STALKING:  
A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF WOMEN’S LIVED EXPERIENCES

A Thesis  
Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for  
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By  
Linda June Cox, B.A.

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Master’s Examination Committee:  
Dr. Bette A. Speziale, Adviser

Dr. Susan Saltzburg  

Approved by

Bette A. Speziale, Ph.D.
Adviser  
College of Social Work
ABSTRACT

Stalking was first defined as a crime in the United States in 1990 by the state of California. Since that time research on stalking has drastically increased. However, little data exists about the personal experiences of stalking victims. The aim of this study was to explore the lived experiences of female stalking victims. The sample consisted of nine women, 21 to 40 years old, from metropolitan areas of a midwestern state. Each participant completed an in person interview. The interview was based on a semi structured interview guide that inquired about the women's prior relationship with the stalker, the progression of the stalking behavior, the stalker's persona, the strategies employed by the women to stop the stalking, others' perceptions of the stalking behavior, the impact of the stalking on the women, and the women's advice for current stalking victims. Applying the constant comparative method of data analysis, the themes that emerged from this qualitative study of nine females were: gendered reactions to stalking; letters, flowers, and gifts; charming, engaging persona; genuine risk of harm; survivors behavioral changes; and retrospective wisdom. A deviant case was identified and analyzed based on one woman's multiple violent experiences and her family dynamics. Based on the findings of this study the researcher recommended a greater need for community education on stalking and more prevalent and applicable services specifically designed for victims and survivors of stalking.
Dedicated to April Nicole Musser
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my advisor, Dr. Bette Speziale, for support and encouragement throughout this experience. The countless conversations we have had regarding this study helped to inspire and motivate me, during both times of excitement and frustration. I am grateful for her words of wisdom and, especially, her mentorship, without which, this study would not have been possible.

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VITA

September 25, 1982.........................Born – Akron, OH

2003.............................................B.A. History & Political Science,

The Ohio State University

2006..........................M.S.W.

The Ohio State University

FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Field: Clinical Social Work
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Stalking is a relatively new crime, but an age-old phenomenon, with profound ramifications affecting over one million women in the United States annually (The National Center for Victims of Crime, 2004). Blaauw, Winkel, Arensmen, Sheridan, & Freeve (2002) found a remarkably high level of psychopathology among victims of stalking with symptom levels more comparable to individuals receiving psychiatric outpatient care than the general population. As a direct result of being stalked approximately 75% of former victims exhibit enough symptoms to warrant a psychiatric diagnosis. Meloy (1998) found that 25-35% of stalkers physically assault their victims which he found to be a high rate for violence when compared to other groups of criminals. Although only 2% of all stalking victims are ultimately murdered by their stalker (Meloy, 1998; Roberts, 2005) about 76% of all femicide victims (The National Center for Victims of Crime, 2004) and 90% of femicide victims killed by boyfriends or husbands (Sinwelski & Vinton, 2001) were once stalked by their murderer. From these basic statistics it is clear that the effects of stalking are significant and a greater understanding of the personal experiences of stalking victims needs to be reached in order to better assist victims.
Context is everything in incidents of stalking, both culturally and legally (Roberts, 2005). In society-at-large, many persons have been socialized to believe that stalking is a romantic and legitimate means by which to court another individual. This belief has been perpetuated for centuries through plays, poems, music, and, more recently, movies. As a result, stalking did not always fulfill society’s definition of a crime. Until 1989 no jurisdiction in the United States had a law that explicitly forbade stalking as an activity (Spitzberg, 2003). This changed in 1989 when actress Rebecca Schaeffer was murdered by a fan turned stalker (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2003; Sinwelski & Vinton, 2001; Saunders, 1998). After Schaeffer’s death, California established the first anti-stalking law in the United States. It went into effect in 1991. Although stalking was finally labeled a crime in at least one state, because of Schaeffer’s status, society believed only celebrities were victims of stalking. Research, however, has shown that simple obsessive stalking, stalking which stems from a past relationship, is the most common form of stalking.

Despite this fact, society continues to be ambivalent as to whether or not simple obsessive stalking is truly a crime. This belief stems from the fact that most stalking behavior consists of daily activities, typically performed by a former significant other, that would not appear intimidating to the outside observer. In context, however, these seemingly innocent acts symbolize the threat of injury or death for the victim. And although society in general may not understand the ramifications of stalking, the victim does. Numerous behaviors that compile the stalking experience are meaningless outside of the contextual environment. Certain acts are unmistakably threatening to the outside observer, such as acts of physical and sexual violence. Other behaviors, such as telephoning, sending letters, flowers, and gifts may not seem inherently dangerous. For
example, receiving flowers is not an act of intimidation on the surface. However if the flowers are dead, contain animal parts, or come with an intimidating note the act is no longer innocent. Placing each act in context is crucial to understanding the severity of stalking, a concept that society-at-large has neglected to identify. This has served to minimize the dangers of stalking. Therefore the goal of this study was to explore the lived experiences of stalking victims within their sociocultural contexts. By studying the actual experiences of stalking victims, the understanding and practice of advocates, social workers, law enforcement, and therapists will be enhanced. Ultimately, women who seek help because they are the targets of stalkers will be more completely served.
CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Stalking is generally defined as unwanted, persistent, fear-inducing behavior enacted by an obsessional perpetrator against a victim (Blaauw et al., 2002; Kinkade, Burnes, & Fuentes, 2005; Mullen, Pathe, Purcell, & Stuart, 1999; Nicastro, Cousins, & Spitzberg, 2000; Roberts, 2005; Sinwelski & Vinton, 2001; Spitzberg & Cupach, 2003). Definitions of stalking vary across disciplines. For the purpose of this study it was important to access the legal definition because it defines the framework in which the victims lived. Currently, each state has a different anti-stalking law, all of which are based on fundamental legal principles. The first requisite of any anti-stalking law is that the stalker must have threatened the individual. This is problematic because the acts that encompass stalking are often seen as routine, such as making phone calls, sending letters, etc (Sinwelski and Vinton, 2001). As a result, the level of threat is often evaluated according to the “reasonable person” standard that assesses whether or not a reasonable person would find the pattern of behavior intimidating (Spitzberg, 2003). The reasonable person standard is crucial because in order for stalking to be established there must be proof that the actions were conducted with the intent to harm the victim. This is complicated by the fact that “it is not just the intentions and behavior of the perpetrator that create a stalking event but how the actions are experienced and articulated by the
victim” (Mullen, Pathe, Purcell, & Stuart, 1999, p. 1245) Finally, there must be an established pattern of behavior, which is legally defined as two or more separate acts (Roberts, 2005). In compiling various entities that contribute to the crime of stalking it is clear that trying to establish a single definition is complex and difficult. The contextual environment is the most important indicator in all stalking cases. As such, Sheridan, Blaauw, & Davies (2003) found that the laws that are vague and provide few specifics are among the most beneficial for the victim. Vague anti-stalking laws tend to be more operational and can better address the real experiences of victims.

As stated above, a single definition of stalking has not been agreed upon and therefore current statistics on the prevalence of stalking are also not uniformly accepted. Current literature demonstrates that approximately 8% of women and 2% of men are stalked at some point in their lives (Blaauw et al., 2002; Kinkade, Burnes, & Fuentes, 2005; Mullen, Pathe, Purcell, & Stuart, 1999; Nicastro, Cousins, & Spitzberg, 2000; Roberts, 2005; Sinwelski & Vinton, 2001; Spitzberg & Cupach, 2003). These statistics are based on more conservative estimates and strictly adhere to the legal definition of stalking, as discussed above. More liberal estimates suggest that 12-16% of women and 4-7% of men are stalked at some point in their lives (Sheridan et al., 2003; Spitzberg & Cupach, 2003). Liberal estimates are based on operational definitions that are less specific than standard state laws. Further investigation into these statistics shows that certain populations are more likely to be stalked than others. One group is female college students whom are more likely to be stalked than the general population, and at a 13% occurrence rate in a single nine-month school year, according to the conservative definition (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2003). Overall, individuals between 18 and 30 years are
most likely to be stalked. They comprise the largest group of stalking victims (Sheridan et al., 2003). Regardless of which definition one is using, stalking can be considered a prevalent problem that needs to be understood and addressed.

Current literature on prevalence statistics has eliminated the myth that stalkers predominantly fit into the erotomania typology. Erotomania occurs when an individual is under the delusion that an intimate relationship exists between the stalker and the victim. In reality, no such relationship exists or has existed. Typically, erotomania is used to describe celebrity stalkers (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2002). The murder of actress Rebecca Schaeffer, a victim of an erotomaniac stalker, was the dominant force behind defining stalking as a crime, therefore leading to the myth that erotomania was the dominant stalking typology (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2003; Sinwelski & Vinton, 2001; and Saunders, 1998). Statistics have shown that a large number of individuals are stalked, whether one uses a conservative or a liberal definition. As such, many “common people” are stalked, more so than celebrities, a fact that has further hindered the public’s ability to define and understand the crime. Society does not identify the common individual as a target of stalking, and therefore shows little concern for or understanding of the average stalking victim.

Once erotomania was no longer seen as the most common form of stalking, researchers attempted to identify various typologies of stalkers. Identifying a classification system for stalkers and their behaviors is important to help predict different behaviors, to assess the risks to victims, and to stop the behaviors of different types of stalkers. Various typologies have been created and tend to focus on characteristics of the victim (celebrity vs. common individual), characteristics of the stalker (psychotic or
mentally healthy), or the prior relationship between the stalker and the victim (intimate relationship, neighbor, peer, customer, etc) (Sheridan et al, 2003). Other typologies, such as those created by Mullen et al., (1999) divide stalkers into five motives: rejected, intimacy-seeking, incompetent, resentful, and predatory. Rejected stalkers consist mainly of ex-partners seeking reunification or revenge. Intimacy-seeking stalkers attempt to establish a relationship with an infatuation under the delusion that the victim loves them. Incompetent stalkers know the victim is not interested but believe that they can change the victim’s mind through stalking. Resentful stalkers choose victims at random with the intent to intimidate and distress the victim. And predatory stalkers follow their victims with the intent to ultimately sexually attack their victims. Despite the various classification systems only three broad typologies are commonly identified and accepted: simple obsessional, love obsessional, and erotomania (Tellefsen, 2005 & Zona, Palarea, & Lane, 1998). Simple obsessional occurs when a previous romantic or personal relationship existed between the stalker and the victim. Love obsessional occurs when an individual develops an infatuation for a person in which no personal relationship ever existed. Erotopmania, defined earlier, although no longer identified as the dominant typology, does occur and remains a prominent classification of stalkers.

Literature on stalking typologies, although inconsistent and incomplete, has identified simple obsessional as the most common (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2002). Simple obsessional stalking typically stems from relationships fraught with violence, jealousy, and controlling behavior. According to Nicastro et al., (2000) 80% of stalking victims believed that the stalking began prior to the demise of the relationship in instances when their stalker was a former partner. In such cases, the partner controlled, monitored,
manipulated, and followed the victim, all of which can be classified as stalking behaviors. Power and coercion are major components of abusive relationships and typically continue during the stalking phase once the relationship ends. Brewster (2003) identified four methods of control: financial, social, psychological, and physical violence. These methods begin during the relationship and then continue in slightly altered forms during the stalking phase. Financial control is exerted by denying the victim the ability to work and access to all financial sources. During the stalking phase the perpetrator may refuse to pay bills both individuals are responsible for, or attempt to sabotage the victim’s employment. Financial control is used to make the victim believe that she cannot survive economically independent of the stalker. The stalker/abuser may exert social control by denying the victim access to friends, family, and various communication sources. Once the relationship ends, the stalker may contact friends and intimidate them, thus isolating the victim further. The abuser enacts psychological control by using guilt, shame, and fear to influence the victim’s thoughts and actions. Psychological control continues during the stalking phase through threats, constant contact, and monitoring. Physical violence typically decreases during the stalking phase because of the limited access that the stalker has to the victim. Violence, although it diminishes, may still continue after the relationship ends and does occur with 25-35% of all stalking victims (Meloy, 1998).

Simple obsessional stalking, in its most basic form, is seen by the stalker as a means of communicating to the victim that he wants to reestablish their relationship (Nicastro et al., 2000; Spitzberg & Cupach, 2002). Initially, during simple obsessional stalking, the ultimate goal for the stalker is to reunite with the victim, though his behavior is vicious and vengeful. According to Spitzberg & Cupach, (2002) simple obsessional
stalking typically progresses through five stages. First is the hyperintimacy stage, which is the stalker’s initial attempt to reunite with the victim. This stage consists of behaviors that could be seen as romantic in other situations. Next is the pursuit stage, which is an attempt to increase interaction with the victim through a variety of tactics such as following, contacting, watching, etc. The stalking then progresses into the invasion stage during which more covert and invading tactics are enacted, such as breaking and entering into the victim’s home, hacking into the victim’s computer, photographing the victim, etc. The intimidation phase follows, in which the stalker accepts the victim’s rejection though contact increases, usually in the form of threats, harassment, property damage, etc. Finally, the stalking progresses into the violent stage during which the stalker carries out threats through physical and sexual assault, sometimes leading to murder (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2002). These stages can also be viewed as tactics with which to stalk the victim and therefore are not always carried out in this order. They can also occur independently of each other. Brewster (2003) found that 75% of women believed that the stalking they experienced began as a means in which to reconcile but when this did not occur, the stalker’s motive changed, leading to an escalation of threats and violence.

Simple obsessional stalkers, who are not limited to ex-partners but also include peers, neighbors, family members, friends, etc, can be differentiated from other stalkers by the fact that they know their victims and had some form of prior relationship. Love obsessional and erotomaniac stalkers typically choose their victims based on single meetings, infatuations, and delusions, and a prior relationship never existed (Tellefsen, 2005). Research has shown that the victim’s prior contact with the stalker greatly affects the victim’s perception of the behavior. Victims are typically more fearful of stalkers
when there has not been a prior relationship (Sheridan et al., 2003 & Mullen et al., 1999). Other research suggests, however, that victims experience a high level of fear and anxiety when a prior relationship with the stalker was routinely violent. In such instances the victim experiences a high level of fear and anxiety because she knows what the stalker is capable of doing (Tellefsen, 2005). Furthermore, regardless of the victim’s perception of risk, stalkers are more likely to assault their victims if there was a prior relationship (Sheridan et al., 2003; Mullen et al., 1999). A prior relationship also makes the situation more dangerous due to the fact that the stalker knows the victim’s weaknesses.

The effects of stalking, regardless of typology and the prior relationship between the victim and stalker, are profound. Victims of stalking typically seek help long after the stalking begins and only after they feel they can no longer cope with the behavior on their own (Sinweski & Vinton, 2001). Victims undertake drastic measures to alter their lives in order to escape the stalker. Some are forced to move, change jobs, alter their routines, and isolate themselves from friends and family. Ironically, the length of the stalking appears to be inversely related to the victim’s sense of fear and danger. Blaauw et al. (2002) found that victims ultimately get to a breaking point where death is preferable to a life of constant fear. Even if the stalker is incarcerated, many victims continue to be traumatized by the experience through Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). The psychological abuse, rather than physical abuse, is typically the cause of PTSD among stalking victims (Kaysen, Resick, & Wise, 2003). Studies have shown that victims might have coped better with a physical assault than with the stalker’s constant intrusions and threats (Blaauw et al., 2002). Stalking victims are continuously on-guard, feeling as if their stalkers are never far away and ready to attack at any moment. In such
cases, the victim experiences chronic trauma in which the environment may not be violent but the threat of violence is omnipresent (Kaysen et al., 2003). Chronic trauma is much more difficult to treat once the victim is safe and may become a permanent part of the victim’s life. Therefore, even if few stalking incidences result in death, about 2% (Meloy, 1998), more proactive measures against stalking need to be enacted because of the extensive and long-term effects on the victims.

Despite the need for more proactive measures, the legal response to stalking victims is still evolving and can be considered inadequate at best. Law enforcement has yet to establish a successful or uniform way in which to deter and end stalking behavior (Kinkade et al, 2005). In 1993, the National Institute of Justice developed a legislative model on which state anti-stalking laws were to be based. However, state laws continue to be inconsistent and ineffective (Kinkade et al., 2005). When legal action is initially taken against a stalker, the first step is for a third party, either a member of law enforcement, family, or a friend, to speak with the stalker. Such action is rarely effective in deterring the stalker because stalkers typically see third party individuals as barriers between themselves and the victim, a delusion that is reinforced by third party intervention (Saunders, 1998). A second option for victims is a restraining order against the stalker. Restraining orders are a commonly used tool against stalkers but are rarely effective. Research has shown that restraining orders are often violated, victims rarely receive a permanent restraining order, and violence against the victim tends to escalate after restraining orders are served to the stalker (Nicastro et al, 2000). Restraining orders are effective in that they legally establish that the stalker is breaking the law and provide recourse for victims if they are violated (White & Cawood, 1998). Documentation is
vital when seeking legal action against a stalker and a restraining order can be an important part of that documentation process. However, a restraining order is simply a sheet of paper and therefore a weak form of protection. In some cases stalkers may be incarcerated, though this alone will not eliminate the stalker’s obsession. Stalking may continue from prison, through letters or phone calls, and may continue upon the stalker’s release (Saunders, 1998). In such cases legal support for the victim needs to continue after the incarceration and release of the stalker.

By evaluating the options available to victims of stalking it is clear that the current legal response is fraught with problems. First of all, legal action against stalkers is typically not taken until the behavior has progressed to a point at which physical damage to the victim or victim’s property has occurred. Therefore, stalking must progress to a certain phase before legal action is taken. Secondly, law enforcement personnel are not sufficiently trained on the issue, yet law enforcement officers routinely must make a judgment call on what is and is not considered stalking behavior (Kinkade et al, 2005). Finally, Humphreys & Thiara (2003) argue that the law’s inability to protect victims multiplies the perpetrator’s sense of control. Simple obsessional stalkers, whose initial goal is typically to reestablish a relationship with the victim, gain the most control from failed legal protection. Victims see their plight to escape the stalker as futile and may be forced to return to their stalker because of a lack of protection.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Despite gaps in current literature, experts have a much more accurate understanding of stalking than they did 15 years ago. However, to date, research has not tended to focus on the progression of stalking nor the victims’ perceptions, reactions, or coping behaviors. In short, research rarely discusses the actual experiences of stalking victims. It was the goal of this study to increase the knowledge of the day-to-day, lived experiences of female stalking victims in order to expand research beyond its current focus on prevalence rates and stalker typologies. To this end, the application of qualitative research methods were deemed most appropriate.

Research Design, Sample, and Sampling

The researcher designed a qualitative study incorporating elements similar to a grounded theory approach. However, given the time limitations of conducting a master’s thesis and the fact that theoretical sampling was not possible, the research strategy is not purely grounded theory. The researcher designed a qualitative study that gave voice to women who had been stalked. Using a semi-structured interview schedule (see Appendix A) the researcher interviewed face-to-face nine voluntary participants. The participants all resided in urban areas of a midwestern state. All participants fulfilled the following criteria for purposive sampling: 1) 21 years of age or older, 2) female, 3) a victim of
stalking during the last fifteen years, 4) not currently receiving professional assistance as a result of the stalking, and 5) not a current victim of stalking. Initial attempts to identify participants were conducted through flyers advertising the study on two university campuses. Additional subjects were identified through snowball sampling. All participants were assigned pseudonyms that are used throughout the text.

The nine women who participated in this study ranged from mid 20’s to late 40’s. Seven of the women were stalked once and two of the women were stalked twice. Eight of the women were stalked by a man that they knew before the stalking began. Six of the women were stalked by former romantic partners, one by a coworker, and one by a friend. Only one woman was stalked by a stranger. Those women who had prior mutual relationships with the stalker were romantically and sexually involved with them from one month to five years before the stalking began. Once the stalking began it lasted from five months to five years. Table 3.1, Demographics of Participants, provides specific information about each woman interviewed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th># of Times Stalked</th>
<th>Prior Relationship to Stalker</th>
<th>Duration of Relationship</th>
<th>Duration of Stalking</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wilma</td>
<td>Mid 20’s</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Friend</td>
<td>4 years</td>
<td>5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cora</td>
<td>Early 20’s</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Boyfriend: Cohabiting</td>
<td>5 years</td>
<td>1 year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vivian</td>
<td>Late 20’s</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Stranger</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Five months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michelle</td>
<td>Mid 20’s</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Boyfriend; Dating</td>
<td>2 years; 1 month</td>
<td>2 years; 9 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>Early 20’s</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Boyfriend</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>Seven months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carolyn</td>
<td>Mid 20’s</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Boyfriend; Dating</td>
<td>1 year; 1 month</td>
<td>2 years; 5 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Danielle</td>
<td>Late 40’s</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Coworker</td>
<td>6 months</td>
<td>6 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christina</td>
<td>Late 30’s</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Boyfriend: Cohabiting</td>
<td>10 months</td>
<td>2 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joyce</td>
<td>Mid 20’s</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Boyfriend: Cohabiting</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>1 year</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.1 Demographics of Participants
A semi-structured interview guide was used as a basis for conducting each interview. Each question covered a broad general topic. The interviewer used probing questions to expand the topic in a manner that was meaningful for each participant. Questions were added to the basic interview guide as new data emerged. More specifically, questions were added regarding the women’s initial attraction to the stalker when a previous relationship existed as well as questions about the reaction of the women’s families to the stalker’s behavior. These new questions were also addressed in interviews with subsequent participants. And previously interviewed participants were also contacted to address these questions as the researcher deemed necessary by emergent data analysis. All interviews were audio taped. Consent forms (see Appendix B), approved by the Institutional Review Board, were explained and signed before audiotaping occurred.

During the interview process an audit trail revealed that the initial criteria used to identify participants was too limiting. The criteria initially required that participants had to have been stalked within the previous five years. In other words, the stalking could have begun ten years before but it had to have ended within the previous five years. Once the interviewing began the researcher discovered that the majority of participants were in their early and mid twenties. In consultation with her advisor the researcher speculated that this was due to the recent time frame within which the stalking had to have occurred. A request was submitted asking the IRB, Office of Responsible Research Practices, that the criteria be expanded to a stalking experience within the previous 15 years. The request was granted, and as a result two, additional participants, one in her late 30’s and one in her late 40’s, volunteered to participate in the study.
Throughout the data analysis process the data was discussed with the peer debriefers in order to ensure the researcher’s analysis was accurate. Initially field notes and interview transcripts were read through fully three times. Open coding was then used to develop an understanding of the total picture and each part of the data in context (Padgett, 1998). Additionally, each transcript was analyzed soon after the interview to identify any issues or topics that should be added to the interview guide. Once all of the transcripts had been reviewed separately, the data was then analyzed through selective coding and constant comparative analysis. These methods were used to identify supporting and conflicting data within and between each transcript. Through constant comparative analysis the researcher and the peer debriefers identified a deviant case example. The deviant case example emerged because of the number of violent occurrences the woman had experienced and her unique family dynamics in relation to the other participants.

Four methods were used to ensure the trustworthiness and credibility of the empirical material and findings of this study. Triangulation of sites identified participants in various metropolitan areas within a Midwestern state. Member checking allowed each participant to read the transcript of her interview, providing each woman the opportunity to add to or clarify any of her earlier remarks. Member checking ensured that the participant was accurately and fully understood. Peer debriefing was used to compare the researcher and her advising committee’s interpretations of the empirical material. This method ensured that the researcher’s interpretations were plausible and
that no emerging data was neglected. Finally, a deviant case example was identified. One of the participants, whose responses demonstrated a lived experience unlike the other women's, was analyzed in depth.
CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

From application of the constant comparative method six themes emerged: Gendered Reactions to Stalking; Letters, Flowers, and Gifts; Charming, Engaging Persona; Genuine Risk of Harm; Survivor’s Behavioral Changes; and Retrospective Wisdom. The following is a discussion of each theme supported with verbatim excerpts from the interviews of the nine participants.

Gendered Reactions to Stalking

Victims’ fathers tended to deny that the stalker’s behavior was problematic. In situations where the victim had once dated or been friends with the stalker, fathers felt that the stalker’s behavior was acceptable. In most cases the stalker was young and the fathers equated their behavior with immaturity and poor dating skills. As a result they viewed the stalker’s conduct as an appropriate form of courtship. Wilma’s dad rationalized the stalker’s behavior saying, “Oh give him a chance, he’s just a kid in love.” Cora’s father attributed the stalker’s behavior to weak dating skills and rationalized his behavior by saying “…he’s young, he doesn’t understand, he’s going to figure it out.” Michelina’s father, on the other hand, minimized the seriousness of the stalker’s behavior and almost viewed the behavior as understandable and justified. “My dad on the other hand [in contrast to her mother] had this impression that he wasn’t all that bad and the
reason he was calling and driving by is because he probably just wanted me back.” After
the stalker tried to run Michelle off the road her father stated that the stalker was “crazy”
and advised her to call the police. But surprisingly, he continued to defend his behavior.

Wilma explained that her father eventually took her seriously once the stalker
started writing her bizarre letters. Three other participants however stated that their
fathers still, years later, do not see the stalker’s behavior as problematic or unacceptable.
Cora explained, “I don’t have contact with him [my father] anymore…it had a lot to do
with the incident, the fact that he was more on his side and you just need to work it out
with him…” Michelle, now six years later, still argues with her father about the
seriousness of the stalker’s behavior. “Dad will still want to argue about it. He will say
‘he was the nicest boyfriend you ever had.’” Michelle went on to say that whenever she
reminds her father of the stalker’s violent and obsessive behavior towards her he replies
by saying, “…he simply went crazy.” Mary commented that her father did not react to
the stalking at all, he neither defended nor condemned the stalker, despite continual
harassment of his daughter. “My dad was just off in his own world. He didn’t comment
on it.”

The majority of women interviewed stated that their mothers, regardless of their
father’s perception of the stalking, took the stalking seriously and were supportive. Cora
was close friends with her stalker and was in a committed relationship with him. During
their friendship and romantic relationship her family, including her mother, “loved him,
everybody loved him, because he was my best friend.” After their relationship ended and
the stalking began, Cora’s mother confronted the stalker and told him: “you need to go
ahead and move on.” She told Cora that “he better not ever show up around here again.”
Cora’s mother took the stalking very seriously and consistently supported her daughter’s decision to end the relationship despite her previous affection for her daughter’s stalker. Michelina’s mother, unlike her father, found the stalker’s behavior to be completely inappropriate, inexcusable, and “creepy.” Michelina stated that while her father was not concerned about the stalker until he tried to run her off the highway, her mother, “didn’t like him, she didn’t like what he was doing,” as soon as he started driving by, calling her multiple times a day, and making verbal threats to her. Mary dated her stalker for almost three years during which time her family “liked him for the most part until he started to get possessive and that made them feel very uncomfortable.” At that point the family encouraged her to end the relationship. After the relationship ended and the stalking began Mary remembers both her mother and stepmother being very concerned about the stalker’s behavior. “My step-mom was like ‘this kid’s off his rocker, he needs to settle down and just leave you alone.’” Wilma’s mother “always” found the stalker to be “really weird.” Whereas Wilma’s father only saw the stalker’s behavior as inappropriate after he sent her bizarre letters, her mother was concerned in the beginning when he started calling her repeatedly and continually told her “I love you,” despite continual rejection by Wilma.

Gender differences in response to stalking are not limited to parents but also appear to exist with any third party observer, such as friends, police officers, and coworkers. Michelina described receiving phone calls from male friends of the stalker. “He would have him [a mutual friend] call and then he [the stalker] would grab the phone and threaten me, ‘I’m going to come over to your house, I’m going to burn your house down, I’m going to run you off the road.’” When Michelina confronted the friend and
told him to stop calling for the stalker and not to allow the stalker to call from his home. The friend said, “Well I didn’t know it was really bothering you.” The male friend witnessed these conversations between Michelina and the stalker, and yet he did not identify the stalker’s behavior as offensive.

Wilma did not identify a specific man, besides her father, who trivialized the stalking but she stated that only a close female friend took her seriously. This close female friend was the only person, other than her mother, that considered the stalker’s behavior as inappropriate. “…we [the stalker and I] had a lot of mutual friends. They were like ‘oh you know he just loves you’ blah, blah, blah. I was like ‘he’s scary, he’s freaking me out.’ And the only person that really understood me was my best [female] friend.” Clearly many female friends trivialized the experience however it is important to note that not a single man took it seriously, at least initially.

Vivian, stalked by a client at work, sought assistance from the police officers in charge of security at her place of employment. In the beginning her stalker approached her multiple times at work, left her small gifts, and admitted to watching her at a restaurant. Initially Vivian found his behavior “bizarre” but continually “blew it off and didn’t think anything of it.” Shortly after meeting, Vivian noticed a car following her home from work. The individual following her sped off once Vivian pulled into a police station. Vivian was unable to identify the driver of the car and was unable to read the license plates. Although she filed a report the police stated that there was nothing they could do because she could not identify the driver and because “…they [the driver of the car] didn’t do anything to you, they didn’t harm you.” A couple of days later the stalker approached her at work and admitted to following her a few days earlier, rationalizing his
behavior by stating “I wanted to talk to you by yourself.” Vivian contacted the security department and explained the situation to them. A police officer approached the stalker, told him that his behavior was inappropriate and ran a police check on him. Security informed Vivian that besides one arrest several years before, his record was clean, and that he had never been charged or convicted of a violent crime. The male security guard told Vivian not to worry too much about the situation and rationalized his behavior by saying “he probably just thinks you’re attractive and doesn’t know how to talk to you.” Despite the fact that the stalker’s behavior was escalating the male police officer equated the stalker’s behavior with poor social/dating skills. Vivian stated that she was relieved by the police officer’s interpretation stating “He [the police officer] wasn’t worried about it so why should I be worried?” Only after the stalking behavior turned violent did the police officer, as well as Vivian’s friends and family, take the stalking seriously.

Gendered difference in the perception of a stalker’s behavior indicates that men and women may define appropriate courtship routines differently. In the case of Michelina her mother viewed the behavior as inappropriate regardless of the stalker’s explicit or implicit motives. Her father on the other hand only viewed the stalker’s behavior as inappropriate when it became violent and life threatening to Michelina. Even then, he interpreted the stalker’s motive as an attempt to revitalize a romantic relationship and therefore found the stalker’s behavior understandable. In some cases both parents were supportive but it is important to note that there was not a single woman who reported her mother as insensitive to her experience, but four women stated that their fathers were. Furthermore, participants tended to identify a woman, whether it was their mother, friend, or another third party, as their biggest support throughout the stalking
experience. This may suggest that men and women, when observing from the outside, define appropriate dating practices differently and that women have a lower tolerance for what they consider to be inappropriate behavior. In contrast, men may have a tendency to rationalize bizarre or escalating behavior as a suitable attempt to pursue a woman romantically.

**Letters, Flowers, and Gifts**

Stalking behavior is not limited to direct contact, meaning approaching or calling the victim. Stalking also involves indirect contact, such as sending gifts, letters, pictures, and/or flowers. Most women interviewed acknowledged receiving some form of indirect contact from their stalkers. The items and letters sent appeared to be an attempt by the stalker to rekindle a past relationship or initiate a new relationship. This is consistent with the findings of a study completed by Spitzburg and Cupach (2002) that found that stalkers typically went through five phases, the first one being hyperintimacy, which is the stalker’s initial attempt to reunite with the victim. The women who received these items however, did not see them as a healthy sign of affection, rather many of the letters, flowers, gifts and objects victims received were interpreted by the woman as a threat as well as a romantic overture. In many cases the message sent by the stalkers’ indirect contact was not simply, “I love you and I want you,” but also an attempt to threaten the victim if the stalker did not get his way.

**Letters**

Wilma received multiple letters from her stalker. The letters were disorganized, illogical, and unconstrained. The stalker would start the letter by talking about what he had done that day and, in the next line, he would make a romantic overture. Wilma
explained that based on the letters it appeared that “he had this imaginary relationship with me in his head.” Wilma stated that she would receive multiple letters in a single envelope, each with a different date. In one incident the letters were crumpled up into a ball rather than folded and shoved into the envelope. On one letter the stalker had drawn a sexually implicit picture of a naked woman. The picture, at first glance, appeared to be scribbles but on closer look the picture was clearly the body of a naked woman. Cora also received letters from her stalker stating that their relationship “wasn’t over and he knew that all he had to do was give me time…” In addition she received numerous cards sent with flowers that said, “I love you.” Vivian articulated receiving notes on her car stating, “I just wanted to say hi” or “you look beautiful today.”

The development of technology over the last decade has added to the means by which a stalker can harass his victim, for instance cyberstalking. Joyce’s stalker sent her multiple e-mails. In these e-mails the stalker admitted to reading her diary and accessing her personal e-mail account to gain information about her feelings and daily activities. The stalker’s e-mails accused Joyce of cheating on him, threatened to take her to court to “get even”, and blamed her for his foreseeable suicide. A stalker e-mailing a victim is much different from simply writing a letter, although the two appear to be very similar. E-mails can be used to transmit viruses to the receivers’ computers and to install spyware. Spyware is a software program that records every key stroke made at a computer. Therefore, if spyware is downloaded into a computer a third party, such as a stalker, can monitor everything an individual does on a computer, such as read in-coming and out-going e-mails and identify all passwords for e-mail accounts, bank accounts, etc. Initially Joyce gave the stalker her e-mail password while they were still dating. However after
the stalking began, and she changed the password, he managed to continue accessing her e-mail. She believes that happened through spyware or through another means of computer hacking. This access enabled him to gain knowledge about her daily activities and her personal conversations with others about the stalker.

In certain incidents stalkers sent both positive and negative letters to third party individuals about the victim, as a means by which to contact the victim. Danielle’s stalker sent a letter to personnel stating, “how wonderful I was.” Although the letter was positive it was unsettling to Danielle. “I felt like I was professionally vulnerable. At any time he could say something bad or something good about me that would change my professional image in other people’s minds.” Joyce’s stalker sent numerous letters to her landlord and various agencies she used accusing her of criminal activity and smearing her character. Consequently these letters led to multiple investigations of Joyce by a number of local agencies. In reality the stalkers were communicating to Danielle and Joyce that they had power, and that they were not going to go away.

*Flowers and Other Objects*

Cora described receiving flowers on numerous occasions, sent to her home and her job. “He came back that night and he had flowers at my doorstep…and then it was the next day, maybe two days after, at work, he had sent me flowers and they were cut up. I got that a lot, a lot of cut up flowers.” In addition to the flowers Cora received photographs. “I got a lot of pictures of the two of us. It was like one time the picture may have been the two of us together, the next time the picture was ripped up, and I got that a lot.” Wilma described receiving a sweatband soaked in cologne in the mail along with pictures of her stalker. Carolyn’s stalker would leave items in her locker at school,
sometimes as an attempt to be romantic and sometimes as an attempt to get her in trouble. “I mean if he was having a good day, there would be flowers in my locker, if he was having a bad day, I’d find like a baggie of weed in my locker.” Vivian’s stalker left a small gift for her at work on one occasion, which she promptly threw away. “I threw it away because my thought in my head was I know that he must be watching me, so I’m going to throw this away to show him, ‘I don’t care about you, I don’t want anything to do with you, I don’t respect you, you know nothing.’” Vivian’s premonition that the stalker was watching her proved to be correct. He approached her that day saying, “…why have you been ignoring me, why did you throw my stuff away? I wanted to talk to you, I love you.” All of these objects sent multiple messages to the victim that implied an obsessive love with threatening undertones, such as, I love you and you cannot reject or escape me.

**Charming, Engaging Persona**

The participants tended to describe their stalkers, when they first met, as extremely charming men. Based on these descriptions it appears that these men might not have taken rejection, even initially, very easily. They actively pursued these women from the beginning. Their behavior appears to have exceeded typical dating rituals. With time, however, the charm disappeared and most participants described their stalkers as crazy, obsessive, controlling and, at times, delusional or violent. The changes were drastic. Some participants who had dated their stalkers stated that he was obsessive and/or violent before the relationship ended. Michelina describes her stalker in the beginning as “the absolute charmer, knew the right things to say. Like a con-man trying to get your money.” As the relationship progressed Michelina stated she noticed that her
boyfriend was following her and would routinely show up everywhere she went. In addition he became increasingly violent and would frequently slap and punch her. The violence and the relationship came to a head when he attempted to strangle her. By the time the relationship ended Michelina described her ex-boyfriend as “crazy”, “controlling”, and “in a rage all of the time.”

Cora described her stalker, initially, as having “a very captivating personality, he does and I mean he could talk the pants off of anybody.” Despite his initial charm Cora ultimately ended the relationship because of multiple incidents of domestic violence. When the relationship ended Cora’s stalker began following her and waiting for her outside her building. Cora did date her stalker a second time, and although he had stopped following her, “there was still a lot of aggressiveness as far as him calling me to see where I was and things like that.” Cora stated that by the end of their relationships the initial “charismatic charm was almost depleted.”

Christina also described her stalker as initially very charming, but also very needy. “[He was] Very charming, very, very caring, over zealous about my daughter,…and like I said he was a needy type person.” As Christina’s romantic relationship with the stalker progressed his charm dissipated and he became increasingly possessive of Christina and her daughter. “He was extremely possessive of my daughter, but I kind of understood that because he didn’t have any children. Very possessive of me. He’d rather stay home than go anywhere else.” Ultimately Christina ended the relationship but the stalking continued for two years during which time “I considered us not dating, but he did.” As the stalking continued the stalker repeatedly broke into her home, hid in her house, watched her sleep, and broke her doors and windows.
Mary described her stalker as “…very charismatic, he’s a sweet talker. He’ll figure out what you want to hear and he’ll tell it to you.” For the first two years Mary and her stalker dated his behavior did not appear to be odd and he continued to be charismatic. Mary started to notice a change in his behavior when they graduated from high school. “I noticed that before we had left for college he was really nonchalant about our relationship and he was like, well, I want to be with my friends before I go away to school, we’re doing too much, we’re too close, da, da, da, da, so I kind of backed off and then once we came up to school he always wanted to be with me and he always wanted to be around me, like calling me all the time to see what I was doing, who I was with, where I was at, things like that.” After Mary ended the relationship the stalker continued to call her, ask where she was and who she was with, and repeatedly showed up everywhere she went. Mary remembers her friends started referring to him as “psycho.”

Joyce was initially attracted to her stalker because he was attentive. “He would make himself available for absolutely anything I needed…I had recently moved, I didn’t know anyone in the area, and here was this guy that was willing to do anything and everything to be with me.” Joyce also remembers the stalker as being very “sly,” “smooth,” and “caring.” Shortly after they started dating Joyce noticed that the stalker was extremely paranoid, that he described people as “being evil at heart,” and he continually blamed others for “everything bad in his life.” Although initially his paranoia was aimed at others, the stalker eventually started accusing Joyce of trying to rip him off financially and of cheating on him. Towards the end of their relationship the stalker became destructive and violent. The stalker destroyed some of her personal property, threatened to kill her dog, and severely beat her up.
Danielle, a social worker, was stalked by a lawyer who represented one of her clients. Danielle remembers, when she first met the stalker that he presented himself as “very professional and polished.” In addition she remembers him portraying himself as very intelligent, “…he always wanted to present as very knowledgeable, he knew everything, almost too much so…there was an arrogance there…” On the other hand, Danielle, remembers him being very caring. Danielle’s daughter had health problems and she remembers the stalker taking an interest in her daughter “…he would ask me questions about ‘what was that disease, what did it involve,’ so on the one hand it seemed like he was a caring person…” However, towards the end of Danielle and the stalker’s professional relationship Danielle realized “…it was more like a control thing than it was ‘I care about you.’” Danielle also recollected that his “…controlled manner…” dissipated and he became very angry towards her. “When the attorney [the stalker] found out that I was removed [from their client’s case] he called me and he was yelling at me, he was angry that I did that, and ‘how could I do this to the client’ and trying to really guilt me into it…He was very angry, which really creeped me out even more, it was like he wasn’t able to accept me getting off this case.”

When Carolyn first met her stalker, and began dating him, she described him as “the class clown…everybody knew him and wanted to hang out with him…” As their relationship progressed her boyfriend became controlling, as evident in the description below.

He would call and we would make plans for something, like if it was Sunday and I would make plans for Tuesday evening to go out and it would be Tuesday evening at 7:00 o’clock, then it would be 8:00 o’clock, then 9:00 o’clock and he
would call me because he was out really drunk with his friends and couldn’t leave because he knew I was forgiving. I was raised that something could’ve always happened and that was just the way he was. He was so controlling with the fact that he knew I would stay home and I wouldn’t go anywhere or do anything with anybody else and so he was content with that knowing exactly where I was and what I was doing, so he would go out and do what he wanted to do with his friends.

Once the relationship ended her stalker became very possessive and made several threats that “…if I wouldn’t get back together with him, nobody would get with me.” Carolyn, however, did start dating a man at the restaurant where she worked. As a result the stalker started working at the same restaurant. Carolyn described feeling like she was being “monitored” by the stalker. He had completely changed and the class clown morphed into the class addict with drug connections.

Three women identified their stalkers as having a mental health diagnosis, alcohol or drug dependency and bi-polar disorder. Wilma was a friend of her stalker for three or four years before he started stalking her. During these years Wilma described him as “sweet” and as “everyone’s best friend.” She explained that no one was ever really interested in dating him but everyone liked him. Initially Wilma stated that her stalker called her continually despite her constant rejection, however his behavior was not extreme or bizarre. A year after the stalking began the stalker started using drugs and Wilma noticed a major change in his personality. “That’s when he stated getting crazy [after the drug use began], like he was obsessed with me, it was so weird.” Wilma remembers being amazed at his obsession with her and how persistent he was in pursuing
her. "With most people if you like someone and they don’t like you back it’s not going to last that long. I mean reality sets in. You know you are never going to be with them so you stop trying." Michelina stated that her stalker was an alcoholic throughout their relationship and while he stalked her. "He was pretty nice when he was drunk, but when he was coming down from being drunk, he would get mean." It was during these times, while Michelina was still dating the stalker that he would get violent. Carolyn stated that her stalker was diagnosed with bi-polar disorder before they began dating. Carolyn and her family were unaware of his diagnosis until their relationship ended. While they were dating her stalker stopped taking his prescribed medication because he thought "...I [Carolyn] made him happy enough that he didn’t need his drugs." During this period he also started to use illegal drugs and alcohol. “I just noticed that he went from being the cool new guy that nobody knew to the pothead partier that you would go to to get stuff.”

The women’s descriptions of their stalkers and the stalking experiences indicated that many of the stalkers were delusional regardless of whether or not they used drugs/alcohol or had a DSM diagnosis. Often times the stalkers did not realize the effect their behavior was having on the victim. Although Vivian’s stalker attempted to attack her on multiple occasions he often stated, “Why are you so afraid of me?” and “I love you…why do you act like you are afraid of me?…You know you love me too.” The stalker was ultimately arrested and at his arrest he asked Vivian, “Why did you do this to me?” The stalker appeared to interpret his behavior as a sign of affection and did not notice the effect his behavior was having on Vivian. Wilma received a phone call from her stalker nearly two years after the stalking ended. When she answered the phone he began to talk to her like nothing had ever happened. “And he started talking to me like
we had just talked yesterday. You know. He was like ‘well I am going back to school. You would be really proud of me.’” Wilma remembers being in “disbelief” that he had called her because “it had been so long, and I had told him so many times that we weren’t friends at this point. We hadn’t been for probably three years because he got crazy.” During the years that he stalked Wilma he repeatedly told her he loved her and attempted to show her that he loved her but he never noticed the effect his behavior was having on Wilma and that she never took his attention as a sign of affection. Michelina’s stalker also called her long after the stalking ended asking if they could get back together despite the fact that he had attacked her and attempted to run her off the highway.

Three women interviewed stated that their stalkers threatened to commit suicide. Joyce stated that there was domestic violence between her and the stalker while they were dating one another. On one occasion Joyce remember having a verbal altercation with the stalker and “he was accusing me of being the worst thing that ever happened to him and that I was going to cause him to commit suicide since everything was my fault.” After the relationship ended Joyce received multiple e-mails from her stalker stating that his inevitable suicide was her fault and that she would have to live with that forever. Carolyn’s stalker also threatened to commit suicide and told her she was to blame for it. “He would show up at my house and threaten to commit suicide if I didn’t let him in, like on my front yard. He was really off balance and he kept blaming everything on me. Like he would tell people ‘this is her fault…I’m going to kill myself if you don’t get back together with me, I have no reason to live if you’re not with me.” Christina’s stalker never explicitly stated that he was going to commit suicide because of Christina however “he tried to hang himself in front of me and my daughter on a tree behind our house in
front of the abandoned house.” All three of these men used suicide attempts and threats to communicate to their victims.

In contrast to the cases above Vivian was stalked by a client at work with whom she had no prior relationship. Although he initially was very friendly he progressed much more rapidly into delusional and obsessive behavior. Despite limited interaction, within weeks after meeting, her stalker approached her at work and admitted to “watching” her at a restaurant and was seen watching her at work. Vivian remembered thinking “what is wrong with this guy…he’s just kind of weird, maybe he has mental health problems…” On multiple occasions he physically attacked or attempted to attack Vivian. During these episodes he would repeatedly say “I love you and you know you love me.” There is a definite difference between the man who stalked Vivian and the stalkers of the other women interviewed. Vivian is not the only woman interviewed that had never dated the man who stalked her, but she was the only one that did not have any prior relationship with the stalker. The other stalkers were able to initially establish a relationship of some sort with the victim through their charm or sweet demeanor. Vivian’s stalker, however, used the stalking to establish a relationship from the very beginning. Regardless of the initial tactics, most of the stalkers, including the man who stalked Vivian, ultimately became controlling, “creepy,” and violent.

**Genuine Risk of Harm**

By looking at the different gendered responses to stalking it is clear that people do not always agree on what constitutes appropriate and inappropriate behaviors when pursuing someone romantically. Almost every woman interviewed could identify at least one person that denied that the stalker’s behavior was problematic. In fact, initially the
victims themselves may have found their stalkers to be annoying, but they did not perceive them as threats. However stalking typically does not start out as intense or violent. Rather it begins with one or two phone calls, a dozen roses, or one letter, and from there it escalates to four or five phone calls a night, drive bys and tailing the target. Initially such behavior is typically trivialized by victims, friends, and family. But these seemingly innocent and supposedly romantic early behaviors more than likely will continue to escalate into violence or perpetual monitoring by the stalker.

Vivian’s stalker was physically violent towards her on a number of occasions. The last time he had contact with Vivian it was in the parking lot of her place of employment. He approached her, shoved her, started yelling, and told her to get into her car. Vivian agreed to get into the car and remembered thinking, “I’ll just do whatever he wants me to do and then I’ll be ok and then he’ll be fine.” Ultimately, Vivian never got into her car and was able to run away. The stalker was eventually prosecuted and brought to trial where his history of attacks on other women was revealed. According to Vivian, “…they had found out that he had done this again under an alias name, and, that woman, he had actually raped her and physically abused her and kind of tortured her. So I don’t know if that was what his plan was for me, I don’t even like to think about that, that maybe that night that is why he wanted me to get into my car to drive me somewhere.” Unlike the stalker’s other victims, Vivian suffered only mild physical harm but, based on the stalker’s past, the potential for violence was very real and very great.

Michelina was threatened multiple times by her stalker. He threatened to burn down her house or run her off the road. Approximately two years after she ended her
romantic relationship with the man, and the stalking began, he attempted to follow through on his threat to run her off the road, as described below:

I was on the highway and I was driving south towards my house and there was a car. I didn’t recognize it, I didn’t know who it was, but it was right on my bumper, and then it would back off and then get right on my bumper and back off, and I thought you know what is this guy doing, I was in the right lane, there’s nobody out there, and they kept doing it and finally they started laying on the horn and like waving and stuff. He pulled up along side me and was trying to push me off on the right side of the road and finally we got close enough and I was like oh shit, it’s him. I tried everything. I tried speeding up, slowing down, pulling off, but nothing, every time I would slow down he would slam on his break and pull in front of me. He tried running me off the road like three or four times before I was actually able to get off on an exit.

This event made Michelina realize that the stalker was not making empty threats and that the potential for harm was real. After this incident Michelina remembered thinking in disbelief, “he wasn’t lying [when he made these threats].” Michelina stated that individuals, who had previously trivialized the stalker’s actions, after this incident, took his behavior seriously.

Christina dated and lived with her stalker for an extended period of time. Ultimately Christina broke up with him and asked him to move out. Nearly three months after Christina asked the stalker to move out she learned that he had been living in her basement since she asked him to move out. Christina asked him to leave her property again and again, and filed police reports on numerous occasions. “I filed reports on him,
he never showed up for court... He never showed up for court and they never arrested
him.” As a result the stalker kept coming back. He would hide in Christina’s basement
and abandoned houses in the neighborhood in order to watch her and her daughter. “I
kicked him out again. It didn’t work. He was satisfied to be near us, close to us. It got
so bad that I would have to sleep downstairs because I knew he was staying in the
basement. I’d have to sleep downstairs; I’ve suffered from insomnia for a year. I would
have to sleep downstairs on a mattress and I would listen for his movements. On one
particular night I fell asleep and something woke me up, but I was too afraid to look
back, and there was a presence in the room and I knew it was him, sitting on the couch. I
was too afraid, I was alert, but I was too afraid to look at him until I could hear him
breathing and the odd thing about it was I never heard him come up from the basement.”
Christina moved multiple times in order to get away from the stalker, but he found her
each time and continued to monitor her, hide in her home, and watch her from her yard.
Christina called 911 on one occasion but the stalker left the property before the police
arrived. Because the stalker had left the property the police stated that there was nothing
they could do. Christina, who had the least amount of financial means in comparison to
the other participants, and who identified as a member of a lower socioeconomic class,
believed that she was discriminated against. Christina reported that the police attributed
the incident to a domestic dispute, expected of someone of Christina’s social class, and
did not attribute the behavior to stalking. Christina felt helpless because the police did
not offer her any protection and because she could not afford to implement other safety
measures. For example Christina changed the locks on her apartment but the stalker
broke the locks a second time. Christina was unable to afford to continue to change the locks especially since it was likely the stalker would break the locks again.

Despite the stalker’s continual presence, with the exception of a single incident in which the stalker grabbed Christina’s arm, he was not physically violent towards her or her daughter. However his behavior was no less threatening and induced a heightened sense of fear in Christina’s everyday life, as described below:

The emotional fear, it was almost like you’re numb and you’re just trying to think about survival, ways of how you can get out if he gets in the house. Of course he gets in the house, but if he gets in the house and he decides that he wants to act crazy because that was not on his agenda, and I was always thinking what if he comes in the house one day and he’s totally different and he snaps, what am I gonna do and that’s what energized the insomnia, hypervigilance, constantly thinking of ways to protect me and my daughter. If he comes in here, instead of going in the basement where he goes, or sitting on the couch where he does, what if he comes in here and snaps completely. Then I had these nightmares, what if he comes in here and chops us all up, so yeah I was up, I was alert all the time. I even slept with a knife by my bed.

Therefore, although Christina was not physically harmed, the psychological terror she experienced was no less threatening or damaging than if the stalker had acted out violently.

Joyce’s stalker possessed a concealed weapons permit and owned multiple guns. The stalker never pulled a gun on Joyce. He did, however, threaten to shoot and kill her dog. On one occasion he severely beat Joyce and threw his gun at her. The police were
called to the house and removed the guns but, ironically, the stalker did not initially lose his license to carry a concealed weapon. Ultimately he did lose his license to carry a concealed weapon, but only for a limited amount of time. Whenever a weapon, such as a gun, is readily available, the level of risk and the threat of harm increases regardless of whether or not the gun is ever used or a direct threat is ever made.

 Survivor's Behavioral Changes

 Changes Made During the Stalking

 The women noticed many changes in their behavior, both intentionally to deter the stalker and unintentionally as the result of mental anguish, as the stalking progressed. Cora switched cars with an uncle and then intentionally parked her new car in a different lot than the one designated for her apartment. In this way, the stalker would not be able to identify her new car. As the stalking progressed Cora moved back in with her parents because she was too fearful to stay in her old apartment. “I mean I used to be so fearful in my apartment that he was just going to show up in my doorway and I was going to wake up and he was just going to be like over me.” Vivian also moved back in with her mother and remembers thinking, “I am moving back home, I’m not doing this, I can’t do this, I can’t live on my own, I can’t deal with all of this.” Vivian began attending counseling sessions and was prescribed medication to control her increasing anxiety and insomnia. “I still can remember laying in bed for hours every night, I could not go to sleep, and I got medication from my doctor to be able to sleep and I still would just lay there wide awake because any noise I heard frightened me.” Vivian began to feel like he was watching her at all times. “I would be out in public and I would feel like he was somewhere watching me.” Eventually Vivian began to “shut down” and she left the
house as little as possible. "...the only thing I did was go to school and that was it, and I had my mom drop me off, pick me up, or one of my siblings or something like that, or a friend because I just did not want to be walking on campus, I did not want to be doing anything." Ultimately Vivian’s stalker was imprisoned for stalking Vivian and another woman. Although the stalking was over, she still chose to move. "I moved here, my whole family did actually, and it was partly for me to kind of start over and just get away and I didn’t want to be there when he was out and to kind of like leave all of that life behind me." Michelina and her parents made several changes to avoid the stalker.

Michelina, stalked by two different men, recalled that the second stalker would call her parents house constantly, "...and it was to the point my mom and dad were like we are going to cut off the phone because they tried blocking the number, he called from a cell phone, he called from his house, he called from work, so he was constantly finding a way to call..." Michelina’s parents began to lie to the stalker about where she was and at times did not answer the phone all together. Michelina started spending most nights with friends instead of going home in order to avoid the both of the stalkers. When Michelina was home she “didn’t want to be home alone,” and so her cousin ended up living with her and her parents for the summer. Joyce noticed a change in her behavior before her romantic relationship with the stalker ended because of ongoing domestic violence. Joyce felt socially isolated, which was aggravated by the fact that she was new to the area and had limited support in the locale before she started dating the stalker. After the relationship ended and the stalking began Joyce was forced to move multiple times because the stalker kept finding her. In addition she quit going to local community organizations in order to avoid places the stalker knew he could find her. Joyce also
disclosed that she was being stalked to any agencies that she continued to utilize. She
gave them a picture of the stalker so they could notify her if he appeared. In addition,
Joyce changed several weekly routines such as medical appointments, grocery shopping,
and cleaning habits.

Christina’s experience was different from the other women because the stalker
would not leave her home despite being asked to leave multiple times. Eventually
Christina gave up trying to get rid of the stalker because it seemed futile. “I did have the
locks changed once, but then again I had a very limited income and I think getting the
locks changed was like $50.00 and I was getting money like once a month, so it was
rough. And not only that, he kicked in so many doors that it didn’t matter. He was
jumping through glass windows so it really didn’t matter. I must have replaced about
$100.00 worth of glass because I had a really big glass window in my kitchen where I
lived and he would jump through it, so it really didn’t matter.” Christina lived in constant
fear and became hyper vigilant, which led to insomnia, an inability to eat, and hair loss.
“He was satisfied to be near us, close to us. It got so bad that I would have to sleep
downstairs because I knew he was staying in the basement. I’d have to sleep downstairs;
I’ve suffered from insomnia for a year. I would have to sleep downstairs on a mattress
and I would listen for his movements.” As the stalking and mental anguish progressed
Christina began to contemplate hurting the stalker. Ultimately she realized “its not worth
it because if I did something like that, they would win but at times it felt like hurting him
was the only way out.”
Unlike the other women interviewed, Carolyn describes her parents as being more proactive about changing Carolyn’s behavioral patterns than she was. She remembers their having to “plan things really carefully,” as Carolyn describes below.

Like to stay at a friend’s house I would have to tell my brothers that I’m staying at Kathy’s house when really I was staying at Kristin’s house. We always had to lie so that if he [the stalker] were to call, because we never knew, but if he were to call, they [my brothers] would tell him oh yeah, they’re at Kathy’s house and he wouldn’t know where we were. We did that a lot, anytime I had friends over, both my parents had to be home just in case he were to show up or call, everybody else knew and they would just hang up if it was him, but if it was me [that answered], then he would come to the house. So I was not allowed to answer the phone anymore.” In addition her family ensured that she was never alone. “...my mom started taking me to and from school. I had cheering practice and there was a group of us that would leave [together], I was never allowed to walk from building to building, I was not allowed to be at my house myself, I wasn’t allowed to be at my dad’s house by myself. It was just like there was always somebody with me whether it was my brother, friends, or one of my parents. I never did anything by myself. My parents would take me and drop me off to work.

Neither Mary nor Wilma felt physically threatened by their stalkers but both women noticed that their stalkers always showed up at any social function where they were and, therefore, both women consciously tried to avoid certain places. While Mary was being stalked she felt that she always had to “look over my shoulder to see if he was
there.” She remembers deliberately making and changing plans in order to avoid him. “I always had to ask people if he was coming, and if he was coming then I would have to make other arrangements and go find something else to do.” Although Mary never felt threatened she felt as if “he was always in the back of my head,” and she constantly wondered, “is he going to show up, is he going to be here,” everywhere she went. Wilma recalled a similar experience. Wilma moved several states away right about the time that the stalking began. As a result she believes that the stalking did not have as great of an effect on her everyday life as it could have. However, whenever she would return home to visit she remembers being preoccupied with whether or not he would show up. “When I did go back to visit, I always had to worry, is he going to show up here? Is he going to drive by?” Wilma, during these visits home, would avoid certain places where he was more likely to be. Even now, years after the stalking has ended she fears running into him on her visits home. “I am always afraid he is going to hear that I am in town and I don’t trust that he won’t try to see me”

*Changes Made After the Stalking Ended*

After the stalking ended the women continued to be affected by it, and many of them live differently today because of that experience. Cora has moved several hours away from her stalker in order to avoid him. Although she has not seen him in multiple years she continues to live in fear that he will show up. As she said, “...today I’m so scared of noises and things like that, like I have night lights in every room of my house so it’s never dark in my house. I might have my lights out, but my nightlights are always on, ...when I first moved here I still slept with a knife under my bed, I have a security system on my home. I have little window chimes on my doors, on my windows, because
I was just like so paranoid about things and it still comes back from time to time.”

Despite all of these safety measures Cora continues to feel insecure in her own home.

“I’m not sure, I think that it has a lot to do with what he did that made me as fearful as I was, but it was just that feeling of not knowing and not knowing when I walked into my house, was he going to be there. I mean some of those habits have still carried on when I first walk in my home I look everywhere. I still have those times where I may get in late at night, I will open the storage spaces, I will open my closet, I will open everything, have all my lights on and I’m just like sitting there for a minute and obviously he’s not going to get up here, but its like that fear still just carried on.”

Vivian describes her life as less “carefree” than it was before the stalking began.

“I don’t open any mail that I don’t know anyone sent, none of that kind of stuff. I only have a cell phone, I don’t ever answer numbers that I don’t know unless they’ve come up a couple times and they’ve left a message and I know who its coming from then.”

Although in the past Vivian would leave her doors unlocked and windows opened on a nice day she explains that she would never do that now. In addition Vivian is paranoid when she is out in public alone. “I still now have to say that occasionally when I’m out, if I see somebody walking towards me, like a guy and its just me, it doesn’t matter what race they are, anything, it could be just a guy, I sometimes will feel just a little bit of paranoia, like are they looking at me, do I need to move over so that we don’t cross, especially when I’m on campus, walking back to my car or something like that.”

Several women reported being paranoid of others, regardless of the individual’s sex, since the stalking ended. Christina stated that when it comes to her social life she is “not a people person like she used to be.” She does however enjoy working with people
in a professional capacity “...I do enjoy people if I’m in a position where I can try to help them help themselves, but other than that I prefer to be by myself because I’m not being controlled.” Michelina explained that she is no longer paranoid that her stalker will attack her but she is paranoid of people in general. “...he put ideas in my head that actually people will do that, you know they’ll come and get you and do all this. And its not even now I think oh he’s going to come and get me here, its not that, its just it can be anybody, somebody I don’t know, somebody I do know, it’s a girl, it’s a guy, just somebody, you know.” Danielle, stalked by a professional peer, stated that she prefers to have a witness present at all interactions with other professionals in the community.

“The idea that you have a witness to hear what you have to say and what somebody else has to say to you. That would be something that might have been the answer to what has changed to me. I would still behave in that manner in a case where I think somebody might lie or exaggerate the fact, I would always want somebody with me to verify. I don’t think I would have thought about that before actually.”

Post Stalking Dating Patterns

Several women noted being very cautious about dating once the stalking ended, specifically those women stalked by a former boyfriend. Michelina became very cautious of men who appeared overanxious. “I dated some guys off and on and it got to a point if they would call me all the time, that was really creepy...” and she would immediately cut ties. In addition Michelina took a knife on her first date with her current boyfriend. For the first two months Cora and her current boyfriend met in public places for all of their dates and he did not know where Cora lived. Joyce started dating a new man while she was still being stalked. Shortly after the relationship began she noticed
that new guy she was dating was “very clingy and so when I was looking at the relationship and I remember that Peter [the stalker] was kinda clingy to start out and I don’t think that William would ever turn into what Peter is, but I think that, I kinda re-evaluated and I said I kinda need to take some time off and not date someone for a while.” Mary continued to date after the stalking ended but she refrained from getting into a serious relationship for two years. “I dated, but I never got serious, like I told all my friends the word relationship is not in my vocabulary right now and that was for like two years.” Although she now has been in a serious relationship since the stalking ended, “I’ve found that I’ve taken everything a lot slower now, like I’m very, very apprehensive about jumping into a relationship now.” Christina, unlike the other women, has not dated at all since the stalking ended roughly eight years ago.

Retrospective Wisdom

Oftentimes victims of stalking may not label their experience as stalking until weeks or months after the stalking began. Some victims do not even label the experience as stalking until long after it is over. Therefore, many women interviewed refrained from taking action because, although the stalker’s behavior was unsettling, initially they did not envision it escalating and they definitely did not label it stalking. Wilma stated that she “was too nice for too long....Cut it off as soon as you can. I think I was too young to realize that. I didn’t know it was going to turn into something like this.” Mary felt like she ignored some early warning signs while she was still dating the stalker and encouraged women to take action and listen to their instincts. “...a lot of times in the beginning of a relationship, you’ll see warning signs that are not apparent when you start dating that person, you know you just kind of blow them off and don’t think anything
about it. But then when you really look back and reflect on it you’re like wow, maybe it would have been a good idea to stop this before it even could’ve gotten started. And if it does get to that point definitely go to the authorities because they’re the only people that can really help you.” Joyce commented on how difficult it can be for victims to identify the behavior as stalking if there is not any violence, but stressed how stalking does not have to include violence to be treacherous.

Sometimes I think that people that would get stalked or people that are being stalked wouldn’t know that it was a horrible thing. You know that they would not think of it as a big deal. In my case I think that because of the domestic violence, it made it more serious to me, but I think that some people, they aren’t exposed to the violence like that, like if I was just exposed to the e-mails or him driving by, I’m not sure if I would take it as seriously as it should be taken and so I think that people need to realize it is a serious thing and I think community awareness is an important thing. I think that you kind of need to know that it’s out there. There are people that will get a little obsessive and that that’s not normal and it’s not safe.

Carolyn encouraged women to listen to their instincts. “Any idea, any indication, even just the slightest feeling that something isn’t right, to have somebody else look at it.” Cora advised current victims that, “when something is out of place, you need to work with your instinct.” Overall the participants encouraged victims to never underestimate the power of intuition.

Although multiple women interviewed advised that victims listen to their instincts and document everything, some women purposely attempted to ignore the stalker as a
coping strategy. Some women stated that as the stalker’s behavior escalated they attempted to ignore it as a way to manage the experience. These women hoped naively that if they ignored the stalker he would go away. Wilma and Vivian did this by disposing of letters and objects sent to them by the stalker. Wilma kept a couple of letters but threw away most of the letters the stalker sent her. She also threw away the sweatband soaked in cologne that he had sent her. Vivian, like Wilma, threw away the items her stalker sent her. “I just wanted to continue on with my life, I was in school, I was working, I didn’t want to deal with it or think about it. I ripped it [a letter] up and threw it away. And I told the police officer about it and he was like why did you do that, he was like you should have kept it, and I’m like I just don’t want anything of his, I want it to be gone.” Vivian also asked her co-worker to stop telling her when he came to her place of employment looking for her.

He would also like stop in and tell the workers to tell me hi, that he said hi kind of thing and he would always only give his first name, like tell Vivian I said hi and I stopped in. He was trying to communicate through others with me and then it got to the point that they wouldn’t tell me because I would say I don’t want to hear that stuff anymore, don’t tell me anything, I don’t want to know what he says. Then the police said no, we need to hear what he’s trying to communicate to you because I was like let me just to try to brush it all off, blow it off, keep pushing away, but the police were like no, we need this information, you’re throwing stuff away that we need and my whole thought was just get it away from me, because then it didn’t happen kind of thing.
Cora stated that she ignored her instinct initially and remembers thinking, “I don’t want to get involved, I don’t want to do anything with that [the stalking].”

Clearly, possible victims are sometimes unsure of whether or not they are being stalked, or they speculate that they are but they ignore the signs as a way to avoid the behavior in hopes that it will end. In all cases, whether or not a romantic relationship existed before the stalking began, Christina encouraged women to evaluate themselves and the changes they have undergone rather than simply the stalker’s behavior. “Think about how you were before this happened and how happy you were and I think once ladies reminisce on that, I think that’s where strength comes from. Just like I had this person strip me from all of this, how can I get back there.” Stalking victims consistently experience some form of change in their daily living patterns, particular behaviors or emotions. Christina recommended that women be cognizant of these changes and see them as indicators that a relationship is unhealthy or a pursuer’s behavior is inappropriate.

If there is any indication that one is possibly being stalked several participants advised how important it is to document the experience and to confide in someone. Michelina never went to the police and felt, as the stalking escalated, that it was too late to seek help. “I felt that since we had been girlfriend/boyfriend for such a long time and this had been going on for such a long time at this point, what were the police going to do, its kind of like you should have called sooner, or since I knew him they would have had the same kind of impression that he’s just coming over or whatever to get you back.” Therefore she advised that women get help and take legal action early on. “Press charges…so even if its little stuff, calling all the time, its kind of like heads up, its
probably going to escalate, call the cops, at least [get] a restraining order, get something written, get something on paper. Because I guess that was my thought after he tried to run me off the road in the car...nobody is ever going to know that this has been an ongoing thing...even though other people knew, it's got to be in writing, you better have it written down, you write it down, tell somebody, tell the cops, get it on a piece of paper, get it on a post-it, whatever.” Danielle, stalked by a co-worker, had to interact with the stalker to complete her work responsibilities. She advised that any victim being stalked by a co-worker, in addition to documenting every interaction with the stalker, never interact with the stalker without a third party present. “Documenting everything, same thing as you hear right now, document, document, document, document, document, and I never went to his office by myself. There was an occasion where I did have to go and I made sure that somebody else was with me.” Joyce reiterated how important it is for other victims to “…make sure that they do stand up and tell someone about it.” Christina advised women to report the stalking to anyone that would listen. “File police reports and tell everybody you can, run your mouth. It's not telling your business, it’s about making other people aware of what’s going on in case the police don’t help. That’s what I did, I told everybody, in case I showed up dead, in case I had to kill him possibly, you know somebody knew.” In general, survivors advised others to document the stalker’s behavior as thoroughly as possible, write it down, seek assistance from law enforcement, and report the situation to friends, family, and co-workers.

Deviant Case Example

Carolyn’s lived experience deviated from the experiences of the other women interviewed. Despite Carolyn’s young age, early twenties, she reports being stalked by
three different men and raped twice, once by one of the stalkers and once by an 
aquaintance. In comparison to the other eight women interviewed, only one of the other 
women reported being stalked by more than one man and only one of the other women 
reported being the target of any other violent crime perpetrated by any individual other 
than the stalker. Overall it appears that Carolyn’s dating history has not followed a 
normative dating pattern. Nearly every relationship she described involved overly 
obsessive, and oftentimes violent, men. In addition she had been targeted not only by 
men she has dated, but also by a number of acquaintances and strangers, for example, she 
was raped by an acquaintance and reported being followed home from bars by strangers. 
It should be noted that according to customary societal standards of beauty Carolyn is an 
 extremely attractive women. In view of this reality it is probable that she attracts an 
inordinate number of men. However, despite her appearance, it is still possible that her 
interactions with men somehow differ from those of her female peers. 

Carolyn seemed to exercise less caution, relative to the other women interviewed, 
in regards to her dating habits. Several of the other women interviewed reported 
practicing extreme caution when they began dating again after the stalking ended. Cora 
reported that two months went by before her current boyfriend learned where she lived. 
Michelina reported taking a knife for protection on a first date. Many of the women 
waited from several months to two years before entering into a serious relationship. In 
one case the participant, Christina, has not dated since the stalking ended, approximately 
eight years ago. In contrast, Carolyn has continued to date, without interruption, since 
she was first stalked. She did report taking some safety measures, such as only going on 
group dates for first dates. However, she is more willing to go alone to a man’s home 

much sooner than the other women interviewed. In general she appears to be much more trusting of people than the other women interviewed despite the fact that she has been the target of interpersonal violence at a much higher rate than any of the other women interviewed. In addition, Carolyn deviated from the other women in that she reported relying on friends and family to validate her significant others rather than relying on her own judgment. Many of the women interviewed reported ending new relationships based on their “instinct” that something was out of place, or because the man’s behavior reminded them of the stalker’s early behaviors. No other woman interviewed reported relying on others to make that decision for them.

Carolyn also deviated from the other women interviewed in the way that she reported interacting with her family. Based on her comments during the interview, it appears that Carolyn comes from a very close-knit, possibly enmeshed, family system. Although many of the other women reported coming from a close, supportive family their boundaries between themselves and their family appeared to be more flexible than the boundaries within Carolyn’s family. Carolyn described having a lot of rules placed on her while she was growing up. She explained that the rules were in place because her older siblings had rebelled against her parents. Therefore her parent’s strict rules were put in place to prevent Carolyn from rebelling. During high school, Carolyn remembers her parents being increasingly strict as the stalking escalated, supposedly as a means by which to protect her. Even as an adult, when she was stalked the second time, her mother placed rather strict rules on Carolyn by requiring her to call her mother every time she left a place and every time she arrived elsewhere.
Carolyn also described having an extremely close relationship with her stepfather. As an adolescent Carolyn had a distant relationship with her biological father and tended to look to her stepfather as her main father figure. Carolyn’s stepfather is a member of the clergy. As a member of the clergy he counsels people within his church. Carolyn reported that her stepfather offered to provide counseling for Carolyn if she ever wanted to discuss her experiences of being stalked or raped. Carolyn stated that she does not feel that she needs counseling but if she did she would seek out her stepfather rather than a third party professional counselor. Carolyn admits that the family was very secretive the first time she was stalked and raped and that no one outside of the family knew about it. Her stepfather’s offer to counsel her may be another attempt by the family to keep the experience a secret. In general, however, counselors are discouraged from serving family members. Therefore the arrangement between Carolyn and her stepfather indicates some concern with boundaries.

Another aspect of Carolyn’s experience raises concerns about family functioning. Carolyn reports that her brother introduced her to the second stalker. Her brother introduced a member of law enforcement to his sister in order to avoid penalties for illegal activities. Carolyn agreed to go on a date with the second stalker because she trusted her brother and his opinion of this man. Once the stalking began the brother admitted that he knew little about the stalker when he had introduced him to Carolyn. The brother apologized profusely to Carolyn for the introduction, but not for exploiting his sister for his own personal gain.

The functioning of Carolyn’s family may have an effect on the way Carolyn develops and maintains relationships as an adult. Carolyn’s personal interactions and
relationships with members of the opposite sex may be patterned after her relationships with family members, especially male family members. As a result friends and strangers may misinterpret her actions and she may be more likely to attract obsessive men who are inclined toward enmeshed, controlling relationships. In addition, she seems to rely on the judgments of friends and family for assessment and approval of significant others, thereby indicating that she distrusts her own ability to assess others’ motives and behavior.
CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

Identifying stalking behavior appears to be a significant barrier to assisting victims of stalking. Anti-stalking laws vary from state to state, however they all consist of the same basic elements. Typically for behavior to be labeled stalking there has to be at least two separate acts to establish a pattern, the behavior has to induce some sense of fear within the victim, and the perpetrator has to knowingly engage in the patterned behavior (Mullen et al, 1999; Roberts, 2005; Sheridan et al, 2003). These elements are limited, but can be beneficial for victims because stalking behaviors vary widely. At the same time, however, they require law enforcement, victims, family and friends of victims, social workers and other professionals to make a judgment call on what is and what is not stalking. As a result, it can be difficult to operationalize anti-stalking laws and definitively identify stalking behaviors. Current research has attempted to create typologies of stalkers based on whom a perpetrator stalks or his motives (Mullen et al, 1999; Sheridan et al, 2003; Zona, Palarea, & Lane, 1998). However, empirical data alone does not define precisely what does and does not constitute stalking behavior because many stalking behaviors could be considered romantic gestures in another context. Therefore, creating an operational definition of stalking or constructing anti-stalking law raises many complex questions. For example, what behaviors cross the line from
pursuing someone romantically to stalking someone? Is stalking different from a romantic pursuit based on the number of rejections, the amount of contact, or the length of time in which the stalker pursues the victim? How often do these behaviors have to occur? Does the behavior have to include violence or even the threat of violence? Is stalking defined by the perpetrator’s behaviors or the victim’s perception of the behaviors? All of these questions are important because how a victim answers them will dictate the actions taken by the victim, her family and friends. For example, victims may attempt to ignore the behavior and minimize the possible consequences if family and friends trivialize the stalker’s actions. In such situations the behavior may continue to escalate. The victim may destroy any evidence of the stalking and fail to document the behavior, leaving little evidence to incriminate and prosecute the stalker. Stalking is a crime that is very difficult to stop, once it has started. Therefore, identifying someone’s behavior as stalking will not guarantee that it will end. However, until the stalking is recognized victims will not seek assistance. And the stalking may escalate beyond their control very quickly, leaving them in an imminent crisis.

When assessing a potential stalking situation the most difficult defining element is whether or not the behavior is an appropriate form of courtship. Many stalkers pursue their victims because they desire a romantic relationship (Nicastro et al, 2000; Spitzberg & Cupach, 2002). Some victims, their family and friends, or law enforcement may view the pursuer or potential stalker’s behavior as typical and acceptable romantic overtures. Oftentimes there is a fine line between appropriate courtship practices and the early stages of stalking. This reality is related to the fact that stalking exists on a continuum. On the one end the stalker may send the victim flowers or show up at the victim’s home.
On the other end, the stalker may monitor the victim’s every move through GPS, video surveillance, or spyware, as well as physically threaten or harm the victim or her family. Diverse persons, including victims, will identify the behavior as problematic at different points on the continuum. Typically a stalker’s behavior cannot be placed on one end of the continuum or the other; rather it will fluctuate and typically escalate. In addition, the behavior needs to be evaluated within its context. It is appropriate to send someone flowers when you are dating, however, it is inappropriate to send someone flowers that are dead or cut up. Oftentimes even the context may not seem overly intimidating to the outside observer and therefore the victim’s interpretations of the stalker’s behavior need to be evaluated. For example Wilma never felt physically threatened by her stalker. However, he would routinely leave her messages on her answering machine telling her that he loved her. To the outside observer, this type of behavior may not appear to be problematic, however to Wilma, who had made it clear to the stalker on numerous occasions that she was not interested, it was extremely unsettling. Overall, the findings of this study indicate that women tend to define a supposed romantic pursuit as stalking much sooner than men. It was only after the behavior escalated that many of the women in this study identified a male family member, friend, or peer who was supportive. This particular finding of a gendered response to stalking, was not found elsewhere in the current literature.

Dating customs of American society may be contributing to the different gendered responses to stalking. The heterosexual script dictates that men are to pursue women. Evidence abounds in society through our books, movies, and music. For example Every Breath You Take, written by Sting and performed by the Police, appears
to be a romantic love ballad. But the lyrics imply that the singer is watching and following the subject of the song. As a result some have argued that the song is more of a stalker’s anthem than a declaration of love. In fact anti violence organizations, such as Crisis Connection in Indiana and the Office of the Prevention of Domestic Violence in New York, use the lyrics of *Every Breath You Take* on their websites to educate people about stalking ([www.crisisconnectioninc.org/](http://www.crisisconnectioninc.org/) & [www.opdv.state.nv.us/index.html](http://www.opdv.state.nv.us/index.html)). Despite this fact, “Every Breath You Take” is a popular love song, implying that unrelenting pursuit of women, regardless of whether or not their affections are reciprocal, is romantic and acceptable behavior for men. Consequently, if men are to pursue women, then women are to be chased. Women are not supposed to be available. Furthermore, when a woman is not interested, she is not supposed to reject explicitly her pursuer by saying “sorry but I am not interested.” Rather, she should subtly reject the pursuer by fabricating an excuse such as: “I’m sorry but I am washing my hair tonight.” This idealized, romanticized dance between men and women may explain why men appear to have a higher tolerance than women when it comes to what is considered stalking and what are considered appropriate courtship behaviors. Men believe that women are playing “hard to get” and women are told to let men down “easy” and avoid direct rejection. As a result, men observing this behavior are likely to trivialize the stalker’s behavior and are quick to attribute it to poor dating skills, immaturity, or a deep affection for the victim. However, there is clearly a difference between pursuing someone
romantically and stalking them. The question then becomes when is that line crossed. It appears, because of the different ways men and women are socialized, men and women may not agree on where that line is drawn.

Although persons disagree on what does and does not constitute stalking, it is clear based on the findings of this study, that victims of stalking are genuinely at risk of violence. This point cannot be over emphasized. Michelina recounted her stalker attempting to run her off the road. Joyce reported that her stalker owned two guns and physically attacked her on a number of occasions. Christina stated that her stalker was living in her house and despite numerous calls to the police, he refused to leave. Vivian reported that she was physically attacked three times by her stalker and that he was ultimately imprisoned for raping and torturing another woman whom he had stalked. Clearly these women were at high risk. Furthermore the events described above occurred towards the end of the stalking experience, not the beginning. In the beginning most of the men appeared to be very charming and caring. Even when the stalker began to be obsessive, it did not appear to be alarming and others attributed it to the stalker’s attempts to be romantic. But early warning signs cannot be ignored. More importantly, they should not be trivialized and attributed to a romantic pursuit, immaturity, or poor dating skills.

Trivialization of the stalking behavior by a third party can place the victim at a greater risk. Stalking victims tend to underestimate the level of risk, which could be reinforced when an individual that the victim turns to for help and support agrees that there is nothing to fear. Third party individuals need to take the situation seriously from the beginning and emphasize to the victim how important it is to document all
interactions with the stalker and keep all gifts, letters, and other objects. Vivian was told by a police officer that the stalker more than likely was attracted to her and did not know how to approach her. As a result Vivian interpreted the stalker's actions as unsettling but harmless. However, over the next several weeks the stalker physically attacked her three times. Vivian's experience illustrates the effect trivialization of stalking by third party individuals can have on a victim. The police officer initially may have trivialized Vivian's experience in order to offer her comfort, but he should have encouraged her to document all contact with the stalker in case the behavior escalated. Stalkers must always be taken seriously.

The legal status of stalking as a crime, in relation to other crimes, may contribute to society's general trivialization of stalking. Anti-stalking state laws typically categorize stalking in one of three ways: 1) as a misdemeanor no matter how many offenses have occurred, 2) as a misdemeanor if a first offense and subsequent convictions of stalking or protection order violations as a felony, or 3) as a felony at all times (National Center for Victims of Crime, Stalking and the Law, 1997). The second classification, of the three listed above, is the most common. In Ohio menacing by stalking is a misdemeanor of the first degree. The charge can be raised to a felony of the fourth degree if the assailant physically threatened or harmed the victim, trespassed on the victim's property, place of employment, or school, has a history of violence with the victim, had a deadly weapon, destroyed the victim's personal property, had been charged with a previous menacing by stalking offense, or the victim is a minor (Anderson's Ohio Revised Code, 2005). In comparison to other crimes, stalking is oftentimes a lesser offense. For example, as stated above menacing by stalking in Ohio is limited to a felony of the fourth degree,
whereas rape is a felony of the first degree (Anderson’s Ohio Revised Code, 2005).

Ironically stalking oftentimes escalates to rape or murder, however it is the physical assault that is considered more heinous than the behavior that led to the assault. This legal classification trivializes the lethality of stalking. In the beginning stalking rarely involves violence however it can, and it often does, escalate. Classifying stalking as a significantly lesser crime than other crimes, such as rape, sends a strong message to victims and the general public that stalking is not as serious as other interpersonal crimes.

Based on the discussion above, it appears that American culture and the American legal system do not identify stalking as an important issue or a potentially lethal crime. American society’s lack of concern translates into a lack of resources and support available to victims. As a result victims are vulnerable to violence, psychological harm, and death. As discussed in the literature review, Blaauw et al. (2002) found that victims ultimately get to a breaking point where death is preferable to a life of constant fear. Such a progression is a sign that not enough is being done to protect these women. Although only 2% of victims of stalking are murdered, it is apparent that significant psychological harm is being inflicted on these women, the effects of which will last long after the stalking ends, if it ever does (Meloy, 1998; Roberts, 2005). In addition, the literature shows that the criminal justice system’s inability to protect victims reinforces the stalker’s power and may encourage women, who were once in a romantic relationship with the stalker, to return to the stalker because there is no way to escape (Humphreys & Thiara, 2003). The lack of training provided to law enforcement since the creating of anti-stalking laws in the early 1990’s may also contribute to this situation (Kinkade et al, 2005). Finally this study showed that many men who stalk are skilled, intelligent men,
thus increasing the risks to victims. For example Joyce’s stalker was able to hack into her personal computer and access her e-mail passwords. Christina’s stalker was able to break into her home, undetected, and hide in her basement. The man who stalked Danielle was a lawyer and knew how to access personal information from public records about her divorce and her family. The intelligence and skills of these men can increase the risks to victims because they are capable of evading the law, especially in a society that is not committed to protecting stalking victims. Until society recognizes the seriousness of stalking and advocates lobby for stricter laws and an increase in resources for victims of stalking, women will continue to be vulnerable to physical and psychological harm, and in some cases, death.
CHAPTER 6

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Community Education

Every stalking experience is different and therefore there is no simple, specific formula to stop a stalker. Several women interviewed stated that the stalking ended abruptly for no apparent reason, while some participants cited specific reasons. Cora stated that the stalker started dating another woman and therefore left her alone, and Joyce stated that the stalking ended when the perpetrator faced a suspended 60 day jail sentence that would be enforced if he contacted her. It is beyond the scope of this study to definitively state what deters a stalker. If there is no way to stop the behavior once it starts, the best alternative may be community education to ensure that the general public can identify stalking and know what measures to take if they or a loved one becomes a victim. There is widespread community education on sexual assault and domestic violence but there is very minimal education on stalking despite the fact that sexual assault and domestic violence often coincide with stalking.

As seen in the theme labeled Retrospective Wisdom, many of the women ignored early warning signs because they did not envision the behavior escalating. Even as the stalker’s behavior escalated, the women, as well as their friends and family, trivialized the experience because they did not understand the lethal potential of stalking. Many of
the recommendations given by the women interviewed were things they themselves did not do, such as documenting every interaction with the stalker, telling the people around them about the stalking, and reporting the stalker to law enforcement. The women interviewed did not do these things because they did not know how important they were. Currently, it may be that individuals become knowledgeable about stalking once they have become victims, after the stalking has escalated or possibly ended. Victims throw letters and gifts away, do not document interactions with the stalker, and ignore the escalating behavior because the general public does not know or understand the level to which stalking can escalate. Most of the women interviewed wished they had been more proactive when the stalking behavior began but they were uneducated about stalking and the appropriate measures they could have taken to protect themselves. So, they simply ignored the stalker.

*Services for Victims and Survivors*

Only two of the women interviewed, Joyce and Vivian, reported receiving counseling to cope with the stalking. Joyce accessed an individual counselor, as did Vivian. Vivian was also able to access a support group created by her private counselor specifically for survivors and victims of stalking. The rest of the participants of this study reported that they never sought counseling. Even if they had sought services specifically for victims or survivors of stalking, it is unlikely that they would have been successful. Based on a survey of the services available in the area in which this study was completed it appeared that there are minimal services specifically for victims of ongoing stalking and even fewer for survivors of stalking. Typically the city prosecutor’s office has a victim advocate specifically for stalking victims, but based on a search of
local services there are few additional services beyond the prosecutor's office. In addition, counseling services, especially group services, are nonexistent. Although Vivian was able to attend a group specifically for victims of stalking it was her individual counselor, who organized the group. Current victims and survivors are oftentimes sent to domestic violence or sexual assault support groups. Although domestic violence and sexual assault often occur within the context of stalking, stalking is a much different crime. On-line counseling services, through the use of chat rooms, have developed in recent years however these are not sufficient. Survivors and victims can always access an individual counselor but stalking research is relatively new and even individual counselors are not fully equipped to deal with the effects of stalking. Overall, the services currently available for victims and survivors of stalking are virtually nonexistent and insufficient.

Due to the fact that services are limited stalking victims tend to be referred to services for victims of other crimes, such as domestic violence and rape. However, stalking is very different from other forms of crisis. In some crimes the crisis may be isolated to a single incident, such as some incidents of sexual assault, robbery, car jacking, and murder. These events, whether one is the victim or a witness, are very traumatic and can have long lasting effects. However, the incident is isolated. Stalking is more similar to domestic violence or ongoing sexual abuse in that one is repeatedly victimized. In such incidents there is little recovery, and as time goes by and the behavior continues, the ability to recovery between incidents lessens. Victims of these crimes live in constant crisis. Yet there are differences between domestic violence and stalking. The fear of the unknown is much greater in victims of stalking. Although
victims of domestic violence may not always know when their abusers will strike, there is usually more predictability. Victims of stalking are hyper vigilant at all times and in all places because there is no way to know when the stalker could emerge or where they will emerge. None of the crimes listed above are any less traumatic than the other however the effects, and therefore the course of counseling, are much different. The same formula cannot be utilized with all victims or survivors. Therefore stalking victims and survivors cannot be sent to a domestic violence support group, and the same intervention model used in domestic violence support groups cannot be applied to stalking support groups because the dynamics between the two crimes are so different. Support groups need to be created specifically for victims and survivors of stalking.

Support groups for stalking victims and survivors need to address specifically crisis coping strategies. As seen in the findings of this study, victims of stalking often undergo a significant amount of change, both while being stalked and after. These changes are meant to serve as some sort of protection, however realistically these safety measures are probably not that effective. For instance Cora put a mechanism on all of her doors and windows that rings every time a door or window is opened. Although this makes Cora feel safe, realistically it is not that effective at keeping her safe because the alarms on Cora’s doors and windows can notify her if someone has entered her home, but they do not make it more difficult to enter her home nor do they signal law enforcement if someone has entered. Cora, and the other women interviewed, take these precautions to minimize the anxiety that remains years after the stalking ended. For instance, Vivian stated that she returned home one day, four years after the stalking ended, and her garage door had been left open. She remembers panicking and leaving her home in fear. She
called the police and after they had checked the entire house she asked them to check it again. This incident may have elicited some anxiety in the average person, however, for Vivian it sent her into crisis mode, even though it had been years since the stalking ended. Therefore one of the purposes a stalking victims/survivor support group should serve is to develop effective coping strategies to manage the crises they endured throughout their stalking experience as well as the effects it is still having on them years later.

When working with a victim or survivor of stalking, whether in an individual or group setting, it is important to assess the behavioral changes they have made since the stalking began. Every woman interviewed for this study made some sort of change. The changes existed on a continuum. Some women started avoiding certain social events and gatherings whereas other women made more drastic changes such as moving. However not all of the changes were made to avoid the stalker. Some of the changes were the result of the mental anguish that the women endured. Christina stopped eating and suffered from insomnia. Vivian began to isolate herself and was afraid to leave her home because she suffered from a high level of anxiety and fear. These types of changes can have detrimental effects on the victim and must be addressed. Although many stalking victims may need to make changes in order to protect themselves, one should not assume that all changes made by victims are necessary or healthy. All changes should be evaluated and victims should be helped to develop effective coping strategies.
CHAPTER 7

STUDY LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

The majority of the participants were in their twenties, most of them were white, all of them were women, and all of the women identify as heterosexual. Individuals of all ages, races, genders, and sexual orientations can be victims of stalking. A more diverse sample may elicit different findings and may identify other implications for culturally sensitive practice.

Another limitation of this study was that the majority of participants had been stalked in the last five years and all of them had been stalked within the last ten years. This range of time may provide a limited view on the long-term effects of stalking. Although all of the women made changes in their behaviors when the stalking ended some of the changes were long term and others subsided with time. For example Christina was stalked eight years ago and has not dated since the stalking began whereas some of the other women interviewed did begin dating again. Therefore a study inclusive of women who have been stalked further in the past might identify the prevalence of diverse long-term changes. In the future a longitudinal study would be helpful to identify alternative behavioral patterns and the long-term effects of being stalked.

The sample size consisted of nine participants, in part because of the selected issue and established criteria for participation. Approximately 8% of women are stalked
in their lifetime (Blaauw et al., 2002; Kinkade, Burnes, & Fuentes, 2005; Mullen, Pathe, Purcell, & Stuart, 1999; Nicastro, Cousins, & Spitzberg, 2000; Roberts, 2005; Sinwelski & Vinton, 2001; and Spitzberg & Cupach, 2003). This is a significant percentage of women. However, recruitment of participants from across the state required time and travel. Additionally, support groups for stalking victims and survivors are limited. Therefore, no readily available convenience sample could be identified. Furthermore, in this study participants could not be a current victim of stalking to participate nor could they be actively seeking professional help to manage the stalking or its aftermath. Another reality surfaced in this study. A couple of participants noted that they did not hear from their stalker in a year or two and then, unexpectedly he called. When this happened to one of the participants she remembered thinking, “How can this still be going on?” She was fearful that the stalking had resumed. Moreover, even if the stalker no longer had contact with the victim, the women continued to remain hyper vigilant and fearful that the stalker would reappear, leading them to question whether or not it was truly over. Finally this study was a master’s thesis and the research did not receive funding. Because of the financial limitations and the time restraints of this study the researcher was unable to travel extensively to complete this study. As a result, the research endeavor was limited by time and money. In the future the use of theoretical sampling would be ideal to identify a more diverse and extensive sample whose lived experiences could possibly construct more meanings and help us understand better the sociocultural contexts of stalking.
APPENDIX A

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. Tell me about your relationship before the stalking occurred.

2. Please describe his (or her) first contact with you after the relationship ended.

3. When did you first sense that his (or her) behavior was inappropriate?

4. How did you attempt to deal with the stalking?

5. Where did you seek help?

6. How did the stalking finally end?

7. How did your life change during the stalking?

8. How has your life changed because of the stalking?

9. What would you recommend to women who are being stalked?

10. What were your family and friends reactions to the stalker? Were they always this way? Did they ever change?

11. How would you have described the stalker’s personality when you first met? Did his personality ever seem to change? If so how?
APPENDIX B

CONSENT FORM

CONSENT
Behavioral/Social Science

IRB Protocol Number: 2005B0344
IRB Approval date: 01/10/2006
Version: 12/15/2005

The Ohio State University Consent to Participate in Research

Study Title: Qualitative Study of the Experiences of Female Stalking Victims
Dr. Bette Speziale, Associate Professor in the College of Social Work at The Ohio State University

Researcher: Linda Cox, MSW If Student in the College of Social Work at The Ohio State University

Sponsor: None: Non-funded Research

This is a consent form for research participation. It contains important information about this study and what to expect if you decide to participate.

Your participation is voluntary.

Please consider the information carefully. Feel free to ask questions before making your decision whether or not to participate. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to sign this form and will receive a copy of the form.

Purpose:

You are being asked to participate in this research study to investigate adult females’ experiences with stalking.
Procedures/Tasks:

You will complete one interview session lasting no more than 1 - 1.5 hours that will be audio taped. The initial interview will be based on, but not limited to, general questions about your stalking experience. The interview will be transcribed and then you will be asked to read over the interview transcript at a later date in order to make amendments or additions. The second session will likely last thirty minutes or less.

Duration:

You may leave the study at any time. If you decide to stop participating in the study, there will be no penalty to you, and you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Your decision will not affect your future relationship with The Ohio State University.

Risks and Benefits:

You will not benefit directly from participating in the study. The data collected, however, will help social workers and human service professionals to understand dynamics of stalking and help survivors overcome its effects.

Involvement in this study will require you to discuss your experiences of being stalked, which may possibly result in psychological distress. In order to minimize this risk you can stop your participation in the study at any time. In addition, you will receive at the conclusion of the audio taped interview a list of local counseling centers and crisis hotlines where, if you wish, you can receive any needed support.

Confidentiality:

You will be assigned a pseudonym at the beginning of this study. Your identifying information and matching pseudonym will be kept on a master list only accessible to the student researcher and the faculty mentor and kept in a locked cabinet in their offices. Only your pseudonym will appear on all research materials, the audiotape and the interview transcript collected during this study. All research materials will be destroyed one year after the data analysis has been completed.

Efforts will be made to keep your study-related information confidential. However, there may be circumstances where this information must be released. For example, personal information regarding your participation in this study may be disclosed if required by
state law. Also, your records may be reviewed by the following groups (as applicable to the research):

- Office for Human Research Protections or other federal, state, or international regulatory agencies;
- The Ohio State University Institutional Review Board or Office of Responsible Research Practices;
- The sponsor, if any, or agency (including the Food and Drug Administration for FDA-regulated research) supporting the study.

Incentives:

You will not be paid to participate in this study.

Participant Rights:

You may refuse to participate in this study without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you are a student or employee at Ohio State, your decision will not affect your grades or employment status.

If you choose to participate in the study, you may discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits. By signing this form, you do not give up any personal legal rights you may have as a participant in this study.

An Institutional Review Board responsible for human subjects research at The Ohio State University reviewed this research project and found it to be acceptable, according to applicable state and federal regulations and University policies designed to protect the rights and welfare of participants in research.

Contacts and Questions:

For questions, concerns, or complaints about the study you may contact

Dr. Bette Speziale, Associate Professor in the College of Social Work at The Ohio State University by phone at 614-262-7882.

For questions about your rights as a participant in this study or to discuss other study-related concerns or complaints with someone who is not part of the research team, you may contact Ms. Sandra Meadows in the Office of Responsible Research Practices at 1-800-678-6251.
If you are injured as a result of participating in this study or for questions about a study-related injury, you may contact: The Office of Responsible Research by phone at 614-688-8457.

**Signing the consent form**

I have read (or someone has read to me) this form and I am aware that I am being asked to participate in a research study. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have had them answered to my satisfaction. I voluntarily agree to participate in this study. I also consent to have my responses audio taped and have initialed the box below to indicate consent to be audio taped.

I am not giving up any legal rights by signing this form. I will be given a copy of this form.

---

**Printed name of subject**

**Signature of subject**

AM/PM

Date and time

---

**Printed name of person authorized to consent for subject (when applicable)**

**Signature of person authorized to consent for subject (when applicable)**

AM/PM

Date and time

---

☐ I have initialed the box at left to indicate that I consent to have my responses audio taped.
Investigator/Research Staff

I have explained the research to the participant or his/her representative before requesting the signature(s) above. There are no blanks in this document. A copy of this form has been given to the participant or his/her representative.

Printed name of person obtaining consent

Signature of person obtaining consent

Date and time

AM/PM
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