuisance behaviors, a sub- set of perpetrators has more sinister intent. The extent of the violent intent observed in some stalking cases is exemplified in the murder of 16-year-old female, Laurie Show. Show had briefly dated Lawrence Yunkin; however, this aggrieved his former partner Lisa Lambert who was pregnant at the time with his child (Miller, 2019). Although the relationship between Show and Yunkin never progressed, Lambert began stalking and harassing Show, turning up at her workplace, attempting to intimidate her, and being verbally aggressive in interactions weeks before the violent attack. This romantic rivalry culminated in Lambert and another female friend (along with initial assistance from Lawrence Yunkin), stabbing Show and cutting her throat. The death of Laurie Show led to changes to the Pennsylvanian stalking legislation in an effort to provide stronger police and prosecutory responses (Anthony, 1993).

Among stalkers, acts of aggression and violence are estimated to occur in 25–50% of offences, although this rate is said to increase if the victim and offender had a prior intimate relationship (Bendlin & Sheridan, 2019; Farnham et al., 2000; Logan, 2020a; McEwan et al., 2017; Meloy, 1996; Meloy & Boyd, 2003; Meloy et al., 2011; Meloy & Gothard, 1995; Mullen et al., 2000; Purcell et al., 2001, 2010; Rosenfeld & Lewis, 2005; Strand & McEwan, 2012; Thompson et al., 2020). Studies have noted similar rates of violence across male- and female-adult stalkers (Purcell et al., 2001; Scott et al., 2015; Strand & McEwan, 2012) as well as among juvenile stalkers (Purcell et al., 2010). Furthermore, Thompson et al. (2012) found that female stalkers engaged in significantly higher rates of actual or attempted moderate violence (such as physical assault or sexual coercion) compared to males (28.8% vs. 15.5%), with no difference across genders in rates of severe violence or no

violence. Meloy et al. (2011) noted that female stalkers were less likely to threaten or be violent toward their target compared to male stalkers. However, Meloy et al. included violence toward the person, property, or both in their analyses, whereas other research distinguished between physical violence toward a person and actions toward property. Furthermore, Purcell et al. (2010) found that juvenile male stalkers were more likely to be violent toward property (but not persons) compared to their female counterparts, so the higher rates of male violence in Meloy et al.'s study could be due to including violence toward property.

Females engage in expressive and instrumental threats, violence against property, and violence against victims (ranging from minor acts such as pushing or slapping to major assault and occasionally homicide). Compared to males, female stalkers are less likely to harm pets, commit sexual assault, or murder their victim (Meloy et al., 2011). Purcell et al. (2001) found that, although rates of threats and violence were similar across genders, females were less likely to escalate from explicit threats to physical violence. Meloy and Boyd (2003) found that a female stalker is more likely to threaten than engage in physical violence. Female stalkers are less likely to follow their target and are more likely to resort to phone calls (Purcell et al., 2001); thus according to Boyd (2002) violence among female stalkers may manifest as verbal threats rather than physical assaults. However, more recent research has shown similar rates of physical violence across genders. Like male stalkers, women who were previously sexually intimate with their target and had a criminal history were most likely to resort to physical violence (Catanesi et al., 2013; Meloy & Boyd, 2003; Meloy et al., 2011; Strand & McEwan, 2012).

Several factors increase the risk of violence. As previously stated, having a prior intimate relationship with the victim is a significant risk factor, although this does not imply that non-ex-partner stalking is not violent. Indeed, Strand and McEwan (2012) found that the combination of a prior intimate relationship, approach behaviors, and threats best predicted violence for both male and female stalkers. Other general risk factors for violence which hold true for female stalkers include an opposite-gender victim, explicit threats, previous criminal history or violent history, and dynamic factors such as substance abuse, triggering events, intentions, and opportunities (Bendlin & Sheridan, 2019; Farnham et al., 2000; Meloy, 2002; Meloy & Boyd, 2003; Meloy et al., 2011; Strand & McEwan, 2012; Thompson et al., 2020).

Although violent male stalkers are much more likely to be violent toward female victims compared to male victims (86% vs. 6%), violent female stalkers have more similar rates of violence against female victims compared to male victims (38% vs. 50%; Strand & McEwan, 2012). Additionally, Strand and McEwan found that females classified as rejected stalkers and engage in following or accosting their victim were more likely to be violent than other female stalkers. Interestingly, the frequency of erotomania found among women is considered to increase the risk for violence (Catanesi et al., 2013). This is consistent with Catanesi et al.'s (2013) findings that female stalkers were more likely to turn violent only in the event of a mental illness, especially erotomania. Similarly, Strand and McEwan (2012) found that stalking violence manifested in some women was directly related to psychotic symptoms.

Mental Illness

Studies on psychological underpinnings of female stalking are limited (Dressing et al., 2011; Mullen et al., 2009). Thus, it may be premature for mental health professionals to

discount females as less dangerous (West & Friedman, 2008), particularly in cases where psychopathology linked to an increased risk for violence is a contributing factor. Although research on the psychopathology of female stalkers is still in its infancy, case examples of severe mental illness have been observed. Margaret Ray was imprisoned for repeatedly stalking former later-night television host David Letterman. The extent of Ray's infatuation with Letterman led to her committing acts such as stealing his Porsche, claiming to be his wife, trespassing on his property, and sending multiple letters and packages (Bruni, 1998; Washington Post., 1998). However, Ray was reported to have suffered from schizophrenia and maintained delusional beliefs about Letterman, including that he reciprocated her romantic inclinations. Unfortunately, Ray's difficulties with mental illness continued throughout her life, with Ray dying as a result of suicide at the age of 46 (Bruni, 1998).

Stalking behavior can be impacted by certain mental illnesses such as erotomania or borderline personality or a direct result of psychotic or delusional disorders such as schizophrenia (Dressing et al., 2011). However, Catanesi et al. (2013) contended that, in general, the presence of a mental illness is not a direct cause for stalking and suggested that in contentious matters, courts should appoint mental health experts to determine the extent to which the diagnosed disorder contributed to the offence. Appropriately distinguishing the contribution of mental health symptomology to an offence is crucial to both sentencing and refining the professional management and apprehension of female stalking. For example, if a stalking perpetrator is deemed to have committed the act as a result of a mental illness, they may be committed to a forensic hospital for treatment rather than incarcerated (Dressing et al., 2011). As mental illness may increase the risk of violence for some perpetrators, it is important to understand whether significant psychiatric symptoms are associated with female stalking.

Preliminary research examining the relationship between female stalkers and mental illness suggests that women who stalk are usually socially isolated with high rates of mental illness and personality disturbance, similar to male stalkers (Catanesi et al., 2013; Mullen et al., 2009). While the available research provides information on rates of mental illness within female stalker samples, it is important to note that the methods by which diagnoses were made is generally unclear, interpretations should be made with caution. Purcell et al. (2001) noted psychiatric disorders in 95% of female stalkers (which was not statistically different from male stalkers) and Strand and McEwan (2012) found mental disorders in 84% of female and 79% of male stalkers. This study used both a Swedish and Australian sample, with the Swedish stalkers being assessed by police officers trained by a psychiatrist, while the Australian sample was diagnosed by a psychiatrist and a psychologist. Perpetrators who stalk strangers instead of ex-intimates were more likely to be diagnosed with a psychotic illness as assessed by psychiatrists (Farnham et al., 2000). Additionally, McEwan et al. (2011) found that those who stalk strangers and acquaintances were more likely to have a mental illness, including both the erotomania and persecutory types of mono-delusional disorder. While McEwan et al. (2011) provide an in-depth analysis of the different psychopathologies associated with stalking, they do not distinguish between male and female stalkers. However, similarities between their findings and other research that highlight female offenders suggest that their results may be attributed to women as well.

An investigation of stalking and mental illness was conducted by Purcell et al. (2001) on a sample of 150 male and 40 female stalkers referred to a forensic mental health clinic. They found that 18 of the female participants were diagnosed with Axis I disorders, twelve manifested delusional disorders (eight erotomania type and two jealous type), the other

diagnoses were schizophrenia, **major depressive disorder**, and bipolar disorder. Additionally, 20 females were diagnosed with a personality disorder (six borderline, six dependent, and three narcissistic types). This highlights the prevalence of mental disorders among female stalkers, although it is important to note that diagnoses did not significantly differ between males and females (Purcell et al., 2001). In comparing 21 female and 190 male stalkers, Strand and McEwan (2012) also found similar rates of Axis I disorders across genders, although female stalkers had slightly higher rates of psychotic disorder. They did, however, find significantly higher rates of personality disorders (specifically borderline) among female stalkers compared to male stalkers. One notable diagnosis through the research is **borderline personality disorder**. In a self-report study, which examined the behaviors of stalkers in comparison to a control group, stalkers were found to score significantly higher on insecure attachment and borderline personality features (Lewis et al., 2001). Lewis et al. (2001) found that stalkers were characterized by inadequate interpersonal attachment, limited ability to form and maintain restricted relationships, emotional instability, and ambivalence toward interpersonal relationships. Although female stalkers displayed higher sensitivity and empathy compared to male stalkers, the researchers identified that “both male and female stalkers reported greater difficulty with dependency, trust, abandonment, and security issues” than the control group (Lewis et al., 2001; p. 83). Meloy and Boyd (2003) collected case files from mental health and law enforcement professionals in the United States of America, Australia, and Canada. They found major mental disorders and personality disorders among female stalkers. Notably, 45% of female stalkers with Axis II diagnosis received a diagnosis of borderline personality disorder (although it is important to note that psychiatric evaluation was only possible for 56% of their sample). Of interest is the potentially high rate of suicidality found among prior- intimate stalker cases, irrespective of whether the offender was a man or woman (Meloy et al., 2011). However, it is important to note that suicidality was unknown in 78% of female stalking cases (and the quantity of missing data for male stalking was not provided) in Meloy et al. (2011) research.

Within the literature, a common theme of erotomania was found to be present among female stalkers. Erotomania, jealousy and persecutory/ paranoid ideation are seen as the three major subtypes of delusions (Sinnamon, 2015). Brüne (2003) defines erotomania as the “delusional conviction of being loved by someone” (p. 83). According to Boyd (2002), erotomania among women is characterized by a delusional belief that a man, usually older than her and of an elevated social standing, is passionately in love with her. This love is an idealized romantic love and not just sexual. It is possible that the person with the delusion may have had prior momentary contact with the subject of their delusional beliefs (Boyd, 2002). Many women affected by erotomania are found to be in their late reproductive phase and usually in unstable relationships (Brüne, 2003). According to Brüne (2003), the delusion can be understood as a pathological variant of a long-term mating strategy.

Although erotomania was initially thought to be found exclusively among females, it has now been found equally among men, irrespective of their sexual orientation (Brüne, 2003; Mullen et al., 2009). However, the manifestation of erotomania behavior differs significantly between men and women. In men, it often manifests as violent behavior stemming from sexual jealousy and is usually directed toward their pursued “love object” (Brüne, 2003). Women, on the other hand, tend to target people associated with their pursued “love object,” this may be a close friend, relative, wife or children as they are viewed as “rivals” to the woman (Brüne, 2003; Mullen & Pathé, 1994).

Victimology

Research has shown that there is a significant difference between male and female stalkers in terms of the type of victim they most often target. Female stalkers commonly victimize people known to them more often than strangers (Mullen et al., 2009). On the other hand, Meloy et al. (2011) found high rates of female stalkers targeting celebrities in the case files examined. However, they are among the only researchers to include these types of cases for comparison. Whilst male stalkers typically targeted people of the opposite sex, women-targeted people of both sexes (Purcell et al., 2001; Strand & McEwan, 2012). The motivation in most cases of female stalkers was to establish an intimate relationship with the target, shifting from a prior professional relationship with the victim to seeking intimacy (Mullen et al., 2009; Purcell et al., 2001), although rejected and retaliation motivations are common as well (Meloy & Boyd, 2003; Strand & McEwan, 2012). Meloy et al. (2008) found that the most benign stalkers targeted celebrities and were most likely to have a mental illness. These stalkers attacked the family or friends of the celebrity and not the target directly (Meloy et al., 2008). There was a significant amount of victim precipitation observed in the case of female celebrity stalkers as opposed to male stalkers, including something as minor as receiving a signed fan photo (Meloy et al., 2011). One of the most common targets of female stalkers are those that work in the “helping professions” such as mental health practitioners (Carr et al., 2014; Mullen et al., 2009). An example of this occurred with Emily Maloney stalking her psychiatrist over several years of treatment. Whilst never directly approaching her psychiatrist outside of appointments, Maloney wanted to connect and feel close to the practitioner. During the course of treatment, she developed an increasing infatuation, driving past their residence, learning license plate numbers, accessing public records, closely watching on social media, and eventually requesting her own patient records. Maloney was only able to cease her behavior once managing to stabilize her mental health, at one point prescribed 26 different medications to treat conditions including Bipolar Disorder and Anxiety (Maloney, 2014).

Many cases of mental health professionals being victims of stalking go unreported as they are often dismissed as a misunderstanding (Carr et al., 2014). There is no sufficient empirical evidence to determine the exact reason why mental health professionals are at a high risk of becoming victims of stalking (Storey et al., 2017), however, idealization of therapists may play a role. Mental health professionals play the role of a clinical provider requiring the development of an empathic alliance. In a therapeutic context, there is room for possible misunderstanding, where alliance is misconstrued as indicators of intimacy, such as caring and love. In such cases, patients can come to idealize a therapist, believing that the practitioner cares for them and has the answers to all their problems. The role of idealization may partially explain the findings by Purcell et al. (2005), who found that male mental health professionals were more likely to be victims of stalking by their client in comparison to their female counterparts. The clients who stalked them were more likely to be women with whom they had no current intimate relationship. It is also possible that the stalking of mental health professionals occurs in part at least owing to their exposure to those suffering various psycho- pathologies and substance use disorders.

Implications and Conclusion

This paper examined the literature on female- perpetrated stalking with a particular focus on violence, mental health, and victimization. A significant amount of attention and academic research has been dedicated to understanding the complexity of stalking perpetrated by males, resulting in a considerable knowledge gap regarding female stalking. It is insufficient

for practitioners and law enforcement to simply assume that female stalking is of a lesser concern or danger, and making “gut judgments” about female perpetrators in the absence of sufficient understanding/information can result in dire consequences (McEwan, 2021). Although male stalking may be more direct and confrontational, with higher levels of lethality, it is inaccurate to perceive female stalking as not posing a threat. While it is widely acknowledged that there are fewer female perpetrators of crimes compared to males, and that females are mostly victims of crime, the lack of attention to female-perpetrated crime has significant negative impacts. For example, it can lead to victim blaming, especially in the case of stalking, wherein a male victim is often asked whether he is “flattered” by the attention he is receiving from a female and held more accountable for his victimization than a female would be (Wigman, 2009).

It is possible that the lesser attention on female stalking is due, in part, to social factors, such as gender-socialization scripts which regard women as less dangerous and men as more capable of defending themselves, men being less likely to self-identify as victims of crime or report crime, and men being less likely to feel or admit fear for their safety (Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 2012; Logan, 2020b; Mullen et al., 2009; Scott et al., 2015; Wigman, 2009). The fact that some victims (particularly male) of female stalkers do not identify as victims or fear for their safety highlights the need to reassess the definition of stalking and potentially remove the necessary component of fear. Since the threat posed by female stalkers has been historically overshadowed by male stalkers, the victims of female-perpetrated stalking may not get justice for what they have experienced. This indicates a need not just to research and understand female stalking, but to also shift the way in which individuals and society perceive females as perpetrators and males as victims of violence. Such a shift could help professionals and victims of female stalking recognize victimization and understand and manage the risk of violence.

Upon reviewing the literature on female stalkers, it is determined the female perpetrators of stalking pose similar levels of risk of harm to that of males. Studies have noted similar (and even higher as found by Thompson et al., 2012) rates of threats and violence across genders in both adult and juvenile samples (Purcell et al., 2001, 2010; Scott et al., 2015; Strand & McEwan, 2012), with higher levels of violence against previous sexually intimate partners compared to acquaintances or strangers. Furthermore, female stalkers have similar rates of violence against both male and female victims (Strand & McEwan, 2012). There are several factors that increase the risk of violence, such as having a prior intimate relationship with the victim, making explicit threats, approach behaviors, an opposite-gender victim, previous criminal or violent history, and dynamic factors such as substance abuse, triggering events, intentions, and opportunities (Bendlin & Sheridan, 2019; Farnham et al., 2000; Meloy, 2002; Meloy & Boyd, 2003; Meloy et al., 2011; Strand & McEwan, 2012; Thompson et al., 2020). As with violent male stalkers, violent female stalkers are often former intimate partners of their victims, engaging in substance abuse, and classified as resentful stalkers (Strand & McEwan, 2012). Viewing the risk of violence posed by female perpetrators as valid is essential to making an accurate risk assessment and threat management plan for victims of stalking.

In addition to the potential for violence, the presence of a mental illness is crucial to accurately determining risk. A review of the research suggests both genders having high rates of mental illness associated with stalking (Catanesi et al., 2013; Lewis et al., 2001; Mullen et al., 2009; Purcell et al., 2001; Strand & McEwan, 2012). Notable disorders among female stalkers may include borderline personality disorder and delusional beliefs, primarily

captured as erotomania. The implications of a perpetrator having a diagnosed mental illness are significant, as it can result in a perpetrator being committed to a forensic hospital rather than prison. Additionally, mental illness may be a risk factor for violence in some cases. Thus, it is essential to analyze the extent to which the mental illness impacted the stalking and how it relates to motivation, victim precipitation, and victim–perpetrator relationship, among other features.

While it has been demonstrated within this article that there are many similarities between male and female stalkers, there are also some notable differences that have been discussed such as the focus of threats to safety. These differences have significant and serious implications for risk assessment and threat management. The instruments used for assessing risk are normed on specific populations and captures the peculiarities of that population. Should we use a risk assessment instrument normed on males, or on a largely male population, the degree to which this may apply to a female-perpetrated case would potentially increase risk to the victim by failing to accurately assess any risk posed by the stalker. This would have flow-on implications for the subsequent threat management.

Finally, as with all serious crime, victimology is essential to understanding both motivation and potential risk. Female stalkers are more likely to target acquaintances as opposed to strangers. Women who stalk usually target people they have previously had an intimate relationship or may currently or previously have had a professional relationship with (Logan, 2020a, 2020b; Meloy & Boyd, 2003; Purcell et al., 2001, 2010; Strand & McEwan, 2012). The motivation of stalking was rarely sexual, in nature but often an attempt to establish further communication and intimacy. Subsequently, this provides insights as to why the pursual method of female stalkers is often intrusive communication through phone calls, emails, or social media website, rather than physically following a victim. Understanding the victimology of female stalkers is essential as the information not only provides a guide to the kinds of victim’s female stalkers would generally target, but also offers insights into the forms of stalking behavior that typically occur. This can help professionals develop intervention strategies for offenders as well as harm minimization tactics for victims. Ultimately, the relationship between the victim and the perpetrator provides much-needed information to understand the motivations that led to the stalking behavior. Furthermore, it can inform as to the risks of violence as rates of violence are often higher among ex-intimate partners than other victim–offender relationships.

This paper sought to expand on the knowledge of female stalkers, highlighting the role of violence, mental illness, and victimology in their perpetration. With the increasing attention to female stalking in the last decade, it is evident that women pose more of a risk of violence than previously thought, which may even be on par to the level of violence committed by male stalkers. To move forward in the assessment and treatment of female stalkers and their victims, it is important to work toward a change in societal beliefs regarding female-perpetrated violence. This paper also highlighted the similarly high rates of mental illness across male and female stalkers, as well as the importance of victimology, as the relationship between victim and offender can inform as to motivations and risk of violence.

Appropriately understanding female stalking is important for further research, mental health practitioners, and the legal system. As there are still some discrepancies across the literature with regard to behaviors, motivations, and rates of violence within female stalkers, it is imperative that this research be continued. Furthermore, future research and practice should consider how stalking behavior may evolve with the advancement in technology, particularly in females who employ less confrontational methods of contact. It is important

to examine these factors and take into consideration the type of risk posed to the victims of female-perpetrated stalking. Although there are several risk factors for violence that are similar across male and female stalking, the differences in male and female stalker characteristics and behaviors highlight the need to further examine female stalking risk and validate stalking risk assessments with female samples. The increased understanding of the varied dynamic factors associated with female stalking is necessary for the minimization of future victimization.

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