From the Eye of the Stalker:

Personality Profiling of Self-Reported Stalkers

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Under review at Psychology of Violence

Draft date: December, 2010
ABSTRACT

Current understanding of stalking behavior derives largely from victim accounts and clinical studies of known male stalkers. To profile the stalker personality in subclinical samples, we collected data from self-reported stalkers, with a special focus on females. Three studies were conducted on college students (total N = 501) using anonymous on-line survey methods. In Study 1, we operationalized two types of personalities (“Pit-bulls” and “Cobras”) that were previously distinguished in the domestic violence literature. Pit-bulls are described as being anxious, explosive and insecure in their relationships whereas Cobras are described as cold and detached, controlling their partners through fear. As predicted, both Pit-bulls and Cobras reported high levels of stalking. Pit-bulls tended to be female whereas Cobras tended to be male. Study 2 replicated the stalking typology in an all-female sample, with both types independently predicting stalking. Avoidant and anxious attachment styles were linked to stalking via the Cobra and Pit-bull personalities. Further analyses suggested that the Cobra personality is essentially equivalent to subclinical psychopathy. Results of Study 3 suggested that the Pit-bull personality is indistinguishable from borderline personality. Results showed that borderline and psychopathic personalities were independent predictors of stalking. Together our results begin to flesh out the personalities of female stalkers, whose misbehavior has largely been overlooked.
INTRODUCTION

A number of writers have called for more attention to the dark side of relationships (e.g., Cupach & Spitzberg, 2004; Duck, 1994; Perlman, 2007). Among the most serious issues are physical and emotional abuse perpetrated by post-intimate partners (Johnson, 2006). A curiously perverse example of the dark side is the phenomenon of stalking.

Current understanding of the psychological characteristics of stalkers is based largely on victim reports gathered from forensic and clinical populations (Boon, 2001; Kienlen, Birmingham, Solberg, O’Regan, & Meloy, 1997; Schwartz-Watts, & Morgan, 1998; Zona, Sharma, & Lane, 1993). Most perpetrators studied in forensic and clinical samples were originally referred by authorities or arrested for other crimes, for example, assault or murder. As a result, current understanding of the stalker personality is biased toward the extreme end of the spectrum.

Although a number of stalking studies have been conducted on subclinical samples, for example, college samples (see review by Cupach & Spitzberg, 2004), those studies focused on victims’ perceptions of their stalkers. Not surprisingly, victims painted a uniformly negative picture of their pursuers. It is possible, however, that victim accounts, although fully understandable, are limited in scope. In this report, we investigate stalking from the perpetrator’s perspective. They may flesh out our understanding of stalking and facilitate interventions.

Definitions

Legally defined, stalking is the willful, malicious, and repeated pursuit or harassment that threatens the safety of the victim (Meloy & Boyd, 2003; Palarea, Zona, Lane, & Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 1999). Outside of the legal system, stalking is more difficult to define. Consider the
implications that follow from such diverse labels as obsessive relational intrusion, intrusive contact, aberrant courtship behavior, obsessional pursuit, and unwanted pursuit behavior, just to name a few (Dutton & Winstead, 2006; Haugaard & Seri, 2004; Sheridan, Davies & Boon, 2001; Sinclair & Frieze, 2000, Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007). We will follow several previous writers in defining stalking simply as *unwanted relational pursuit*. Consistent with Spitzberg and Cupach (2007), our definition does not require intention to harm the victim.

**Prevalence**

Estimates of stalking prevalence depend on how the behavior is defined and in which population it is studied. When defined in legal terms as safety-threatening, U.S. stalking rates (lifetime) have been estimated at 7% of women and 2% of men (Basile, Swahn, Chen, & Saltzman, 2006). In Canada, the lifetime victimization rates were recently estimated at 9-13% of women and 4-9% of men (Statistics Canada: Johnson, 2006). Stalking has even spread to the internet through unwanted persistent emails and instant messages, and searching for and harassing the target in online communities (Sheridan & Grant, 2007). Most relevant to the present research, Spitzberg and Cupach’s (2007) meta-analysis found a stalking victimization rate of 21% in college samples.

**Self-report studies.** We could find only a handful of subclinical (i.e., non-forensic, non-clinical) studies that attempted a self-report perspective. In the Fremouw, Westrup and Pennypacker (1997) data, only 1 percent admitted to stalking. In Lewis, Fremouw, Del Ben, and Farr (2001), a total of 9 percent reported stalking. We suspect that these values are gross underestimates.¹ Indeed, the authors of both articles concede that socially desirable responding compromised the validity of their prevalence estimates.

¹ A third study found higher rates because they specifically solicited participants who “had difficulty letting go of a recent relationship” (Dutton & Winstead, 2006).
In the present research, our goal was to flesh out the personality profiles of students who admitted to stalking others. To minimize socially desirable responding we turned to an anonymous internet survey methodology (Burhmester, Kwan, & Gosling, 2010). This approach allows us to include a battery of measures including personality traits, coping styles, and attachment styles. We place special emphasis on female stalkers, who have largely been overlooked in the literature.

**Personality profiles**

Research aimed at profiling the stalker personality has primarily been restricted to clinical and forensic samples (Kienlen, 1998; Zona, Palarea & Lane, 1993; Lewis, Fremouw, Del Ben & Farr, 2001; Rosenfeld, 2003; Yokoi, 1998). According to Meloy (2001), the most common diagnosis of male stalkers is antisocial personality disorder followed by narcissistic personality disorder: Their manifestations included anger, control, and revenge (Davis, Ace, & Andra, 2000). Female stalkers, by contrast, were most likely to be diagnosed with borderline personality disorder. Common emotions were anger, obsession, and fear of abandonment (Meloy & Boyd, 2003).

Our knowledge of personality predictors in college students, where most stalking may go unreported, is correspondingly limited. In one exception, Spitzberg and Veksler’s (2007) study of college students found that victims of unwanted pursuit labeled their perpetrators with traits typically associated with borderline and histrionic personalities. Of course, it is difficult to know what to make of personality attributions made by victims.

**Personality Typologies**

Rather than specific personality traits, some analysts have developed typologies based on motivation, psychopathology, and relationship between stalker and victim (Jacobson & Gottman,
1998; Meloy, 2001; Meloy & Boyd, 2003; Melton, 2007; Wright, Burgess, Burgess, Laszlo, McCrany, & Douglas, 1996). Other studies have mainly focused on psychiatric and forensic populations (Kienlen et al., 1997; Mullen, Pathé, Purcell, & Stuart, 1999; Schwartz-Watts, & Morgan, 1998; Zona, Sharma, & Lane, 1993). In short, we could find no helpful stalking typology for non-offender samples such as college students.

Our reading of the literature led us to borrow a personality typology – *Pit-bulls* versus *Cobras* – from the influential work by Jacobson and Gottman (1998) on male domestic violence. Pit-bulls were characterized as jealous, demanding, dependent, insecurely-attached, and fearful of abandonment. They rarely have criminal records and any violence is usually confined to the intimate relationship. By contrast, Cobras tend to be antagonistic, with domineering, antisocial tendencies, and often have a past criminal history. They are aggressive and violent to people inside and outside their relationships, and the violence is often severe (e.g., Waltz, Babcock, Jacobson, & Gottman, 2000).

**Overview of present studies**

In three studies of college students, we used anonymous online web surveys to collect self-reports of personality along with stalking anecdotes. In Study 1, we operationalized the Cobra and Pit-bull personalities and evaluated their ability to predict romantic stalking in both males and females. We also explored the possibility that stalkers have poor self-esteem and maladaptive coping styles. In Study 2, we refined the operationalizations of Cobra and Pit-bull and examined the personalities of female stalkers in more detail. We also examined possible links between attachment dimensions and our stalking personalities. In Study 3, we focused on subclinical psychopathy and borderline personality as predictors of romantic stalking behavior in females.
STUDY 1

Study 1 began our examination of self-reported stalking among college students. We measured a variety of potential personality predictors with standard questionnaires. Stalking was operationalized by self-reports of persistent pursuit in the face of romantic rejection. Based on Jacobson and Gottman (1998), the Cobra personality was operationalized as a combination of social dominance and subclinical psychopathy. The Pit-bull personality was operationalized as a combination of high neuroticism and impulsive lifestyle.

We predicted that our sub-clinical stalkers would subdivide into Cobra and Pit-bull personality types. We also predicted that most male stalkers would be Cobras and most female stalkers, Pit-bulls.

We also predicted that the two types of stalkers would show different but equally maladaptive forms of coping with perceived transgressions. For Pit-bulls, this prediction is based on the belief that one for stalking is poor self-esteem and inability to cope with rejection.

Method

Participants

Participants were 116 undergraduate students from a large northwestern university. Sixty-three percent were female. The mean age of the sample was 21.0 years ($SD = 3.07$).

Procedure

The study was conducted as a web-based survey labeled “Rate Your Personality on the Web” and was designed to maximize honesty. Participants were instructed against providing personally-identifying information anywhere in the survey. To login to the survey they had to create a personal 8-digit number. The appearance of that number on the subject pool list was
used to give an extra course credit point to participants. Next, participants completed a battery of standard self-report personality measures and then wrote about a stalking anecdote, if they had ever done so.

Measures

Unless otherwise stated, all personality item responses were collected in a 5-point Likert format (1 = ‘Strongly disagree’ to 5 = ‘Strongly agree’).

Neuroticism. Neuroticism was measured with the corresponding scale from the Big Five Inventory (BFI; John & Srivastava, 1999). The scale includes a total of 8 questions that pertain to nervousness, excessive worrying, hostility, and emotional instability ($M = 2.08$, $SD = .81$). The alpha in our sample was .85.

Subclinical psychopathy. The 64-item Self Report Psychopathy scale (SRP-III; Paulhus, Hemphill, & Hare, in press) was used to assess subclinical psychopathy ($M = 2.25$, $SD = .44$). The SRP-III is based on the ‘gold-standard’ of clinical psychopathy assessment, the Psychopathy Checklist – Revised (Hare, 1991). Both instruments comprise four facets: callous affect, interpersonal manipulation, impulsive lifestyle, and antisocial behavior. A sample item is “You should take advantage of other people before they do it to you”. In our sample, the alpha reliability for the whole scale was .91.

Self-Esteem. Rosenberg’s (1965) Self-Esteem scale was used to measure self-esteem ($M = 3.40$, $SD = 1.29$). The ten item scale includes such items as “I feel that I'm a person of worth, at least on equal basis with others”, and “I certainly feel useless at times”. Its alpha reliability in our sample was .90.

Control. The 16-item Social Dominance Orientation Scale (SDO; Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth & Malle, 1994) was used to measure domineering control ($M = 2.21$, $SD = .73$). A
sample item is “In getting what you want, it is sometimes necessary to use force against other groups”. It has been shown to tap a privileged sense of control of males over females (Pratto et al., 1994). The alpha reliability in our sample was .92.

**Stalker Typologies.** To operationalize the Cobra personality, we standardized scores on the SDO and the SRP-III, and summed the two scales. The internal consistency of the sum was .92. The Pit-bull personality was operationalized by standardizing the total scores on the neuroticism and impulsive lifestyle scales and then summing them. The internal consistency of the sum was .75.

**Measuring Stalking.** All participants were asked the following open question within the web based survey: “Everyone has had a romantic interest in someone who was not interested in them. In the box below, please describe the most extreme example where you persisted in pursuing someone who had rejected you (e.g., sending unwanted emails or letters, physically following them, joining a group they belonged to, etc.)”. These anecdotes were then coded for degree of stalking.

Using earlier studies as a guideline (Cupach & Spitzberg, 2004; Sinclair & Frieze, 2000), we created a 3-point rating scale as follows.

No stalking: A score of 1 was assigned when no stalking is reported, explicitly state that they do not engage in stalking, or describe an incident where they were rejected once and did not persist.

Marginal stalking: A score of 2 was assigned when minor stalking behavior engaged in 1 to 3 times is reported.

Definite stalking: A score of 3 was assigned when the participant reported several types of stalking behavior engaged in a very persistent (more than 3 times) or
extreme manner\textsuperscript{2}. Note that the participant didn’t necessarily have to ever make contact with the individual, as in cases of pure following, surveillance, and searching information on the internet.

To assess the rater reliability of the stalking coding system, we arranged for a second lab member to independently rate 21 of the anecdotes. The second ratings correlated substantially with the first ratings ($r(20) = .94$, $p < .001$), indicating a high rater reliability for our coding scheme.

**Measuring Coping.** We measured coping with an inventory titled Understanding Reactions Following Transgressions (URAT; Nathanson & Paulhus, 2006) questionnaire. This 24-item questionnaire was derived from a series of established measures of forgiveness, revenge fantasies, and avoidance, to create a single measure with four subscales. These four subscales are: Forgiveness ($M = 3.46$, $SD = .59$, alpha = .76), Avoidance ($M = 3.45$, $SD = .65$, alpha = .76), Reconciliation ($M = 3.27$, $SD = .58$, alpha = .63), and Revenge Fantasies ($M = 2.33$, $SD = .78$, alpha = .80). Participants are asked to think about incidents when somebody was offensive, obnoxious, irritating, got on their nerves, or was annoying. Ratings of agreement were collected on five-point Likert scales (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) with each statement, according to the ways they tend to react. Some sample items from the scale are, ‘I avoid him/her’, ‘I’m going to get even’, ‘I don’t trust him/her’, and ‘I tried to talk things over with him/her’.

**Revenge Behavior.** We used an extended version of the Revenge subscale from the TRIM (McCullough & Hoyt, 2002). This 9-item version emphasized actual revenge behavior ($M = 2.34$, $SD = .66$, alpha = .77). Participants were reminded that the survey was completely anonymous, so that they could be totally honest. Some sample items are, ‘In the last year, I have

\textsuperscript{2} In our data, there were no incidents where stalking was both extreme and repeated.
gone out of my way to get back at people’, ‘I never get revenge on people’, and ‘I like to wait before I get back at people’.

**Anger Rumination.** We used six items of the Angry Afterthoughts subscale of the Anger Rumination Scale (Sukhodolsky, Golub, & Cromwell, 2001) to measure anger rumination ($M = 20.61$, $SD = 4.45$, alpha = .80). Participants were asked to think about any situation that made them angry and to indicate to the extent to which they agree or disagree with each statement. Some example items are, ‘I re-enact the anger episode in my mind after it has happened’, ‘Memories of even minor annoyances bother me for a while’, and ‘After an argument is over, I keep fighting with this person in my imagination’.

**Results**

Based on our 3-level stalking index, more than half of our sample reported engaging in some degree of stalking behavior (66%). Of this group, 45% reported stalking of the third kind.

Across the full sample, the Cobra and Pit-bull typologies inter-correlated to a moderate degree ($r = .33$, $p < .01$). Table 1 shows their associations with stalking behavior: As expected, both the Cobra personality ($r = .24$, $p < .01$) and the Pit-bull personality ($r = .16$, $p < .05$) significantly predicted stalking behavior.

The expected sex differences were also found: The correlations of stalking with Cobra were stronger for men ($Z = 2.2$, $p < .05$) and with Pit-Bull, were stronger for women ($Z = 1.9$, $p < .05$). The strongest predictor for male stalking was the Cobra personality ($r = .35$, $p < .05$), whereas the strongest predictor of female stalking was the Pit-bull personality ($r = .30$, $p < .01$). Surprisingly, we found no significant sex difference in overall rates of stalking, $t = 1.15$, n.s.
To further demonstrate their distinctiveness, we conducted a linear regression analysis entering the Cobra and Pit-bull personalities simultaneously to predict stalking. Results showed that both the Pit-bull personality ($\beta = .19, t = 2.01, p < .05$) and the Cobra personality ($\beta = .18, t = 1.70, p < .05$) independently predict stalking. Interestingly, gender also contributes, with females more likely to be stalkers ($\beta = .20, t = 1.96, p < .05$).

Table 2 shows the correlations of our two stalker types with coping styles. Results show that they both have maladaptive coping styles: The Cobra personality correlates highly with revenge behavior ($r = .61, p < .01$) and revenge fantasies ($r = .51, p < .01$), whereas the Pit-bull personality highly correlates with anger rumination ($r = .45, p < .01$) and an inability to forgive ($r = -.41, p < .01$).

Discussion

Our results with a college sample replicated many aspects of previous research based on clinical and forensic samples. Apparently there is no qualitative difference between clinical and sub-clinical versions of stalker profiles.

The distinction between the Cobra and Pit-bull personalities, borrowed from the domestic violence literature (Jacobson & Gottman, 1998), proved to be useful in distinguishing two types of stalkers. Using that literature, the Cobra personality was operationalized as the combination of dominant and antisocial behavior. The Pit-bull was operationalized as the combination of impulsive lifestyle and emotional vulnerability. As expected, we found that both the Cobra and Pit-bull reported predispositions to stalk.

Recall that we made different predictions for male and female stalkers. As expected, the results showed that male stalkers tended to be Cobras and female stalkers tended to be Pit-bulls. Note that female stalkers have low self-esteem.
This pattern confirms and extends on previous research on forensic stalking: Male stalkers scored high on antisocial personality; female stalkers scored low on self-esteem and high on impulsivity (Meloy, 2001; Meloy & Boyd, 2003; Purcell, Pathé & Mullen, 2001).

We also provided some insight into the coping styles of Cobras and Pit-bulls. Neither is interested in forgiving those who rejected them. Pit-bulls ruminate and avoid reconciliation, but Cobras go further in actually seeking revenge. The revenge behavior of the Cobra is consistent with previous work showing that those high in subclinical psychopathy respond to provocation with revenge (Nathanson & Paulhus, 2006). Overall, the coping results suggest that the Pit-bull and Cobra personalities may stalk due to different motivations. The Cobra may stalk to exact revenge, whereas the Pit-bull stalks due to their intense anger rumination and inability to ‘let go’.

STUDY 2

The purpose of Study 2 is to investigate female stalkers in more detail. Even in the forensic literature they have largely been ignored (Meloy & Boyd, 2003; Purcell et al., 2001). Using the stalker typology identified in Study 1 -- the Cobra and the Pit-bull personalities -- we hoped to replicate and extend the results of Study 1 in several respects.

First, we investigated the attachment patterns of our stalkers. Previous literature has suggested that stalkers have insecure attachment styles, specifically preoccupied and fearful. Findings with dismissive-avoidant attachment style have been inconsistent (Davis, Ace & Andra, 2000; Del Ben & Fremouw, 2002; Mohandie, Meloy, McGowan & Williams, 2006; Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007). Recently, Dutton and Winstead (2006) determined that high scores on attachment anxiety and distress at relationship break-up combined to predict unwanted pursuit behavior and aggression, whereas attachment avoidance did not predict either behavior.
Previous research by Noftle and Shaver (2006) found that attachment anxiety was associated with personality traits of neuroticism, moodiness, nervousness, and worrying. By contrast, attachment avoidance was associated with aspects of disagreeableness: Specifically they were mistrusting, uncooperative, cold, and aloof.

Accordingly, we hypothesized two patterns corresponding to our two stalking personalities. The Pit-bull personality will be high on attachment-related anxiety and the Cobra personality, high on attachment-related avoidance. As before, both Pit-bulls and Cobras should report stalk high stalking rates. In addition, we hypothesized that both attachment-related anxiety and attachment-related avoidance will predict stalking behavior.

**Method**

A limitation of Study 1 was that both stalking personalities were operationalized with elements of psychopathy. The Pit-bull personality included the impulsive lifestyle subscale of the SRP-III and the Cobra personality included the total SRP score. Although the two personality types exhibited somewhat different correlates, we sought to remove any psychometric overlap in Study 2. To that end, we replaced the impulsive lifestyle scale with the Dickman Impulsiveness Scale (Dickman, 1990). It will be combined with neuroticism to operationalize our Pit-bull personality.

We were also concerned that the Social Dominance scale was too politically-oriented for our purposes. As a result, we replaced it with a more interpersonally-oriented measure – Wiggins’s (1979) dominance scale. Finally, we included the Experiences in Close Relationships scale (ECR; Brennan, Clark & Shaver, 1998) to study the attachment profiles of our two stalker personalities.

**Participants**
Participants were 92 female undergraduates from a large northwestern university. The mean age of the sample was 20.1 years ($SD = 1.52$).

**Procedure and Measures**

The procedures and measures for Study 2 were identical to those of Study 1 with three exceptions – addition of the Dickman Impulsiveness Scale (Dickman, 1990), the ECR (Brennan, Clark & Shaver, 1998), and the inclusion of the entire Big Five Inventory (BFI; John & Srivastava, 1999). Conceptually similar to Study 1, the Cobra personality was operationalized as dominant psychopathy whereas the Pit-bull personality was operationalized as a combination of impulsivity and neuroticism. Stalking was coded using the same 3-point system as in Study 1.

**Personality.** The same questionnaires were used to assess the core personality traits. In Study 2, the alpha reliabilities were as follows: SRP-III (alpha = .91), self-esteem (alpha = .89), BFI Extraversion (alpha = .84), Agreeableness (alpha = .76), Conscientiousness (alpha = .84), Neuroticism (alpha = .82) and Openness (alpha = .81). Again alpha reliabilities are in the typical range.

**Impulsivity.** The Dickman Impulsiveness Scale (Dickman, 1990) is composed of two factors, functional impulsivity and dysfunctional impulsivity. For purposes of this study, we focused only on the latter. This form of impulsivity concerns the tendency to act without forethought. Participants are asked to indicate how much they agree with statements such as “I will frequently make appointments without thinking about whether I will be able to keep them,” and “I often say and do things without considering the consequences”. The alpha reliability in our sample was .86.
**Dominance.** To measure dominance we included five items from the Interpersonal Adjective Checklist (Wiggins, 1979), these items included “I am assertive”, and “I am dominant”. The alpha reliability in this sample was .73.

**Stalker Typologies.** To create the Pit-bull composite, we standardized the neuroticism and impulsiveness scales, and summed them (alpha = .83). To create the Cobra composite, we standardized dominance and psychopathy scores, and summed them (alpha = .87).

**Attachment.** The ECR (Brennan et al., 1998) was used to measure attachment. The ECR is composed of two dimensions, assessed with 18 items each. Attachment-related anxiety (alpha = .89) can be described as fear of abandonment and insecurity about your partner’s feelings and relationship status. Attachment-related avoidance (alpha = .92) can be described as emotional coldness and being uncomfortable with intimacy and dependency. Some example items are “If I can’t get my partner to show interest in me, I get upset or angry”, and “I get uncomfortable when a romantic partner wants to be very close”. Participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed with each statement.

**Results**

Although our sample was young (mean age = 20.1 years), 65% reported some degree of stalking behavior. Of these, 40.9% percent reported stalking of the third kind.

Our new index of the Pit-bull personality correlated highly with the index used in Study 1 ($r = .73, p < .001$). Therefore our new index (now independent of subclinical psychopathy) is capturing the same concept as the original index. The new Pit-Bull index showed only a small, non-significant inter-correlation with our new index of the Cobra personality ($r = .17$, n.s.).

Table 3 shows the correlations of our personality and attachment variables with stalking. Significant Big Five predictors included disagreeableness and neuroticism.
The two strongest predictors of stalking are the Cobra personality \((r = .38, p < .001)\) and the Pit-bull personality \((r = .24, p < .05)\). We then regressed stalking on these two predictors. Results showed that the Cobra personality \((\beta = .36, t = 3.68, p < .01)\) and Pit-bull personality \((\beta = .18, t = 1.87, p < .05)\) are significant and independent predictors of stalking. Because the directions were predicted, both are one-tailed tests.

Contrary to predictions, the Table 3 results show no overall association of stalking with the two attachment-related dimensions. Table 4 shows the correlations of our stalking personalities with the attachment dimensions. Here, the Pit-bull personality is associated with attachment-related anxiety \((r = .40, p < .01)\), whereas the Cobra personality showed only a trend toward attachment-related avoidance \((r = .15, p = .14)\).

We decided to evaluate the independent predictive value of subclinical psychopathy and dominance in predicting stalking behavior. When stalking was regressed on psychopathy and dominance, only subclinical psychopathy remained as a significant predictor \((\beta = .31, t = 1.87, p < .05)\). For this reason, the Cobra personality was replaced with subclinical psychopathy in further analyses. Subclinical psychopathy also positively correlated with attachment-related avoidance \((r = .19, p < .05)\).

*Mediational model.* We were surprised to find no overall associations between attachment dimensions and stalking behavior. Nonetheless, we considered the possibility that the stalking personalities might mediate between the attachment dimensions and stalking behavior. As shown in Figure 1, we organized the attachment dimensions, the stalking personalities, and stalking behavior into a sequential model.

Neither attachment-avoidance nor attachment-anxiety had any direct effects on stalking behavior \((\beta = -.01\) and \(\beta = -.03\), respectively). However, attachment-avoidance had a small
indirect effect on stalking behavior via subclinical psychopathy ($\beta = .06, p < .05$ based on Sobel equations). Also, attachment-anxiety had a small indirect effect on stalking behavior via the Pit-bull personality ($\beta = .10, p < .05$ based on Sobel equations).³

Discussion

As expected, the Cobra and Pit-bull personalities independently predicted stalking behavior. Further analysis revealed that subclinical psychopathy alone, without dominance, significantly predicted stalking behavior. Accordingly, subclinical psychopathy alone was used to operationalize the Cobra personality in the rest of our analyses.

The results with the attachment dimensions were more complex than expected. Counter to expectations, neither attachment-anxiety nor attachment-avoidance alone predicted stalking. That finding is consistent with a previous study that found that attachment anxiety only predicted unwanted pursuit when combined with major distress at relationship dissolution (Dutton & Winstead, 2007).

The pattern of associations became more clear when we organized them into the developmental model depicted in Figure 1. We assumed that attachment processes precede the development of personality traits. Under that assumption, our results suggest that attachment-related avoidance (associated with parental coldness) nurtures the development of subclinical psychopathy, but not a Pit-bull personality. In contrast, attachment-anxiety (associated with inconsistent care-giving) nurtures the development of a Pit-bull personality, but not psychopathy. These results are in line with our hypotheses and with previous research (Shaver & Brennan, 1992; Noftle & Shaver, 2006).

³ Other developmental models are possible (e.g., Mauricio et al., 2007), but this one seemed most plausible to us.
Our findings lend support to those of previous studies that have found that stalkers are likely to have experienced early disruption in their attachment development (Cupach & Spitzberg, 2004; Dutton & Golant, 1995; Dutton, Saunders, Starzomski & Bartholomew, 1994). Indeed, Kienlen (1998) found that in their sample of criminal stalkers, more than half experienced a loss or change of their primary caregiver at a very young age.

STUDY 3

Study 3 was designed to clarify the Pit-bull personality -- our second key predictor of female romantic stalking. As previously operationalized, the Pit-bull type is a blend of neuroticism and impulsivity. Study 2 also demonstrated a link with attachment-related anxiety. Our repeated confirmation that this personality type is predisposed toward stalking raises the specter of the borderline personality. This possibility was raised by Spitzberg and Veksler’s (2007) findings on a college sample: Stalker victims attributed to their stalkers a pattern of traits that resemble a borderline personality. Along with research from the clinical-forensic literature, the Spitzberg and Veksler study led us to include a direct measure, namely the Borderline Personality Inventory (BPI; Leichsenring, 1999).

Following the results of studies 1 and 2 and previous research, we predict that high scores on subclinical psychopathy, Pit-bull personality, or borderline personality will be associated with stalking behavior.

Method

Participants

Participants were 293 female undergraduates from a large northwestern university. The mean age of the sample was 21.2 years (SD = 2.15).

Procedure and Measures
The procedures and measures for Study 3 are identical to that of Study 2 except with the inclusion of the BPI (Leichsenring, 1999), and the Barratt Impulsivity Scale (Patton, Stanford & Barratt, 1995) to measure impulsivity.

**Personality.** To assess core personality traits, we administered the same questionnaires as in Studies 1 and 2. Means, standard deviations and alpha reliabilities in this sample were as follows: Extraversion ($M = 3.18$, $SD = .69$, alpha = .85), Agreeableness ($M = 3.51$, $SD = .58$, alpha = .76), Conscientiousness ($M = 3.31$, $SD = .56$, alpha = .79), Neuroticism ($M = 3.41$, $SD = .69$, alpha = .84), and Openness ($M = 3.62$, $SD = .58$, alpha = .80), the SRP-III ($M = 2.10$, $SD = .35$, alpha = .91), and self-esteem ($M = 7.14$, $SD = 1.02$, alpha = .88).

For the Barratt impulsivity scale ($M = 2.81$, $SD = .53$), alpha reliability was .87. To operationalize the Pit-bull personality, we standardized impulsivity and neuroticism ($r = .14$) and summed them (alpha = .83). In short, alpha reliabilities were all quite respectable.

**Borderline personality.** Borderline personality was measured using the Borderline Personality Inventory (BPI; $M = 12.52$, $SD = 7.28$) (Leichsenring, 1999). This 51-item questionnaire comprises 51 yes-no items covering six topics: 1. Identity Diffusion (e.g., “Sometimes it is difficult for me to tell, whether something really happened, or whether it occurred only in my imagination”), 2. Primitive Defense Mechanisms (e.g., “My feelings towards other people quickly change into opposite extremes”), 3. Impaired Reality Testing (e.g., “Sometimes I feel that people or things change in their appearance, when they really do not”), 4. Fear of Closeness (e.g., “If a relationship gets close, I feel trapped”), 5. Self-Harm (e.g., “I have intentionally done myself physical harm”), 6. Misconduct (e.g., “I have often stolen things”). The BPI was designed to distinguish individuals of pure borderline personality from
those that with a neurotic disorder. We used the overall score because of the low reliabilities of the subscales. In our sample, the overall alpha reliability was .87.

Results

Similar to Studies 1 and 2, 62% of the sample reported some degree of stalking behavior. Of this group, 35% reported engaging in stalking of the third kind.

Consistent with our hypothesis, we found substantial overlap between borderline personality and the Pit-bull personality ($r = .48$, $p < .01$), suggesting that they are tapping similar content. When the Pit-bull personality and borderline personality were jointly entered into a regression with stalking as the dependent variable, borderline remained a significant predictor ($\beta = .17$, $t = 2.59$, $p < .01$). The Pit-bull personality was no longer significant ($\beta = .03$, $t = .45$, $p = .65$).

Subclinical psychopathy also overlapped with two subscales of the BPI: misconduct ($r = .35$, $p < .01$) and fear of closeness ($r = .33$, $p < .01$).

Table 5 shows the associations of our personality measures with stalking and revenge behavior. As shown, stalking behavior is correlated with both subclinical psychopathy ($r = .24$, $p < .01$) and borderline personality ($r = .19$, $p < .01$).

We proceeded to regress stalking on our borderline and psychopathy measures. Both borderline personality ($\beta = .11$, $t = 1.73$, $p = .05$) and subclinical psychopathy ($\beta = .19$, $t = 2.96$, $p < .01$) are independent predictors of female stalking.

Discussion

In agreement with our hypotheses, our measures of the Pit-bull personality, borderline personality and subclinical psychopathy all predicted stalking behavior. As expected, however, the borderline and Pit-bull measures overlapped considerably and only borderline was retained in
a regression pitting the two against each other. In short, borderline personality wholly captures our Pit-bull stalker. In a follow-up regression, borderline personality and subclinical psychopathy independently predicted stalking behavior.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Our exploration of subclinical stalking began with a typology of batterers identified in the domestic violence literature by Jacobson and Gottman (1998). Those personalities, labeled the Cobra and Pit-bull, were identified as distinct categories of men with a predisposition toward domestic abuse.

That distinction proved to be heuristic in our exploration of a subclinical version of stalking, namely, unrequited romantic pursuit. In Study 1, we found that Cobras were more likely to be male and that Pit-bulls were likely to be female. Both stalker types used maladaptive coping styles. Cobras were predisposed to seeking revenge in response to transgressions. Pit-bulls were less likely to commit revenge but more likely to ruminate about their loss.

The correlational patterns for our Cobra and Pit-bull personalities match up well with those of Jacobson and Gottman’s (1998) two batterer types. Those researchers concluded that Pit-bulls were prone to rage at threats to the relationship (e.g., rejection and abandonment), and they become physiologically aroused before and during violence. Cobras, in contrast, were not emotionally dependent on their partner, but were determined to have their way.

Our results indicated a parallel distinction between the Cobra and Pit-bull’s stalking. Whereas the Cobra stalks purely to exact revenge, the borderline appears to believe that a relationship with the target of their pursuit is still possible.

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4 Cobras actually had the tendency to become physiologically calm before and during violence (Davis & Frieze, 2002).
In Study 2, our two stalking personalities continued to independently predict stalking behavior. We also addressed the possibility that our Cobra personality was little more than subclinical psychopathy. After analyses with and without the addition of dominance, we found that only subclinical psychopathy remained a significant predictor of stalking. We concluded that the Cobra personality can be subsumed under the construct of subclinical psychopathy.

Study 2 also examined the role of attachment styles in stalking behavior. In a speculative causal model, no direct effects of attachment on stalking emerged. However, attachment-related anxiety significantly predicted having a Pit-bull personality, which then predisposed an individual to stalking behavior. We also found that having attachment-related avoidance significantly predicted having a subclinical psychopathic personality, which, in turn, predisposed an individual to stalking behavior. In sum, attachment styles had small indirect effects on stalking behavior via the stalking personalities, but no direct effects on stalking.

In Study 3 we examined the possibility that the Pit-bull was essentially a borderline personality. This possibility was supported by the findings that (a) they were highly intercorrelated and (b) only borderline remained significant in a regression equation predicting stalking. The pattern is consistent with research conducted in the forensic and clinical populations (Harmon, Rosner, Owens, 1998; Meloy & Boyd, 2003; Rosenfeld & Harmon, 2002; Zona et al., 1998). It also supports Spitzberg and Veksler’s (2007) recent study where college student victims of stalking judged their stalkers to have borderline personality traits.

Even after replacing Pit-bull with borderline and Cobra with psychopathy, Study 3 showed the same pattern as in Studies 1 and 2. That is, subclinical psychopathy and borderline personality are independent predictors of female stalking behavior.
After demonstrating sex differences in Study 1, we turned our focus to female stalkers in Studies 2 and 3. The Pit-bull vs. Cobra distinction appeared to hold up even within female samples. These are the insecure borderline stalker and the vengeful psychopathic stalker. These two stalking personalities are characterized by people that have an insecure attachment style, poor impulse control and social skills, and maladaptive coping styles. They may resort to stalking because they have to try harder to attain and maintain a relationship due to their undesirable personalities. Previous research in the clinical/forensic population had found that stalkers were often single, having limited amount of experience in intimate relationships, or had a history of unstable relationships (Meloy & Boyd, 2003; Mullen, Pathé, Purcell, Stuart, 1999; Purcell et al., 2001).

*The Borderline Stalker.* Whether labeled a Pit-bull or a borderline personality, this woman appears to have a self-esteem deficit linked to insecurity about relationships. Her fears about rejection and abandonment promote dependent behavior in relationships. Emotionally unstable and impulsive, her feelings toward others quickly fluctuate between extremes of love and hate, and she often disregards potential consequences. It may be this intensity of emotion that leads to rumination and difficulty ‘letting go’ of a relationship, whether real or imagined. This same inconsistency makes the behavior of borderlines difficult to predict (Flury et al., 2008). These qualities are evident in the sample anecdote related by an insecure stalker (see example 1 in Appendix A).

*The Psychopathic Stalker.* Whether labeled a Cobra or a subclinical psychopath this woman is likely to have had a previous history of antisocial behavior. This stalker type may then go on to commit further misbehavior during the stalking process (Palarea et al., 1999).
She can be summarized as a callous, manipulative individual prone to antisocial behavior. Emotionally cold, she has difficulty with intimate personal attachment. She is likely to drive others away from her, but does not respond well to rejection. Although she may not experience as intense anger as the borderline stalker, she is more likely to exact revenge on anyone perceived to have wronged her. These qualities are evident in the anecdote provided by a vengeful stalker (see example 2 in Appendix A).

Conclusions

Unlike previous research, we asked student samples to report anonymously on their own stalking behavior. We were then able to profile the personalities that predisposed individuals to stalk. Overall, the results of our three studies support those found in the clinical and forensic literature, where those found guilty of stalking were frequently diagnosed with a DSM-based personality disorders. We conclude that, even at the subclinical level, both borderline personality and psychopathy predispose men and women to stalk.

Our most significant contribution is to the literature on female stalkers. Although their perspective as victims has been vital to earlier research, their perspective as perpetrators has been largely overlooked. Perhaps female perpetrators have been given lower priority in the clinical forensic literature because they wreak less havoc (Purcell et al., 2001). The necessity to distinguish two types of female stalkers was established. Although both eventuate in potentially malevolent behavior, the psychopathic and borderline types have unique psychological dynamics.

Our perspective can be clearly distinguished from certain others in the literature. Some view stalking as an inherent consequence of relationship dismantling (e.g., Cupach & Spitzberg, 2004). Others view stalking as an aspect of violence against women (White, Kowalski, &
Valentine, 2000). Still others argue for an evolutionary perspective: Stalking may be part of a broader aggressive mating strategy that was adaptive at some point in evolutionary history (Brüne, 2002; Buss & Duntley, 2008).

By contrast, we emphasize the importance of personality factors in relationships (see Simpson et al., 2006). Such factors predispose certain individuals, including women, to engage persist with a specific bonding target despite clear feedback to desist. As opposed to universality, we emphasize specific individual differences. In effect, we see certain individuals as stalkers in waiting.

Nonetheless, our personality emphasis does not imply that intervention is pointless. We hope that our results will help identify and ultimately help deter otherwise healthy individuals with a characteriological propensity to stalk. Our clarification of their underlying personality profiles may help in the development of tailored interventions. Understanding stalkers’ coping inadequacies and attachment deficits may provide a good starting point for counselors.

Limitations

An obvious limitation of our research is that it was conducted in college samples whose modal age was relatively young (20 years). These individuals have limited experience with intimate relationships: They may still be learning proper courtship behaviors. In an effort to act romantic, for example, they may behave in ways that are intrusive to others (Dennison, 2007; Sinclair & Frieze, 2000).

Will the same patterns of stalking hold up in older samples? Or do our findings derive from the impulsivity and emotional instability abundant in young adults? Yes, stalking rates per unit time are highest among college age individuals (Cupach & Spitzberg, 2004). Nonetheless, we suspect that our key predictors would hold up. This confidence is based on the fact that our
findings are consistent with (a) previous research in domestic violence settings and (b) other studies in forensic and clinical populations. In fact, we would argue that the added years of opportunities to stalk would yield more reliable indices in older samples, and, accordingly, yield stronger correlations with personality.

Another potential limitation derives from biases inherent in our self-report methodology. After all, perpetrators of antisocial behavior typically minimize their offenses. Indeed, two previous attempts found few students who would acknowledge stalking (Fremouw et al., 1997; Lewis et al., 2001). Interestingly, we actually found a higher percentage of self-reported stalking in our student samples (36% - 40%) than the figures previously based on victimization reports, that is, 21% (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007). We credit the higher disclosure rate to the anonymity of our web-based survey approach. This comparison is noteworthy. Counter to the usual rule, reports of stalking are higher in perpetrator reports than in victim reports. Stalking may be unique in that respect because victims may not always be aware of being stalked.

Although personality disorders may predispose one to stalk, it does not necessarily culminate in violence or even contact (Palarea et al., 1999). Nonetheless, it seems odd to construe unobtrusive stalking as a victimless crime. Further research is required to determine whether society needs to be concerned about subclinical stalking. It may foreshadow an ominous outcome or reflect nothing more than an innocuous youthful indiscretion.

Finally, some readers might question whether there is value in applying catchy terms such as Cobra and Pit-bull when, psychometrically, they reduce to subclinical versions of two well-known personality disorders. We still think so. Although the psychopathic and borderline characters have broader significance as personality disorders, their specific manifestations among stalkers is well-captured by the contrasting image of Cobras and Pit-bulls.
REFERENCES


Table 1

Study 1 – Personality correlates of stalking reported by males and females.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Personality</th>
<th>Pooled (N = 110)</th>
<th>Males (n = 42)</th>
<th>Females (n = 68)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pit-Bull</td>
<td>.24**</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>.30**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cobra</td>
<td>.16*</td>
<td>.35*</td>
<td>.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychopathy</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.25*</td>
<td>.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Dominance</td>
<td>.16*</td>
<td>.29*</td>
<td>.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Esteem</td>
<td>-.15</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>-.22*</td>
</tr>
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</table>

** p < .01, one-tailed.

* p < .05, one-tailed.
Table 2

Study 1 – Correlates of Stalking Types with Coping Styles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Personality</th>
<th>Revenge Fantasies</th>
<th>Anger Rumination</th>
<th>Avoidance</th>
<th>Reconciliation</th>
<th>Forgiveness</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pit-bull</td>
<td>.31**</td>
<td>.45**</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>-.25**</td>
<td>-.41**</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cobra</td>
<td>.61**</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>-.11</td>
<td>-.42**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

** p < .01, one-tailed.

* p < .05, one-tailed.

N=117
Table 3

Study 2 – Personality correlates of self-reported stalking by females

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Personality</th>
<th>Stalking</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Extraversion</td>
<td>.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agreeableness</td>
<td>-.18*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conscientiousness</td>
<td>-.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neuroticism</td>
<td>.16*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Openness</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cobra personality</td>
<td>.38**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pit-bull personality</td>
<td>.24*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Esteem</td>
<td>-.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attachment Anxiety</td>
<td>.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attachment Avoidance</td>
<td>.06</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

** p < .01, one-tailed
* p < .05, one-tailed

N = 92
Table 4

Study 2 – Correlations of Stalking Personalities with Attachment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Personality</th>
<th>Attachment Anxiety</th>
<th>Attachment Avoidance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cobra</td>
<td>.07</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pit-bull</td>
<td>.40**</td>
<td>.04</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

** p < .01, one-tailed.

* p < .05, one-tailed.

N = 95.
Table 5

Study 3 – Personality correlates of Stalking.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Personality</th>
<th>Stalking</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Extraversion</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agreeableness</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conscientiousness</td>
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<tr>
<td>Openness</td>
<td>-.13*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SRP-III</td>
<td>.24**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BPI</td>
<td>.19**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pit-bull</td>
<td>.13*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Esteem</td>
<td>-.09</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

** p < .01, one-tailed.
* p < .05, one-tailed.

N=290.
Figure 1

Mediational Model of Stalking

Overall
.05

Direct
-.01

AVOID
.18

SRP
.37

Stalking Behavior

ANX
.40

Pit-bull
.24

Overall
.07

Direct
-.03
Appendix A

1. Summary of a typical Cobra anecdote.

   He followed his target around the city. Whenever she noticed him, he would try to act casual and friendly. He acquired her home and email addresses and proceeded to send her love letters and emails. She was clearly not interested and rejected her. In response, when opportunity afforded, he vandalized her car by smashing the windows and scratching the sides. His letters and emails turned hostile telling her that she was a slut, and that society did not need people like her.

2. Summary of a Pit-bull anecdote.

   When rejected by the target, she was upset and infuriated. Nonetheless, she believed that the man was just unsure of what he wanted, and that they still had a chance. So she proceeded to follow the man to different pubs around the city even though he was seeing another woman. She went even further to follow him to his hometown -- a 9-hour bus trip. She asked around town to see if anyone knew him and even spoke to his father and brother. She saw him at the local bar with his girlfriend, but she didn’t believe that it was true. To make sure, she entered the man’s place and peeked in on him and his girlfriend in bed together. Nonetheless, to this day, she remains upset and harbors hope for a relationship.