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Psychopathy in a Mixed Gender Sample of Adult Stalkers

ABSTRACT: The authors present data on a mixed gender sample of 78 adult stalking perpetrators, each of whom was assessed with the Psychopathy Checklist:Screening Version (PCL:SV). Results indicate a generally low frequency of psychopathy in this group, although 15% of the sample was composed of psychopaths. Comparisons between this sample and other forensic samples indicate that both the frequency and degree of psychopathy were lower in the stalking group. The findings support previous theory and empirical findings, including the concept that underlying attachment pathology among stalkers and psychopaths is quite different, and psychopathy—in contrast to other areas of violence risk assessment—is usually not relevant when evaluating dangerousness among stalkers.

KEYWORDS: forensic science, stalking, psychopathy, attachment

Stalkers as a group, in contrast to other criminal populations, exhibit low rates of antisocial personality disorder (DSM-IV-TR) (1–3), perhaps due to stark differences in their attachment pathologies (4). Stalkers also tend to form preoccupied attachments (5), while antisocial individuals are typically dismissive and detached in their emotional relationships with others (6–8). These findings would predict, in turn, low frequencies of psychopathy among stalkers. Indeed, Hemphill and Hart (9) shared this opinion when they wrote, “risk for specific forms of violence, such as... stalking...may be related more to disturbances of normal attachment processes rather than the pathological lack of attachment associated with psychopathy” (p. 96). To our knowledge, there has been only one previous study examining the degree of psychopathy in a sample of stalkers. Kropp et al. (10) examined the level of psychopathy among 106 forensic psychiatric patients who had been charged with criminal harassment, and found a mean Psychopathy Checklist:Screening Version (PCL:SV) (11) score of 10.8, below the mean published normative scores for forensic psychiatric inpatients and outpatients and the psychopathy “cut-off” score of 18. The hypotheses of the present study, which involves 78 males and females convicted of stalking or “stalking-related” criminal activity, are: (i) few stalkers will meet threshold criteria for psychopathy, and (ii) the general level of psychopathy among this sample will be low.

Method

Participants

The present study utilized a sample of 78 adult male and female subjects who were court ordered to receive outpatient psychological treatment subsequent to a conviction in criminal court for crimes of stalking or stalking-related criminal activity (e.g., violation of a protective order, making a terrorist threat) between the years of 2000 and 2005 in San Diego County, California. Males comprised

79.5% ($n = 62$) of the sample; females 20.5% ($n = 16$). Stalking was defined as any unwanted contact or attempted contact with a victim on at least two occasions. Additionally, the victim or another reporting party had made contact with legal authorities due to the unwanted contact, and 66.7% of the sample for whom information was available had violated a previously held restraining order prohibiting contact. The average age of the subjects in the present study was 36.1 years, with a range of 18–63 years. Average education was 12.5 years, with a range of 0–22 years. Caucasians represented the majority of the sample, 59% ($n = 46$), followed by African Americans 15.4% ($n = 12$), Hispanic-Americans 9% ($n = 7$), Asian-Americans 5.1% ($n = 4$), other 6.4% ($n = 5$), and unknown 5.1% ($n = 4$). The majority of participants in the present study stalked prior sexual intimates (79.5%, $n = 62$), followed by those who stalked acquaintances (11.5%, $n = 9$), and strangers (9%, $n = 7$).

Procedure

Participation in the treatment program was ordered by the San Diego County Superior Court. All subjects in the present study were involuntary participants in the treatment program, and voluntarily consented to the use of their data for research purposes. Upon entry into the program, a forensic outpatient treatment clinic, all participants were administered several psychological tests, including the PCL:SV (11), which was completed in all cases by the first author, who was trained in the assessment of psychopathy by Robert Hare, Ph.D.

Measure

When Guy and Douglas (12) compared the correspondence between the PCL:SV (11) and the Psychopathy Checklist-Revised (PCL-R) (13,14) among forensic ($N = 175$) and correctional ($N = 188$) samples, the two measures were found to be highly correlated with total scores (0.95 forensic, 0.94 correctional) and significantly correlated with the prediction of violent recidivism in the correctional sample (PCL-R:0.42; PCL:SV:0.37), prompting the authors to posit a “robust relationship” between the two measures. The PCL:SV is a valid means of measuring the underlying

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construct of psychopathy. In this study, threshold cutoff score for a classification of psychopathy was 18, as recommended in the scoring manual (11).

Results

The total sample means for PCL:SV Factor 1, Factor 2, and Total Score are listed in Table 1, as are the group means according to the type of victim the subject stalked (i.e., prior sexual intimate, acquaintance, or stranger). Fifteen percent of the total sample ($n = 12$) were psychopaths. Fifteen percent of the prior sexually intimate subsample were psychopaths ($n = 9$); none of the acquaintance stalkers were psychopaths ($n = 0$); and 43% ($n = 3$) of the stranger stalkers were psychopaths. A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to compare the three perpetrator groups.

If a “reject the null” decision was obtained for the omnibus test of significance (using a level of significance of 0.05), *post hoc* testing via the Tukey Honestly Significant Different (HSD) test was conducted to examine all possible pairwise comparisons (15). A measure of effect size (η^2) is included, and although there are no uniform guidelines about what denotes a small/medium/large effect size as it may be context-dependent (also keeping in mind the bias associated with η^2 , see Grissom and Kim (16)), for this study we used the taxonomy (17) of 0.01/0.059/0.138 as small/medium/large to define effect size. The substantive differences in sample size across our cells may lead to some instability of the results since the homogeneity of variance assumption is not tenable.

With total PCL:SV score as the dependent variable, the differences between the three perpetrator groups was not significant: $F(2, 75) = 1.57, p = 0.215 (\eta^2 = 0.04)$. When PCL:SV Factor 1 score was the dependent variable, the differences between the three groups also was not significant: $F(2, 75) = 0.614, p = 0.544 (\eta^2 = 0.016)$. With PCL:SV Factor 2 score as the dependent variable, the differences between the three groups (i.e., type of victim the subject stalked) was not significant: $F(2, 75) = 3.042, p = 0.054 (\eta^2 = 0.075)$. Note that with a p -value of 0.054, some might refer to this finding as “approaching significance” or “marginally significant,” although such language is problematic [see Glaser, 1999 (18), for a review of this controversy concerning significance testing]. However, given the medium effect size, there does appear to be, to some extent, a nontrivial effect. Though examining the pairwise differences via the post hoc test given the nonsignificant omnibus test should be viewed with caution, there was a significant difference between the acquaintance and stranger stalkers on this variable ($p = 0.042$) with a higher mean obtained by those who stalked strangers.

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to compare the gender of the stalkers on psychopathy. With PCL:SV Factor 1 score as the

dependent variable, the differences between males and females was not significant: $F(1, 76) = 1.27, p = 0.264 (\eta^2 = 0.016)$. Females did obtain a higher mean ($M = 6.75$) than males ($M = 5.60$). For PCL:SV Factor 2 as the dependent variable, the differences between males and females was not significant: $F(1, 76) = 3.13, p = 0.081 (\eta^2 = 0.04)$. Females again obtained a higher mean ($M = 6.75$) than males ($M = 5.45$). With Total PCL:SV score as the dependent variable the differences between males and females was not significant: $F(1, 76) = 2.68, p = 0.106 (\eta^2 = 0.034)$. Females did obtain a higher mean ($M = 13.5$) than males ($M = 11.05$).

Discussion

Our first hypothesis, that few subjects would score above the cutoff for psychopathy, was supported. However, 15% of the overall sample were psychopaths, demonstrating, once again, the versatility of psychopathic criminals, and suggesting that the motivations for pursuit behavior are overdetermined and vary considerably. In one case of a psychopath who stalked his former romantic partner, for example, the first author asked him about his motivations for the pursuit. He responded by stating, in reference to the victim, “It was psychological warfare. I wanted to see how bad I could fuck with her.” In another case, a nonpsychopathic man who stalked his ex-wife, who had recently given birth to a child by another man, was asked the same question, and responded, “I knew I had lost her and I was begging for her attention. I was desperate to have her come back—I wanted her to feel like she had to. I felt so alone. I felt so alone. I wanted her to say, ‘Okay, I’m coming back.’ I felt I had no control over her and I didn’t know what to do.” The first subject conveys, quite simply, delight at the distress of another person; the second subject conveys a desperate desire for reunification, and, perhaps, a preoccupied style of attachment. Although Sheridan and Boon (19) did not include a measure of psychopathy in their stalking research, in light of the empirical relationship between psychopathy and sadism (20,21), the nearly 13% of stalkers who comprised their “Sadistic Stalking” category may have also been psychopaths. Likewise, Mullen et al. (22) posited the existence of a group of “Resentful Stalkers” who engaged in pursuit behavior to frighten and distress their victims, and a group of “Predatory Stalkers” who stalked as an antecedent to sexual assault, and who “took pleasure in the sense of power produced by stalking” (p. 1247). Of the 145 stalkers studied by them, the aggregate of those two groups also comprised 15% of their sample. Perhaps they were also psychopathic. The predictive power of psychopathy (23), its relationship to treatment outcome (24), its reliability, and its familiarity suggests that clinicians and researchers should attempt to make judgments concerning degree of psychopathy when working with stalking populations.

TABLE 1—Psychopathy (PCL:SV) scores for a sample ($N = 78$) of stalkers.

Mean PCL:SV Scores	All ($n = 78$)			Prior Sexual Intimates ($n = 62$)			Acquaintance ($n = 9$)			Stranger ($n = 7$)		
	Mean	Psychopaths		Mean	Psychopaths		Mean	Psychopaths		Mean	Psychopaths	
		n	%		n	%		n	%		n	%
Total score	11.6	12	15	11.4	9	15	10.1	0	0	14.7	3	43
Factor 1	5.83			5.66			5.89			7.3		
Factor 2	5.72			5.74			4.22			7.43		

$p = 0.215$ (Total score); $p = 0.544$ (Factor 1); $p = 0.054$ (Factor 2); level of significance = 0.05.

None of the acquaintance stalkers were psychopathic. In many such cases from the present study, subjects appeared to be similar to a subgroup of the "incompetent" stalkers described by Mullen et al. (22): men who realized their victims did not reciprocate their affection, who lacked social skills, and whose "knowledge of courting rituals was rudimentary" (p. 1246). In one case of an acquaintance stalker from the present sample, an adult male who denied his homosexuality stalked another male who had invited him to attend a Bible study group at his church. The stalking began after the victim told him that he wanted a new "prayer partner." After a series of unwanted contacts, which occurred over the course of several months and increased in their level of intrusion, the perpetrator entered the victim's home while he was entertaining guests. He followed the victim into his bedroom and prevented him from leaving. When the victim attempted to evade him and run outside, the perpetrator tackled him and told him that he had brought a gun to the home to kill himself in front of the victim. Upon arrest, the perpetrator was found to have in his possession a 0.38 caliber handgun and five rounds of ammunition.

Among the seven men who stalked strangers, nearly half were found to be psychopaths. Although firm conclusions are impossible due to the small sample size, the motivations behind the pursuit for these men may be found to be more malevolent. Could it be that stranger stalkers are both more psychopathic and psychotic than other stalkers? The latter finding is well established in the stalking literature (25). The presence of psychopathy among stranger stalkers is also concordant with the finding that when stalkers of strangers are violent, they are more likely to be predatorily violent rather than affectively violent (26). Their planned and purposeful attacks, although much less frequent, are in striking contrast to the reactive, emotional, and impulsive attacks by prior sexually intimate stalkers. These findings may also have implications for public figure stalkers and attackers, although there were none in this study (27,28).

In one case of stranger stalking from the present study, a man who had previously pursued several other adult females asked for the telephone number of a female employee of a large department store. Her refusal triggered his rage, and subsequent year-long intrusions into her life. His pursuit behaviors included calling the victim while posing as a woman in distress; repeatedly calling the victim's residence after midnight; posing as a store employee and entering the store before it opened; and appearing on the bus the victim took to work. The victim's report to police is illustrative of the effects of stalking on victims generally, as well as the desired effect on victims of psychopathic stalkers. She stated, "He followed me again and went and sat in front of me, and I said 'leave me alone, stop bugging me, you're scaring me.' And he would just smile and smirk like he's having fun with me being scared." The psychopathic subpopulation of "stranger stalkers" likely engage in pursuit behavior as a means of stimulating fear in their victims, and may experience such fear with contemptuous delight (29).

Turning to our second hypothesis, the degree of overall psychopathy as measured by the sample's average score on the PCL:SV was relatively low. Table 2 demonstrates that in comparison to the published means of other forensic samples, our sample of outpatient stalkers exhibited lower rates of psychopathy (11). These results are similar to ones found by Kropp et al. (10); the mean PCL:SV total score of 10.8 from their sample was close to the mean score from this study (11.55), suggesting that stalkers as a group exhibit lower average rates of psychopathy than other criminal populations.

Table 3 shows that the percentage of subjects who scored in a psychopathic range (i.e., PCL:SV ≥ 18) was the lowest among other forensic samples, including among a sample of outpatient offenders. The low degree of psychopathy found in this study may suggest that a dismissive style of attachment, as one "pathway" to pursuit behavior, may be the exception rather than the rule among stalking offenders, and may be the province of those stalkers who are also psychopaths. While these results demonstrate that psychopathy

TABLE 2—Comparison of mean total PCL:SV scores across seven samples in U.S. and Canada.

Outpatient Stalkers-Present Study (N = 78)	Forensic/ Nonpsychiatric Inmates* (N = 149)	Forensic Psychiatric Outpatients† (N = 71)	Forensic Psychiatric Inpatients‡ (N = 49)	Civil Psychiatric§ (N = 217)	Noncriminal/ Nonpsychiatric¶ (N = 100)	Inpatient/ Outpatient Stalkers‡,§ (N = 106)
11.55	15.05	13.72	16.56	9.15	2.98	10.8

Source: Hart, S., Cox, D., & Hare, R. (1995). *Manual for the psychopathy checklist: screening version (PCL:SV)*. Toronto, Ontario, Canada: Multi-Health Systems.

*Across three samples of Canadian federal and provincial inmates.

†Adult Canadian offenders on probation or parole.

‡Adult male inpatients in United States.

§Across four samples in Canada and U.S.

¶Across two undergraduate samples in Canada.

TABLE 3—Percentage of six samples with scores above threshold for psychopathy (PCL:SV ≥ 18).

Outpatient Stalkers-Present Study (N = 78)	Forensic/ Nonpsychiatric Inmates* (N = 149)	Forensic Psychiatric Outpatients† (N = 71)	Forensic Psychiatric Inpatients‡ (N = 49)	Civil Psychiatric§ (N = 217)	Noncriminal/ Nonpsychiatric¶ (N = 100)
15.4	29.8	19.7	34.7	10.5	0

Source: Hart, S., Cox, D., & Hare, R. (1995). *Manual for the psychopathy checklist: screening version (PCL:SV)*. Toronto, Ontario, Canada: Multi-Health Systems.

*Across three samples of Canadian federal and provincial inmates.

†Adult Canadian offenders on probation or parole.

‡Adult male inpatients in United States.

§Across four samples in Canada and U.S.

¶Across two undergraduate samples in Canada.

does not preclude pursuit behavior, it is more likely that a single offender convicted of the crime of stalking will exhibit low levels of psychopathy, and may instead have been motivated to act by intense feelings of loss or abandonment, which may trigger a rage that fuels his pursuit (30). On the other hand, since one out of seven stalkers from several different studies appear to be psychopathic, assessment of this dangerous trait appears warranted.

Our results are limited by the small sample sizes among the different perpetrator groups, and by the absence of a second rater for PCL:SV scores, which precluded a determination of interrater reliability. Future research into this area might investigate directly the attachment styles of stalkers through the use of the Adult Attachment Interview (George C, Kaplan N, Main M. Adult attachment interview. Unpublished manuscript 1985; University of California, Berkeley). Differential treatment interventions might then be generated. For example, the violence of truly preoccupied stalkers might best be reduced through the use of serotonergic medications and psychodynamic or psychoanalytic psychotherapy. Dismissive, antisocial or psychopathic stalkers will not benefit from such methods; for these individuals, high levels of supervision, and the implementation of strict sanctions upon the discovery of violation behavior, are warranted.

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