

TECHNICAL NOTE

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Communicated Threats and Violence Toward Public and Private Targets: Discerning Differences Among Those Who Stalk and Attack*

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ABSTRACT: A computation of false positive and false negative rates concerning the probability that directly communicated written or oral threats predict subsequent violent behavior yields a striking difference between “public” and “private” targets. Among private targets, communicated threats appear to increase risk, but are so common that they have little predictive value. On the other hand, public targets are unlikely to receive a direct threat from those who approach to attack. The author suggests that the most parsimonious explanation for this difference is the type, or mode of violence, that is apparent. Private targets appear to be most likely victimized by *affective* violence, wherein the emotionally reactive subject will immediately shove, push, punch, slap, choke, fondle, or hair pull the victim without the use of a weapon, usually in response to a perceived rejection or humiliation. Public targets are most likely to be victimized by *predatory* violence, which is planned, purposeful, cognitively motivated, opportunistic rather than impulsive, and often involves a firearm. Implications for risk assessment are discussed.

KEYWORDS: forensic science, stalking, violence, threats

The conventional belief among mental health and criminal justice professionals that directly communicated threats increase the risk of subsequent violence appears more relative and ambiguous than expected. Macdonald (1) found in the only published study of homicidal threats that 3% of subjects eventually killed someone following release from a psychiatric hospital, and in all cases it was not the person who had been threatened. Dietz et al. (2,3) found no relationship between threats in letters and approach behavior among those who inappropriately wrote to Hollywood celebrities, and a negative relationship between threats in letters and approach behavior among those who inappropriately wrote to members of the U.S. Congress. Recent research concerning those who stalk and attack may shed light on these counterintuitive findings.

A directly communicated threat is a written or oral communication that implicitly or explicitly states a wish or intent to damage,

injure, or kill the target (4). Communicated threats are typically *expressive* or *instrumental*. Expressive threats are primarily used to regulate affect in the threatener. For example, the employee who ventilates his anger toward his boss by articulating a vague threat, and then feels relieved afterward. Instrumental threats are primarily intended to control or influence the behavior of the target through an aversive consequence. For example, the abusive husband who keeps his wife traumatically bonded to him by threatening to kill her if she attempts to leave (5). Recent data suggest, moreover, that frequencies of violence toward the object pursued among those who stalk are disturbingly high, and sometimes exceed 50% when prior sexual intimates are studied as a subgroup (6,7). The purpose of this study is to present a computation of false positive rates and false negative rates across a series of recently published studies involving subjects who stalked their targets—a large proportion of whom subsequently attacked—to attempt to clarify the seemingly ambiguous relationship between directly communicated threats and subsequent violence in previous studies (1–3).

Methods

A computer search was conducted to identify studies published in the past five years which met several inclusion criteria: a) most subjects repeatedly followed and/or harassed another person in a manner which threatened his or her safety—a generic definition of the crime of stalking (8)—before they were violent; b) all samples were independent of one another; c) all samples provided violence frequency data on the subjects; d) all samples provided sufficient data for computation of false positive or false negative rates concerning the relationship between directly communicated threats and subsequent violence. False positive rates represent the proportion of subjects who directly threatened who were not subsequently violent toward the target. False negative rates represent the proportion of subjects who were violent toward the target who did not directly threaten beforehand. Both percentages represent predictive failures.

Results

Nine studies were identified (6–14) which yielded seven independent samples. The samples were nonrandomly gathered by different research groups in San Diego, New York, Los Angeles,

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TABLE 1—False positive and false negative rates of communicated threats and subsequent personal violence among various samples of persons who stalk and attack public and private targets.

Study	Sample/ Subjects	False Pos. Rate	False Neg. Rate	Violence Freq.
Meloy & Gothard (8)	20	73%	22%	25%
Kienlen et al. (10)	25	68%	...	24%
Harmon et al. (11)	175	41%	19%	46%
Fein & Vossekuil* (12)	83	...	90%	100%
Mullen et al. (6)	145	52%	23%	36%
Palarea et al. (7)	223	75%	14%	19%
Meloy et al. (13)	65	72%	15%	46%

* In this study, the violence was an independent variable, rather than a dependent variable; therefore, false positive rates (the proportion of subjects who directly threatened who were not subsequently violent) are unknown and the frequency of violence is 100%.

Missouri, Washington, and Australia, with an aggregated N of 736 subjects. Most data gathering was archival. Table 1 presents the computed false positive and false negative rates of directly communicated threats and their relationship to subsequent personal violence. The violence frequency of each sample is listed in the far right column. Many of these studies operationalized stalking to select subjects, and perusal of them indicated a variety of criminal charges and convictions, from assault to murder. One study (12) selected subjects only by virtue of their lethal approach, attack, or assassination behavior. All subjects were evaluated by a court diagnostic clinic or risk managed by federal, state, or local law enforcement before, during, or after their stalking and attack behavior.

Several of these studies found a positive and significant relationship between communicated threats and violence risk (6,7,9,11,13,14). The two predictive studies (6,14) found that the strength of the relationship between threats and subsequent violence was weak.² As expected, virtually all the studies indicate false positive rates $>50\%$ and false negative rates $\leq 23\%$ for directly communicated threats and subsequent violence: most individuals who directly communicate a threat are not subsequently violent, and most individuals who do not directly communicate a threat are not subsequently violent. The one striking exception to these findings is the study by Fein and Vossekuil (12) of subjects who near-lethally approached, attacked or assassinated a public figure, wherein the *false negative* rate was 90%—only one out of ten of their subjects communicated a direct threat to the target or to law enforcement before they were violent. The *sensitivity* rate—the proportion of violent subjects in their study who directly threatened—was only 10%. The sensitivity rate for the other studies in Table 1, excluding Keinlen et al. (10), averaged 82.3%.³ This prompted Fein et al. (15) to emphasize, once again, the important distinction between *posing* a threat and making a threat.

² Meloy et al. (14) found a beta weight of .26 ($p < .05$) between communicated threats and violence toward the target. In a third study, Palarea et al. (7) found a beta weight of .15 ($p < .05$) between communicated threats and violence toward the target.

³ False positive and false negative calculations are affected by base rate differences; in this particular series of studies, given the much higher base rate for violence in the Fein & Vossekuil study (12), the false negative rate would be expected to be higher. Sensitivity, however, is less affected by base rate differences.

Discussion

Do these findings shed light on the ambiguous relationship between directly communicated threats and violence? There have been several proposed typologies to categorize individuals who stalk (6,9,16), all of which have found some discriminant validity. These threatening communication data, however, may be most understandable by simply contrasting *public* and *private* targets. Public targets are public figures—ranging from political figures to media celebrities—who are typically pursued by strangers to them (2,3,12,17). Private targets include everyone else, who are most likely to be pursued by prior sexual intimates or acquaintances. With this perspective in mind, those who stalk and attack private targets have very low rates of false negatives, while those who stalk and attack public targets, at least in one large study,⁴ have very high rates of false negatives (the proportion of violent subjects who did not directly threaten beforehand).

The reason for this striking difference appears to be the nature of the violence itself. Several studies have found (8,11,13) that private targets are typically shoved, pushed, punched, slapped, choked, fondled or hair pulled by the perpetrator, and he usually does not use a weapon; in one study less than one out of three individuals used a weapon, and it never actually inflicted injury on the target (13). This is a mode of violence which is *affective*: highly autonomically arousing, accompanied by anger or fear, unplanned, and an immediate reaction to a perceived threat, usually rejection by the person who is the target of the pursuit, usually a prior acquaintance or intimate. On the other hand, public targets appear to be victimized by a *predatory* mode of violence: it is planned for days, weeks, or months, is purposeful (instrumental), has variable goals, and is primarily cognitively motivated. In the “public target” study cited in Table 1, it usually involved a firearm (12,18). As Fein and Vossekuil (12) wrote,

Mounting an attack on a person of public status requires preparation and planning . . . Persons intending to mount attacks follow paths to their attacks. They often engage in “attack related” behaviors, that is, discernible activities that precede an attack. They may demonstrate interest in previous assassins and assassination attempts . . . Similar thinking and analysis may hold true for persons who engage in “stalking” behaviors and for those who commit certain kinds of workplace violence (p. 332).

These two biologically based modes of aggression, which appear to be quite distinctive, have been measured and validated in animal (19), psychopharmacological (20–22), neuroimaging (23), and forensic studies (24,5) during the past thirty years (25,26). Calhoun (17) recently labeled those who are affective “howlers” and those who are predatory “hunters” in a study of threats and attacks on federal judicial officials. Both of his terms are very descriptive of the evolutionary bases of these mammalian modes of violence to defend against a threat or to hunt, respectively.

If this hypothesis is valid, and further studies of stalking and violence toward public and private figures do not disprove it, another

⁴ The vast majority of the subjects in all the studies listed, except for Fein and Vossekuil (12), pursued private targets. For instance, in the Palarea et al. study (7), the authors note that only 19% of the LAPD Threat Management Unit’s entire database ($N = 341$) involved celebrity stalking by strangers, despite the fact that this jurisdiction would likely have the highest incidence of public figure stalking cases, particularly celebrities.

intriguing association appears: stalkers of strangers (of whom public figures are a subgroup) are significantly more likely to be psychotic than stalkers of prior sexual intimates (10,13,16,27), and given these suggestive findings, are also more likely to be predatory rather than affective if they are violent. This juxtaposes two phenomena that are often viewed as being mutually exclusive: a psychotic individual who engages in planned, purposeful, and organized attack behavior. This may be disconcerting for some mental health professionals, but others who work forensic cases may recognize that the two may instead complement each other: the symptoms of psychosis, such as delusions, provide a certainty and commitment to a goal, however unrealistic or irrational, that is unshakeable.

The most likely tactical reason for a subject who stalks and attacks a public figure to not directly communicate a threat to the target is, of course, to enhance his probability of success. Public targets are also less accessible than private targets, which likely influences the preoffense behavior of the subject. The application of this technical note to violence risk and threat assessment is important. It suggests that when a private citizen is targeted by someone who is stalking, communicated threats appear to increase risk of violence, but are so common that they have little predictive value (6,14). Nevertheless, from a risk management perspective, all threats should be taken seriously to maximize false positives and minimize false negatives, since the former have less severe physical consequences. If a physical attack ensues, it is likely to be an affective mode of violence. On the other hand, those public figures who are likely to be lethally approached and attacked—as Fein and Vossekui (12) note, “an end result of a process of thinking and behavior” (p. 332)—will not receive a direct threat in advance. A predatory mode of violence should be carefully considered even if the subject is subsequently found to have been psychotic.

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