



THE MEDIA CONSTRUCTION OF STALKING STEREOTYPES*

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ABSTRACT

Stalking is a phenomenon at the nexus of popular culture and criminal justice. Stalking did not exist as a crime until 1990, and in the span of less than a decade, at least four countries, and all 50 U.S. States, passed legislation criminalizing such conduct. This enormous mobilization of political and criminal justice resources was spurred on significantly by the media constructions of stalking as a public risk. These constructions capitalized on the societal fascination with celebrity, crime, and the victimization of women. The various roles the media played in constructing mythic images of stalking are contrasted with the scientific research on stalking. The discrepancies between these discourses illustrate means and motives through which the media, society, and public institutions distort popular images of empirical phenomena.

INTRODUCTION

The term "crime victim" tends to evoke a set of archetypal images: Innocence, violence, powerlessness, weaponry, and tragedy. The iconicity of these archetypes is in no small part a product of media typifications rather than the factual data of victimization. Various media are used to penetrate people's everyday lives with images that not only aid in defining what society deems relevant and true, but also in the sculpting of society itself. With techniques ranging from graphic pictures to vivid language, the media are able to reach vast audiences with any particular message or perspective. Television, newspapers, and magazines are just a few examples of media that have been investigated in order to understand their social impacts. One of the most investigated areas of media imagery is crime. From streetwalkers to stalkers, most people have prototypical images of certain types of socially "deviant" persons and criminal forms of activity, and these cognitive prototypes in turn bear varying degrees of correspondence to reality. This analysis excavates some of the correspondences between the media archetypes of stalking and the actual phenomenon of stalking.

Any effects the media have on people's views of the world are likely to be greater to the extent people rely on the media for their information on that topic. Crime is one of the arenas in which the public has traditionally relied on the media for its information. From Jack the Ripper to Al Capone to the stalking of Madonna and the murder trial of O. J. Simpson, people often rely on the media to give them an image of the criminal, the crime, and the risk and nature of victimization. The analysis presented here examines the image of the victim constructed by the media, especially in reference to the phenomenon of stalking. The images of stalking in the [End Page 128] media appear prismatic. Viewing stalking through the lenses of the media produces many different biased reflections of the phenomenon. These reflections are often reinforcing, but sometimes inconsistent. Understanding how biases and stereotypes are formed and influenced should aid in the understanding of the actual risks of victimization. It will also allow for an understanding of how a crime such as stalking is portrayed by the media and how this portrayal of the crime may affect the public conception of the crime.

The assumption that the news media somehow serve as a value-neutral or objective representation of the world in general, and crime victimization in particular, has long been discredited (Meyers, 1997). News workers inevitably operate with some form of ideology. This ideology in turn "structures the meaning of an event by providing the background assumptions used to understand what is to be treated as an event, what constitutes fact, and interpretation of that fact" (Voumvakis & Ericson, 1984, p.42). For example, Meyers (1994, p. 48) concluded that "news coverage of battering is socially distorted, rooted in assumptions, myths, and stereotypes that link it to individual and family pathology rather than to social structures and gendered patterns of control" (p. 48). Female victimization, therefore, appears to be a productive arena within which to examine the role of societal and journalistic ideology on the formulation of a stereotype such as stalking.

GATE-KEEPING CONSTRUCTIONS

Crime depictions in the media result from a multifaceted process involving many people and organizations. The fragmented origin of crime reporting has no single anchor in the "factual" world (Chermak, 1995). Although justice systems and news representatives may have a clear understanding of what crime is, the news production process can distort the image of crime, creating confusion and resulting in messages different than originally intended. News organizations and reporters monitor society for disruptions that occur within people's lives (Aust & Zillmann, 1996). Crimes, especially violent crimes, represent prototypical disruptions. "Crimes without death, blood, or battering are generally not found in the news" (Chermak, 1995, p. 70). Given the entrepreneurial and competitive nature of news organizations, it is little surprise, therefore, that the media philosophy has come to be summarized pithily as: "If it bleeds, it leads." Under the aegis of contributing to public safety, media organizations give extensive coverage of violent crime, even if the actual personal risk of violent crime is relatively minor. Violent crimes possess a high degree of sensationalistic and dramatic content (Meyers, 1997, p. 90).

Public fascination and potential identification of personal risk with such stories provide indirect guidance to media organizations in their story selection process. Newscasts take the role of messenger, providing the general public with the sensational information of the day. Newsrooms and news programs serve as gate-keepers, monitoring what is seen and heard about any given event. The media also influence public perceptions because of the required selectivity involved in media story selection. Out of the thousands of potential stories that occur every day, the gate-keeping function of media organizations extracts only some as sufficiently newsworthy to present in the appropriate and limited venues of media production (Shoemaker, 1996). The criteria by which some stories are included for broadcast or print, and others excluded, inevitably [End Page 129] reflect the priorities of the news organizations, which in turn reflect perceived priorities of the consuming media marketplace.

RHETORICAL CONSTRUCTIONS

Crimes are, among other things, narratives. As such, crime typifications in the media may follow a variety of rhetorical stylistic conventions. Crimes are also a genre of reporting, and therefore reveal certain institutional and strategic conventions:

Typically, media coverage of new crimes follows a standard pattern: (1) it typifies the crime by offering detailed accounts of particular, usually dramatic, incidents, ...; (2) it describes the crime in compelling terms ...; (3) it explains some of the crime's causes; (4) it offers interpretations of the crime's meaning and significance; and (5) coverage continues as long as the crime can be approached from fresh angles ... or until some other story demands attention (Best, 1999, p. 63).

In general, novelty and titillation potential are important factors affecting whether or not crimes are reported (Meyers, 1997). A more cynical interpretation is that the media "focus on 'hot topics' of entertainment value" until a "media frenzy develops which allows for expanded coverage of isolated and unique events. ... Isolated incidents thus become social issues and, through politicization, eventually crime problems" (Kappeler, Blumberg, & Potter, 1996, p. 6). Prototypical representations of crime tend to trade in "1) the identification and targeting of a distinct deviant population; 2) the presence of an 'innocent' or 'helpless' victim population; 3) the emergence of brave and virtuous heroes; and 4) the existence of a substantial threat to established norms, values, or traditional lifestyles" (Kappeler et al., 1996, p. 18). When males are suspects and women are victims, the story takes on greater newsworthiness (Pritchard & Hughes, 1997), perhaps because it resonates with larger cultural narratives. Such news not only conforms to cultural myths, but assists in enforcing them as well (Altheide, 1997). Cultural narratives of crime serve the function of

providing warnings and suggestions for personal risk management and sense making (Wachs, 1988).

Other narrative rhetorical conventions can subtly affect impressions of a crime. For example, whether reports are primarily derived from police rather than directly from the victims can affect the personalization of the crime. Word choice can affect attribution of responsibility. Reporting in rape cases that a victim was "taking a shortcut through a ravine late at night, hitchhiking [sic], accepting a ride home from a stranger, dressing provocatively, leaving her door unlocked, drinking alone in a bar, sunbathing in a secluded area by herself, and taking a man home from a bar" may seem descriptively incidental, but by implication suggest the victims' role in their own victimization (Voumvakis & Ericson, 1984, p. 23). In a story about a murder-suicide, Meyers (1994) points out that the husband was portrayed as "obsessive" and had a difficult time dealing with the separation from his wife. Such language removes partial blame from the husband's shoulders. In contrast, being obsessive and having a difficulty with separation lend themselves to the explanation that he could not control himself and was driven to shoot both himself and his estranged wife. A content analysis of newspaper reports of domestic violence found that 47.8 percent "suggested at least one motivation or excuse for the perpetrator" (Bullock & Cubert, 2002, p. 484). [End Page 130]

Voumvakis and Ericson's (1984) study of newspaper accounts of attacks on women indicated predominant attributions were:

- 1) to the victim, especially in terms of how victim precautions can serve as a major device for crime prevention; 2) to the criminal justice system, especially how more and improved laws, policing, and punishment is another major crime prevention device; and
- 3) to offender pathology, especially how there is a need to identify and control "dangerous" individuals in society (p. 43).

The tendency to identify the pathological villain and the helpless victim in such crime stories serves several rhetorical functions. "The archetypes are social predators not bound or restrained in any way by normal social rules and values. In contrast, the media portray victims of crime as passive and helpless" (Surette, 1998, p. 40). As such, (1) anyone may be a victim, especially if that person plays an unwitting role in eliciting victimization, (2) increased law enforcement and personal attention to protection are needed, and (3) attention to ongoing media coverage is vital to stay apprised of the risks of such a crime.

AUDIENCE CONSTRUCTIONS

Another arena in which media typifications are constructed, and indirectly reinforced, is in the public's perceptions of the media reports. Crimes such as rape, murder, and robbery evoke strong images in the media consuming public that reflect various cultural, ethnic, and gender-based stereotypes. Such public stereotypes serve to filter what is processed when the media report crime stories, and indirectly feed back to the media organizations' values regarding what the public "wants."

Furthermore, in an increasingly complex communication environment, the public cannot process all available information and news. To manage the deluge of information in the environment, people develop cognitively efficient schemata for processing sensory stimuli. "Perceptions and judgments are subject to distortion because of shortcuts... [that is,] fast and expedient paradigms used to cognitively cope with massive amounts or fast-paced information" (Aust & Zillermann, 1996). When crime narratives are distributed to the mass public, the value orientations of these narratives are filtered through millions of personal schemata, and subsequently through millions of informal interpersonal conversations in which new versions are negotiated, reinforced, and passed on to others.

In such information rich environments, media consumers may increasingly rely on the media to structure and simplify reality into more manageable forms. For example, heavy consumption of sexual images appears to decrease sensitivity toward sexual aggression victims (MacKay & Covell, 1997), and repeated exposure to filmed violence against women similarly produces desensitization effects (Dexter, Penrod, Linz, & Saunders, 1997). Gender role stereotypes portrayed in the media coexist with gender stereotypes in society (Signorielli, 1989), and these stereotypes in turn interact with stereotypes of crime and victimization. Rape tends to be portrayed as perpetrated by sadistic, psychopathic, or disturbed persons preying on the relatively helpless (Bufkin & Eschholz, 2000). [End Page 131]

The similarity media consumers perceive with reported crime victims plays a role in how people attribute blame to a

victim. "A person who sees herself as personally similar to the victim and thus a potential victim will attribute catastrophe to chance or some other factor, and not the victim" (Dexter et al., 1997, p. 2151). The more similar a victim is to a person, the less likely the person is to attribute responsibility of the crime to the victim. Contrariwise, the less the victim is similar to the person, the more likely the person will attribute blame to the victim. Importantly, desensitization, which can be strongly influenced by media typifications and exposure, appears to mediate women's empathy with victims of violence (Dexter et al., 1997). Similarly, males exposed to sexually objectifying films appear less sympathetic to rape victims than males not exposed to such films (Millburn, Mather, & Conrad, 2000).

The finding that similarity between a victim and a perceiver affects the perceiver's attribution of blame has at least three implications. First, although most crime stories mention neither the race nor the socio-economic status of the victim, among those stories that do, most victims are reported as white and middle to upper class (Kappeler et al., 1996; Meyers, 1994). Therefore, media consumers who do not identify with these victims are less likely to be sensitized to the victim, and thereby, to the crime itself. Second, the media can bring unfavorable aspects about a victim to light. This can have the effect of diffusing attributed responsibility for the crime, allowing people to be less empathetic to victims of crimes and implicitly creating a climate of tolerance toward the violence itself. For example, to the extent that stalking victims are portrayed as celebrities, the media consumers may not internalize either empathy or sense of personal risk. Third, and related, relevant parties can distance themselves both from the crime and the societal agenda that would seek to regulate the crime. For example, "the very common view that men who rape, murder, or otherwise commit acts of violence against women are 'sick' or in some way pathological ignores the social roots of this violence.... The representation of the assailant as a monster or psychopath also allows men to distance themselves from the perpetrators of these crimes" (Meyers, 1997, p. 10). Thus, for example, to the extent stalkers are portrayed as obsessed, delusional, or mentally ill, the public may distance their own courtship activities from such crazed and deviant actions, thereby licensing their own intrusive behaviors, and not seeking protection or redress against such actions from others.

In regard to crime, the more unusual the crime, the more media exposure it tends to receive (Meyers, 1997). This leads to a media paradox. The media tend to report highly unusual, unlikely, but vivid events that nevertheless provide a "disproportionate influence on ... subsequent judgments through their increased memorial availability" (Ruscio, 2000, p.22). Media consumers not only find such reports interesting, but their enhanced memorial availability and sensational nature make such stories more likely to be reproduced in everyday conversation with others. Such interpersonal effects thereby serve to reinforce the selective biases of the media. Thus, the media are selective in what they portray of reality, what they portray reflects both organizational ideologies and cultural stereotypes, and these biases are in many ways reinforced through public interpersonal processes of conversational topical reproduction.

In one of the clearest evidences of the mediated construction of reality, research has repeatedly shown that media consumption is significantly correlated with biased perceptions of personal risk of crime victimization. That is, because crime is more likely than other events to end up being portrayed in the media, heavy media consumers tend to perceive personal risks of [End Page 132] crime victimization that are many times greater than their actual statistical risk (Chiricos, Eschholz, & Gertz, 1997; O'Keefe & Reid-Nash, 1987). This enculturation effect suggests that the proportion of media exposure to crime enabled by content selection processes shapes the domain of relevance in people's minds, thereby restricting alternative interpretations of reality.

MEDIA EFFECTS ON REALITY

News media use statistics in order to get across the importance of a crime or newsworthy event. Yet researchers have found that the media often misrepresent the numbers, or otherwise bias how the numbers are presented and, therefore, interpreted by the consumer. For example, perhaps due to an understanding of recency effects, percentages and rates of crime are usually cited toward the end of a story (Berger, 1998). Furthermore, especially in reference to crime, the most dramatic estimates tend to be selected rather than the most conservative numbers. One study, for example, concluded that the media foster the perception that crime rates are constantly increasing, and even downplaying the amount of nonviolent crime (Kappeler et al., 1996). The media in particular appear to be eager and complicit partners with police and political bodies in the construction of "crime waves" (e.g., Brownstein, 1996). Such exaggerations help make a story more newsworthy and interesting. Exaggeration raises viewers' concern and allows the media to spend more time or space on the events (Glassner, 1999).

The media both systematically and unsystematically distort the images they relay to society, for example, in portraying an "epidemic of violent crime" (Kappeler et al., 1996, p.48). Yet, the media use such fear evoking images because they invoke a preexisting framework of expectations in which people identify with potential victims and are able to attribute such problems to manageable causes (Altheide & Michalowski, 1999). Apparently, "the success of a scare depends not only on how well it is expressed, but also...on how well it expresses deeper cultural anxieties" (Glassner, 1999, p. 208).

In parallel to the maxim, "if it bleeds, it leads," it seems to follow that "if it terrorizes, it mesmerizes."

THE MEDIA PORTRAYALS OF STALKING

By any historical measure, stalking is a paradigm example of social and media construction of a crime. Despite the occurrence of stalking since antiquity (Kamir, 2001), it was not recognized as a crime until California passed an anti-stalking law in 1990. Indeed, the media appear responsible for the labeling of the crime itself (Keenahan & Barlow, 1997; Lawson-Cruttenden, 1996). Despite a lack of any scientific evidence of widespread prevalence or risk in society at the time, and in the murky legal context of prohibiting behaviors that may be constitutionally protected (Hueter, 1997), in less than a decade all 50 states in the U.S. passed some form of anti-stalking legislation. The media played no small part in this avalanche of political activity in a context best known for a more glacial pace of social reform. "The new language of stalking was born in the sensationalism of the media who first appropriated the term stalker to name the persistent pursuers of celebrities. . . . Now stalking forms part of legal and scientific discourses as well as having acquired a privileged status among the descriptors of our society's categories of fear" (Mullen, Pathé, & Purcell, 2000, p. 1). Stalking has generated at least three interrelated domains of discourse: Popular (media), legal, and scientific (Lowney & Best, 1995; Mullen et al., 2000). These discourses will be analyzed as they inform, or fail to [End Page 133] inform, each other. First, a couple of specific instances of claims about stalking located at the nexus of these domains are examined for their lack of substance. Second, the research literature on stalking is briefly summarized so as to provide a point of contrast to the media portrayals of stalking. Third, some general critiques regarding media typifications of stalking are presented.

CASE STUDIES IN CONSTRUCTING THE STALKING PROBLEM¹

One of the most oft-cited claims about stalking is that 90 percent of women who are killed by former intimates were stalked prior to the murder (see Table 1). This statistic has been reconstituted in hearings before Congress, in the popular press, and extensively in law review articles on stalking legislation. If the credibility of a statistic is in any way based upon its repetition, this "finding" must be true. In an attempt to trace the origins of this statistic, several steps were pursued. First, available databases and search engines were employed to locate any additional information that could provide leads to this statistic's original source. The additional articles found through these search engines proved to be of no use for this purpose. Second, an attempt was made to locate the original person quoted for this statistic. Its derivations always seemed to lead back to William S. Cohen, Ruth Micklem, or Melinda Beck (who first quoted Micklem). The trail turned out to be more circuitous than any precise and oft-quoted statistic ought to be. Examining references to this statistic, the earliest sources appeared to be from one of two primary candidates: (1) studies reported to Congress, or (2) an interview in a popular news magazine.

The "Detroit and Kansas City" Link. Senator Cohen (1993) claimed in testimony during the Judiciary Committee on Anti-stalking Legislation in 1992 that "There are studies in Detroit and Kansas City that reveal that some 90 percent of all those who are murdered by their intimate partners called the police at least once, and more than half have called five times or more" (p. 8). Best (1999) later surmised that this claim was casually reinterpreted to imply that if calls were made, the victims were being stalked. He correctly noted the fallacy of the inference, given that calls can be made in reference to a current cohabitant, which strains the definition of stalking.

As it turns out, Senator Cohen took liberties with his representation of the studies from Kansas City and Detroit. A focused search of *Criminal Justice Abstracts* eventually yielded the source of Cohen's mysterious statistic. A study published by the Police Foundation (Wilt et al., 1977) investigated police involvement in domestic violence situations in Kansas City and Detroit. The Kansas City study revealed, based on 1970 and 1971 data, that 95 percent (in 1970) and 84 percent (1971) of homicides had previous disturbance calls to the same address, with 52 percent (1970) and 46 percent (1971) having been called to the address five or more times. For aggravated assaults, 87 percent (1970) and 81 percent (1971) had previous disturbance calls, with 50 percent (1970 & 1971) involving five or more calls to the same address. However, in the post-episode interviews, "close to half of the homicide and assault sample reported that they had never called the police for a disturbance" (p. 32). The Detroit data were even more mixed. Of 144 assault victims interviewed, 56 percent indicated they had been victims of previous conflict-based assaults and had reported these assaults to the police. Based on interviews of the perpetrators, only four percent of the homicide cases reported previous calls to the police. [End Page 134]

Contrary to Cohen's testimony, therefore, (1) the data are not entirely consistent across both "Detroit and Kansas City," (2) the actual statistic is closer to 85 percent rather than 90 percent in Kansas City, and closer to 56 percent in Detroit, (3) the data refer to both domestic assault and homicide, thereby confounding the far more serious crime of murder with all domestic assaults, (4) the data were two decades old when Cohen reported them, (5) the data could only

be linked to an address, and therefore could not be specified according to a "victim" or "perpetrator" in terms of who initiated the call, and (6) the data quite enigmatically suggest that the assaults and homicides were potentially relational, in that there was no difference in calls due to "victim" or "offender" status. Indeed, interviews in the Detroit data led to the conclusion that "in 145 (45.5 percent) of the homicides resulting from arguments, the victims initiated the conflicts, while offenders did so in 123 (38.6 percent) instances. In another 26 (8.3 percent) cases, victims and offenders together started the trouble, while in 25 (7.8 percent) cases someone other than offenders or victims did so" (p. 36). The relational instigation and reciprocity implicit in these latter findings seem ill suited to the attribution of stalking. Thus, although the "Detroit and Kansas City" studies are intriguing in their potential relevance to stalking, they require an excessive amount of extrapolation to be directly evidentiary. Furthermore, as is indicated below, these studies ultimately were clearly revealed not to be the source of the actual statistic in question.

The "Virginians against Domestic Violence" Link. The original source for the 90 percent quote turned out to be Ruth Micklem in an article in *Newsweek*, written by reporters Beck et al. (1992). After this article's debut, Micklem's statistic was subsequently cited in many other articles (see Table 1). In the article by Beck et al., Micklem was quoted as co-director of Virginians Against Domestic Violence (VADV). An internet search eventually yielded contact information for the VADV, including Micklem's office phone number, fax number, and e-mail. Ruth Micklem was contacted, whereupon the following conversation ensued, as reconstructed from the interviewer's¹ notes of the conversation:

"Hello, this is Ruth, what can I do for you?"

"Hi my name is Marian and I am assisting my professor who is a behavioral scientist currently involved in studying the area of stalking..."

"Oh, yes?"

"Are you the Ruth Micklem who gave the statistic of 90 percent..."

Micklem immediately recognized where the inquiry was going. She claimed having received hundreds of calls on the *Newsweek* statistic ever since it had been published. She apologetically explained that the statistic is basically an inaccurate extrapolation. "There is no study whatsoever that the figure was derived from because there was no study anywhere in the country at that time [concerning stalking]." The 90 percent figure was merely the response to the reporter's question: "How many of the women that you work with are stalked?" [End Page 135]

In short, this statistic, which has been cited repeatedly, is at best based on an offhand judgment regarding women who are not necessarily murdered and associated with a particular organization and with a highly self-selected population. Indeed, the only hard empirical data available through standard search engines appear in three recent studies. Moracco, Runyon and Butts (1998) found that 23.4 percent of femicide cases had experienced "stalking" prior to the incident. McFarlane et al. (1999) found that 76 percent of femicide and 85 percent of attempted femicide cases involved "at least one episode of stalking within 12 months of the violent incident" (p. 308). Morton, Runyon, Moracco and Butts (1998) conducted a study of partner murder-suicides. In the prototypical episode, 45 percent experienced partner separation or attempted separation as a precursor, and one third of victims had sought protection from the legal system in the form of a restraining order or arrest warrant. "In nearly 70 percent of cases in which the victim and perpetrator were separated, the perpetrator had harassed, followed, or otherwise monitored the activities of the victim in the weeks or days preceding the homicide-suicide event" (p. 96). The evidence of pre-murder stalking appears to be 70 percent of 45 percent, or 32 percent in this admittedly rather specialized sample. Thus, repetition and emphasis of startling quotes such as "90 percent of women murdered by their partner were stalked" illustrate the complicit discourses of the media, legal, and expert domains in the construction of crime myths (Kappeler et al., 1996). Stalking would hardly seem to need embellishment, but receives it nonetheless.

THE SCIENCE OF STALKING

Statistics originally produced as an "educated guess" by the profiler and clinical psychologist Park Deitz during congressional hearings made it into the popular press (Mullen et al., 2000). Specifically, he estimated that there were as many as 200,000 stalkers in the U.S., and that as many as 1 in 20 women would be stalked in their lifetime. These estimates began taking on a life of their own in all three discourses – popular, scientific and legal (Best, 1999, p. 52;

Lowney & Best, 1995, p. 42; Mullen et al., 2000, p. 29). That the media would latch on to such precise guesses is not surprising, because a decade ago there was virtually no scientific research on stalking.

As of this writing, there are over 100 studies available across several countries. Reviews of this research, as well as descriptive meta-analytic data on stalking studies, reveal the following picture of the stalking phenomenon (Spitzberg, in press; Spitzberg & Cupach, 2001, 2002, in press). Across studies, approximately 21 percent of people have been stalked or obsessively pursued to some degree. The more that fear or threat are required as definitional elements of pursuit to consider it stalking, the lower this percentage gets. Women (approximately 24 percent) appear victimized more than men (approximately 11 percent), but this difference tends to disappear in younger, college-based samples (e.g., Spitzberg, Nicastro & Cousins, 1998; Spitzberg & Rhea, 1999). Proportionately about 75 percent of all stalking victims are female, and about 25 percent of all victims are male, although again there are exceptions based upon sampling method and type of sample. A representative adult sample found high proportions of men stalking men, although little is yet understood about what this finding means (Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998). Finally, approximately 75 percent of victims are acquainted with their pursuer, and about 25 percent of pursuers are former romantic partners. Only about a fifth to a quarter of pursuers are complete strangers or unknown to the victim. If the early estimates of societal risk [End Page 136] were significantly biased, the accuracy of other media representations of stalking deserve examination.

MEDIA TYPIFICATIONS OF STALKING

To date, surprisingly there have been no general surveys of the public's beliefs or stereotypes of stalking, and there has been only one systematic content analysis designed to examine trends in media reporting of stalking (Lowney & Best, 1995). There are several stereotypes that nevertheless appear to litter the media landscape. The most prominent stereotypes, often closely interrelated, seem to be that (1) stalking is a particular problem of celebrity, (2) stalkers tend to be strangers, (3) stalking is a gendered crime, (4) stalkers tend to be mentally disturbed and dangerous, and (5) stalking is mutually exclusive of normal courtship.

Stalking as Celebriphilic. Prior to 1989-1990, stalking legally did not exist, and was rhetorically constructed under the aegis of harassment, obsession, and psychological rape (Lowney & Best, 1995, p. 37). However, with the sensationalistic media coverage of the stalking murder of actress Rebecca Schaeffer, along with the association of this crime in the public and media with Theresa Saldana, Jodie Foster, and several, non-celebrity stalking murders in Southern California, watershed "anti-stalking" legislation was passed in California.

In their study of media typifications of stalking, Lowney and Best (1995) note: "During 1989 and 1990, national magazine articles and television broadcasts presented 16 typifying examples of stalking; 11 (69 percent) involved celebrity victims" (p. 39). An article in *Entertainment Weekly* illustrates the continued lack of connection between media reports of stalking and the actual phenomenon. In the wake of the murder of Robert Blake's wife Bonny Bakley, the article examined "inappropriate pursuit in the entertainment industry." In a surprising twist, it claimed that these people "are not stalkers" because "unlike stalkers and groupies, people like Bakley generally don't develop crushes on the stars they pursue — it's fame itself that flames their desires" (Svetkey, 2001, p.44, 47). This claim is odd in several respects. First, it suggests that stalking tends to be motivated by romantic "crushes." Studies show, however, that as a population stalkers have many motives, including revenge, attention, romance, and fantasy (see Spitzberg & Cupach, 2001, 2002, in press). Second, the report seems to imply that stalking is defined motivationally rather than behaviorally. The motive behind unwanted pursuit, presuming the pursuit is intentional, is largely irrelevant to its criminality. Regardless, media reports eventually moved away from a dominant image of stalkers as exclusively experiencing "celebriphilia" (Svetkey, 2001). It is a good bet that any episode of stalking of any prominent celebrity, whether in politics, entertainment, or sports, would receive media attention, whereas stalking among non-celebrities likely would not be covered, short of a serious attendant crime (e.g., kidnapping, murder, etc.). Despite the allure of celebrity for both stalkers and the media, Lowney and Best (1995) found that reports in the media between 1992-1994 occurred far more frequently than in previous years, and stalking was finally depicted as something that affects the public at large.

Stalking as the Return of the Stranger. A corollary of the celebriphilic stereotype is the mythic image of violent crime in general: The lurking stranger lying in wait to inflict harm on the unsuspecting victim. Indeed, people appear to believe there is greater risk of danger from [End Page 137] strangers than from intimates (Harris & Miller, 2000). The media equip the public with a stereotypical stalker profile. In the early period of popular media reporting of stalking (1989-1991), victims were most likely to be portrayed as celebrities (Lowney & Best, 1995). The image of stalking seems to persist of "a cunning stranger who has targeted an innocent victim for prey" (Kappeler et al., 1996, p. 96). This image seems to represent a corrupted vision of courtship, in which love is disjunctive and exploitative in nature. "The public is captivated by the idea of a total stranger becoming obsessed with a victim" (Hall, 1998, p. 114). If love with a stranger is often romanticized in popular culture (e.g., romance novels), love from a dangerous stranger may

evoke deeper fantasies of taboo and risk in an otherwise culturally preferred courtship process.

Stalking as Gendered. One of the notable shifts in media portrayals of stalking is that victims are typically depicted as female while stalkers are typically depicted as male (Lowney & Best, 1995). This shift invokes common societal stereotypes about the nature of criminality and victimization. Combined with the early portrayals of stalking, "the most popular image is that of a celebrity who is stalked by a crazed fan or a battered woman who has left a physically abusive relationship and is now being stalked by the ex-lover" (Hall, 1998, p.114). The research, indeed, clearly shows that stalking is a fairly gendered activity. Approximately 75-80 percent of stalking victims are female and approximately 75-80 percent of stalkers are male (Spitzberg, in press). Research in some populations, however, shows relatively no or small sex differences in either the victimization by, or perpetration of, unwanted pursuit (e.g., Adams, Pitre & Smith, 2001; Brownstein, 2001; Langhinrichesen-Rohling, Palarea, Cohen, & Rohling, 2000; Logan, Leukefeld & Walker, 2000; Sinclair & Frieze, 2000; Spitzberg & Cupach, 2001, 2002; Spitzberg, Nicastro & Cousins, 1998; Spitzberg & Rhea, 1999). It seems that Hollywood pursues some movies that depict stalking episodes in ways that violate these gender stereotypes, such as showing a female stalking a male (e.g., *Fatal Attraction*), a female stalking a female (e.g., *Single White Female*), or a male stalking a male (e.g., *The Fan*). Such depictions may be viewed as sensational precisely because they violate traditional gender stereotypes for such a crime.

The media also portray stalking as relatively premeditated and, therefore, the victims as relatively helpless (Kappeler et al., 1996). The image of the helpless victim is consistent with both common stereotypes of women as reactive rather than proactive in courtship, and as less capable of taking care of themselves and in need of protection. In a potential double bind, another common stereotype is that women victims of violent crimes, especially sexual crimes, "ask for it" by the way they dress, or how much alcohol they may consume enables many to distance themselves from victims of violent crimes (Cuklanz, 1996). These stereotypes are not very consistent with the actual research on stalking that shows approximately 75 percent deriving from the context of existing relationships, the majority of which were previously intimate (Meloy, 1996; Spitzberg, in press). That is, stalking emerges from contexts in which the participants often pursued voluntarily and comfortably a mutually preferred relationship, which only later became exploitative, potentially due to mutually reinforced problems in the relationship.

Stalking as Psychopathic and Violent. Lowney and Best (1995) found in their content analysis of early reports of stalking (circa 1989-1990) that "claimsmakers depicted star-stalkers [End Page 138] as mentally disturbed, inappropriately obsessed with their celebrity victims" (p. 39). Later (mid-1990s), stalking was most likely to be depicted as leading to homicide, suggesting that the "if it bleeds, it leads" priority took over once the crime was no longer as novel and unusual in the public consciousness. The movie industry capitalizes on the fears and curiosities evoked by the images of mental disturbance and violence (e.g., *Pacific Heights*, *The Body Guard*, *The Thin Line Between Love and Hate*, *Stalked*). Such sensationalistic dramas reflect, and may reinforce, news reporting biases of reporting more on the glamorous, thrilling aspects of stalking than on the common, more normative, aspects of the crime. Research shows that stalkers brought to the attention of law enforcement do commonly have psychological disorders (see Meloy, 1996, 1999; Meloy & Gothard, 1995; Meyers, 1997). However, to date there is substantial evidence that processes of unwanted pursuit, even often threatening pursuit, occur in relatively "normal" populations (Cupach & Spitzberg, 1998; Cupach & Spitzberg, 2000; Spitzberg, in press). Intersecting with the previous stereotypes, these data indicate that victims of stalking have less to fear from strangers than from intimates.

Stalking as Clearly Distinguishable from Courtship. At the same time the media horrify stalking, the media ironically tend to glorify stalking-like actions. Romance narratives commonly entail romantic idealizations and adventurous endeavors overcoming great odds and involving great personal sacrifice, as the one obsessed with another invests in a campaign of pursuit despite the rejections by the object of affection (de Becker, 1997). Reflecting a common cultural romantic theme that persistence in courtship eventually pays off (Lowney & Best, 1995, p. 50), stalkers' Quixotic quests are given vivid narrative life. Indeed, that the average duration of stalking tends to be approximately two years (Spitzberg, in press) indicates persistence is a hallmark of stalking and unwanted pursuit. Consequently, actions romanticized as persistence may in many cases exceed the boundaries of propriety. Research demonstrates that even relatively mild to moderate forms of unwanted pursuit and intrusion are often perceived as threatening (Cupach & Spitzberg, 2000). Thus, glorifying such events in the media makes identifying them for the public at large a more difficult task.

DISCUSSION

Several interrelated media-fostered stereotypes of violent crime in general, and stalking in particular, have been suggested by this analysis. By way of summary, it appears that the media create, or at least reinforce, the following portrayals: Stalking is celebriphilic; Stalkers are strangers; Stalking is gendered; Stalkers are disturbed; Stalking is violent; and Stalking is culturally deviant. Specifically, stalking is portrayed as threatening and violent, despite data

that suggest violence occurs in a minority of stalking relationships. Stalking is portrayed as a product of sick, psychopathic individuals, despite data indicating that most stalking results from preexisting relationships, suggesting the relative normality of the perpetrators. Stalking is often portrayed as a social and cultural aberration, something bizarre and deviant. Yet, stalking itself is little more than an extreme version of existing norms and rituals of courtship. Stalking is portrayed as a highly gendered crime, in which women are at higher risk and threat than males, and males are portrayed as the primary perpetrator. While data support the statistical norms for this stereotype, and despite some notable Hollywood exceptions (e.g., *The Fan*, *Fatal Attraction*, the stalking of Steven Spielberg, David Letterman, etc.), in general women are portrayed as the more prototypical victim, and at much greater risk, and men are portrayed as the prototypical [End Page 139] perpetrator. Such stereotypes may ultimately undermine the possibility, let alone the credibility, of male victims and female perpetrators. Finally, stalking continues to be associated with stars and status. In part, simply because those with high status are more likely to be considered newsworthy, stalking stories will disproportionately imply this link. In the process, however, the vastly more common stalking of the far more common person becomes a relatively hidden crime.

An important caveat to any attempt at depicting media typifications and trends is that there is the risk of over-generalizing the over-generalizations. The media are far from univocal in their activities and tendencies. Furthermore, while "it is too simplistic to seek a mono-dimensional stereotype of a victim, so too is it too simplistic to seek a mono-dimensional stereotype of a stalker" (Keenahan & Barlow, 1997, p. 294). Thus, an effort has been made to reflect some of the complexity of the process of media portrayals. To characterize any tendency in the media as a whole is a process fraught with ironic potential.

Examining stalking under the light of previous research literature that examines crime depictions in the media allows for an understanding of how stalking is often misunderstood by society. For example, in Great Britain Sheridan and Davies (2001) compared legislative definitions of stalking with public perceptions of stalking, and found significant differences between the two. In another study, subjects clearly distinguished stalking from non-stalking behaviors, and the clusters identified were viewed as "constituents of stalking as recently portrayed by the media" (Sheridan, Gillett & Davies, 2000, p. 276). However, these authors also found that verbal forms of pursuit and intrusion were largely lacking from people's perceptions of stalking, and concluded that only 20 of the 40 behaviors examined achieved greater than 70 percent shared agreement as stalking behaviors. Hills and Taplin (1997) found in an experimental scenario study that females tend to perceive stalking behaviors as less threatening than males, a finding suggested by Tjaden, Thoennes, and Allison's (2000) report that men who meet the legal definition of being victims of stalking are less likely to view themselves as stalking victims. Perhaps most telling is that police, who should be far more informed than the average person, face many difficulties responding to stalking cases (Spitzberg, 2002). One study presented a stalking scenario to police officers and only slightly over half of them considered treating it as a stalking incident (Farrell, Weisburd & Wyckoff, 2000). A study of actual case files found that out of 285 domestic violence police reports containing narrative elements of stalking, only one resulted in a formal charge of stalking (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000).

Some have suggested that there are powerful institutional forces at work to "manufacture" victims and victimization (e.g., Dineen, 1996). Indeed, it has been argued that it was the intense media attention to stalking that created sufficient public consciousness to find "political expression in a series of anti-stalking laws" (Mullen et al., 2000, p. 11). "New crimes offer government officials opportunities for media coverage; ..." and experts, activists, and the media thereby obtain visibility and resources (Best, 1999, p. 67). The argument of self-interested manufacture of public policy, however, appears largely based on two important assumptions. First, it is assumed that economic motives (e.g., law enforcement budgets, political agendas to pander to public interest in the rhetoric of safe streets, psychologists' profit motive in maintaining a steady stream of clients, etc.) equate to actual political collusion in creating victims *ex nihilo*. Second, such an institutional collusion hypothesis assumes that estimates and diagnoses of victimization are exaggerated relative to the facts. The first assumption seems [End Page 140] paranoid *a priori*, and is not evidenced by actual exemplars of collusive discourse or paper trails. The second assumption, even if true, hardly denies the existence of a large number of victims, whether counted in the thousands, tens of thousands, or millions. In short, as Spitzberg (1999) suggested in his meta-analysis of studies of rape and sexual coercion prevalence, even if the estimates are lower than some studies and authors have claimed, the best estimates summarized across almost 100 studies still make it obvious that the problems are real and significant enough to stop debating *whether* there is a problem (Spitzberg, in press).

One of the obvious biases in the media typifications of stalking is that reporters' crime beats are dominated by police as information sources about crime (Chermak, 1995). Yet, research reveals that women consistently experience gender-specific difficulties in their experiences with police as a source of assistance with their victimization (e.g., Chaudhuri & Daly, 1992; Fischer & Rose, 1995; Gondolf, McWilliams, Hart, & Stuehling, 1994; Kaci, 1994; Keilitz, Davis, Efkeman, Flango & Hannaford, 1998; Klein, 1996; Spitzberg, in press; Wallace & Kelty, 1995; Zoellner et al., 2000).

Victims often are sufficiently traumatized by their experience that they neither seek nor want greater exposure under the media spotlight. [Lowney and Best \(1995\)](#) found that medical, mental health, and legal, criminal justice experts were far more likely to be cited as authorities in stalking reports than were women's victims movement experts. Furthermore, [Chermak's \(1995\)](#) research on crime reports showed that "psychological effects were mentioned in approximately one percent of the sampled stories" (p. 70). In short, stalking reporting is likely to be framed from a law enforcement perspective rather than a victims' perspective. Such a bias may emphasize issues of motive, method, and narrative rather than elaborate victims' sense-making and coping in the face of such unwanted pursuit.

Thus, the official version of crimes often come only from the police, or from clinical psychologists, who have a motive and a worldview to construct crimes as non-routine and products of sick, pathological, and unpredictable individuals. Once again, this would seem to distort the "normality" of stalking in society, and the extent to which it may at once be both a crime perpetrated by men and women, and yet a crime that allows men to terrorize women through routine stalking activities so long as they do not cross the intangible lines that would elicit police response. Police can only report on crimes that come to their attention, and only the most egregious stalking crimes are likely to come to their attention, which are also likely to be those stalking crimes that involve women as victims and psychologically disturbed, male perpetrators. Furthermore, men may be embarrassed to report stalking victimization, especially if it is at the hands of a woman. Such victimization may be considered emasculating by men. This permits men in society to (1) distance themselves and their own mundane relational intrusions from the crime of stalking, and (2) be deterred from ever seeking police intervention in their own stalking victimizations for fear that such incidents would not be regarded as real crimes. At the same time, (3) women would still be likely to experience a background of everyday terrorism by the realization that the next man they say hello to may be a psychopath as depicted in the media ([Brockway & Heath, 1998](#); [Ferraro, 1996](#); [Kelly & DeKeseredy, 1994](#); [Stanko, 1985, 1990](#)).

As a potentially paradoxical contrast, once a crime of stalking has come to the attention of the police and media, subsequent instances of arrest, sentencing, and imprisonment are all disproportionately likely to suggest a veil of regulated order and protection. By contrast, in **[End Page 141]** fictional crime shows "estimates put the solution rate on television at greater than 90 percent" ([Surette, 1998, p. 21](#)). Only a relatively small fraction of all stalking is likely to be reported to police, subsequently prosecuted, and subsequently resulting in actual punishment of the perpetrator (e.g., [Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998](#)). Indeed, it is difficult to locate cases of romantic stalking reported in the media in which the perpetrator was not already apprehended at the time of the report.

One area for future research will be investigation of media effects due to format of presentation. For example, [Chermak \(1995\)](#) reports that television and newspapers differed in their coverage of crimes in a variety of ways. Crime was the second most covered topic on television news, but fifth in newspapers. But certain stages of crimes are more visual, and thus more likely to be covered by television (e.g., police investigation) relative to what is covered by newspapers (e.g., court proceedings). Given the extended time period and intentionally stealthy nature of stalking, it may be a relatively "non-visual" crime unless it ends in a particularly violent manner. Sensational stalking events may be covered more by television, and less violent, routine stalking events may be more covered by newspapers. To the extent that television continues to dominate newspapers as a primary source of news, such a difference between media in their coverage of stalking may perpetuate the sensationalistic stereotypes regarding stalking processes.

A second important arena for research is to conduct random and representative samples of media reports of stalking. These data could then be systematically coded for narrative content and structures, as well as visual content. Such analyses, especially if sensitive to time, could reveal whether stalking reportage has, indeed, evolved (e.g., [Lowney & Best, 1995](#)). Furthermore, if these analyses could then be yoked to public opinion surveys regarding fear of stalking as a crime, then a much more comprehensive picture could emerge regarding the role that media and their consumers play in the co-construction of crime stereotypes.

Research is only now coming to grips with the need for scientifically reliable information on stalking, only slightly beyond a decade after the crime splashed onto the headlines and television screens of American culture (e.g., [Meloy, 1999](#); [Mullen et al., 2000](#); [Spitzberg, in press](#); [Spitzberg & Cupach, 2001, 2002, in press](#)). It is never easy to strip away fact from myth in the domain of media portrayals, as all such efforts come from an ideological position that interacts imperceptibly with the ideological positions being critiqued. Such efforts, however, provide vital insight both into the process of media influence of public perception, and into the phenomena portrayed, such as stalking.

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TABLE 1
EXEMPLARS OF A MYTHIC STATISTIC

Beck et al. (1992, July 12, p. 61): "Nearly one third of all women killed in America are murdered by their husbands or boyfriends, and, says Ruth Micklem, codirector of Virginians Against Domestic Violence, as many as 90 percent of them have been stalked."

Holmstrom (1992, Dec. 22, p. 1): "Of all those women murdered by their ex-husbands or boyfriends, studies indicate that 90 percent had called the police at least once for protection, and more than half had called five times or more."

Geberth (1992, p. 139): "According to Ruth Micklem, co-director of Virginians Against Domestic Violence, 'Nearly one third of all women killed in America are murdered by their husbands or boyfriends, and as many as 90 percent of them have been stalked.' (*Newsweek*, July 13, 1992).

Cohen (1993, p. 8): "There are studies in Detroit and Kansas City that reveal that some 90 percent of all those who are murdered by their intimate partners called the police at least once, and more than half have called five times or more."

Cordes (1993, p. 13): "A study by the Federal Bureau of Investigation reported that 90 percent of women killed by their husbands or boyfriends in 1991 were stalked before the attack."

Morin (1993, p. 125): "Statistical information from Kansas City and Detroit reveals that 90 percent of these women [who were killed by their husbands or boyfriends] made police contact at least once for assistance. Over 50 percent called a minimum of five times" (Citing Cohen's [1993] congressional testimony).

Strikis (1993, p. 2772): Note 19: "It is possible that as many as ninety percent of women killed by former lovers or husbands have been stalked by the murderer prior to the attack (Citing Melinda Beck et al., "Murderous Obsession," *Newsweek*, July 13, 1992, at pp. 60, 61).

Tucker (1993, p. 614): Note 37: "It is estimated that up to 90 percent of women killed in the United States by intimate or former intimate partners have been stalked by them." (apparently citing Joanne Furio, "Can new state laws stop the stalker," *Ms.*, Jan-Feb., 1993, p. 90; and Geberth, 1992, p. 139).

Gross (1994, 1998, 2000, p. 5): "In fact, 90 percent of the 1,500 women killed by their current or former mates each year in this country were stalked before being murdered" (citing Kenneth L. Woodward, "Murderous Obsession," *Newsweek*, July 13, p. 61).

Kappeler et al. (1996, p. 99): "There were estimates that . . . 90 percent of the women killed by their spouses or former boyfriends were stalked prior to their murder (Beck, 1992)."

Coleman (1997, p. 420): "Ruth Micklem, director of Virginians Against Domestic Violence, estimates that as many as 90 percent of women murdered by boyfriends or husbands may have been stalked prior to their deaths (Beck et al., 1992)."

Davis & Chipman (1997, p. 168): "A total of 90 percent of women murdered by boyfriends or husbands were stalked by their killers" (citing Wells, 1996; and National Institute of Criminal Justice Project..., 1993).

Hueter (1997, p. 216): "As many as ninety percent of women killed by their former partners have been stalked prior to their murder" (citing Beck, 1992).

Snow (1998, p. 12): "National statistics show that 90 percent of the women killed every year by current or former spouses were stalked by these men before being murdered" (citing Gross, 1994, p. 9).

Best (1999, pp. 53-54): "In spite of the intense interest in stalking, as late as 1993 there were only two published scholarly studies of stalkers: an examination of LAPD TMU files (Zona et al., 1993); and a typology of 'criminal stalkers' (Holmes, 1993). Neither offered much original data, so antistalking crusaders routinely borrowed data from research on domestic violence to characterize stalking: ... 'Studies in Detroit and Kansas City reveal that 90 percent of those murdered by their intimate partners called police at least once' (Senator William Cohen in Congressional Record 1992: S9527); 'Nearly one third of all women killed in America are murdered by their husbands or boyfriends, and, says Ruth Micklem, codirector of Virginians Against Domestic Violence, as many as 90 percent of them have been stalked' (Beck 1992: 61). The juxtaposition of the latter two quotes reveals how evidence used to define new crimes evolves: Senator Cohen cited a finding that 90 percent of women killed by husbands or lovers had previously called the police; when later advocates repeated that statistic, they equated having called the police with being stalked, ignoring the likelihood that many women called to complain about abuse by partners living in the same residence (and therefore not stalkers)."

Schell & Lanteigne (2000, p. 19): "Ruth Micklem, director of Virginians Against Domestic Violence, estimates that as many as 90 percent of women murdered by abusive husbands and boyfriends may have been stalked prior to their deaths (Beck et al., 1992)."