An Examination of the Predictors of Stalking Myth Acceptance and Perpetration

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ABSTRACT

Although interpersonal violence, such as stalking, is prevalent among college students, the factors that predict and contribute to a culture of campus violence are still obscure. Parallel to the established link between rape myth acceptance and rape perpetration, research has emphasized the ways in which stalking myth acceptance, societal attitudes, and false beliefs about stalking, normalize and perpetuate its occurrence (Lippman, 2015; McKeon, McEwan, & Leubbers, 2015). To further understand this dynamic, we examined the relationship between demographic variables, stalking myth acceptance (SMA), and stalking perpetration (SP) in a convenience sample of college students. Statistical analyses indicated that gender and sexual orientation were significant predictors of SMA. Moreover, SMA, gender, and sexual orientation significantly predicted SP. A better understanding of the relationship between demographic variables, attitudes, and stalking perpetration illuminates the need for targeted efforts to change social norms that have traditionally normalized and perpetuated campus violence.

Keywords: stalking, stalking myths, interpersonal violence, perpetration

Interpersonal violence (IPV), such as rape, sexual assault, stalking, and harassment, is a flagrant problem particularly of concern to college students. Initial victimization most commonly occurs during the first year of school when students are most vulnerable, in relatively new surroundings with many new people and sometimes without their traditional support systems (Breiding et al., 2011; McNamara & Marsil, 2012). Although many people experience some form of IPV at some point during their lifetime, research reveals that women are disproportionately victimized compared to men (Amar, 2006; Breiding et al., 2011; Fox, Nobles, & Akers, 2011; McNamara & Marsil, 2012). Other identified risk factors for increased likelihood of IPV victimization include being an ethnic minority, identifying with a minority sexual orientation, having a low socioeconomic status, engaging in risky sexual and/or drinking behaviors, and being active in Greek organizations (Edwards et al., 2015; Mellins et al., 2017). Collectively, research clearly demonstrates that IPV is prevalent and affects some groups of people disproportionately compared to others.

Stalking is a specific type of IPV that can be generally defined as repeated, unwanted contact typically causing some form of distress to the individual being targeted. Although it has received less attention than sexual assault, stalking is a serious and prevalent crime as illustrated by the fact that approximately 20% of all people experience being stalked at some point in their lifetime (Breiding et al., 2011). Furthermore, stalking is a serious crime that

can have lasting effects, such as a decrease in overall psychological and physical well-being, inhibited social functioning, and increased risks and instances of depression, anxiety, fear, anger, medicinal use, and/or post-traumatic stress disorder (Amar, 2006; Kuehner, Gass, & Dressing, 2012). These symptoms are particularly problematic for college students who may have to face their perpetrators on campus or in class and may not have access to the resources or support system necessary to appropriately address the problem. Importantly, victims of IPV may not be aware of their rights and the resources that are available to them if they do not recognize that they have been victimized and label the behaviors accurately. Stalking victims, in particular women who do not even recognize that they are being stalked, are vulnerable to potential escalation of consequences from fear to femicide, which is the killing of a woman or girl due to her gender (McFarlane, Campbell, & Watson, 2002).

Disparities between self-, legal-, and researcher-identified victimization of sexual assault (Kilimnik, Trapnell, & Humphreys, 2016; Marsil & McNamara, 2016) and stalking (Amar, 2007; McNamara & Marsil, 2012) complicate our understanding of how many people are impacted by IPV. For example, one study found that only 12% of participants self-identified as a stalking victim, yet 43% of participants met the researcher definition of stalking victimization (McNamara & Marsil, 2012). These disparities indicate that perceptions of what exactly constitutes IPV victimization and perpetration vary widely. Even though research suggests that it has been difficult to pinpoint the prevalence of IPV, estimates indicate that the number of IPV victims is staggering.

Such a pervasive crime resulting in negative and sometimes deadly consequences deserves further examination to understand why it occurs. To that end, researchers have focused much attention on how certain attitudes predict perpetration and victimization. For example, rape myths, which are false stereotyping beliefs about rape that perpetuate its occurrence (e.g., the attitude that rape is an unavoidable part of life) are strongly correlated with rape perpetration (Vandiver & Dupalo, 2012). Similar efforts have recently been made to understand the relationship between stalking myth acceptance and stalking perpetration (McKeon, McEwan, & Luebbers, 2015). Stalking myths are unsubstantiated or exaggerated notions and beliefs of what leads to stalking that normalize its occurrence, attribute primary responsibility to the victim, and justify the role of the perpetrator. Types of stalking myths have been categorized based on correlational and factor analyses of statement endorsements: those that diminish the seriousness of the matter, those that attribute the behaviors to romantic feelings, and those that negate any harm victims may endure by blaming them for the occurrences (Fox et al., 2011; Lippman, 2018; McKeon et al., 2015).

Although the societal fallacies about stalking have been established (McKeon et al., 2015), little is known about how attitudes vary among demographic characteristics or how well they predict stalking perpetration in a college sample. One goal of the present study was to examine how participant characteristics predict patterns of stalking myth acceptance. As the aforementioned literature demonstrates that these characteristics relate to attitudes towards rape, we hypothesized that demographic factors such as gender, race, sexual orientation, and year in school would predict attitudes towards stalking. Additionally, as

research has identified men as having an increased risk of perpetrating IPV (Breiding et al., 2011), and women in their first or second year at school are more at risk for IPV victimization (McNamara & Marsil, 2012; Marsil & McNamara, 2016), we predicted that demographic variables such as gender and age would predict stalking perpetration. Finally, a third goal was to examine how attitudes towards stalking might predict stalking perpetration. Specifically, we hypothesized that higher endorsement of stalking myths would predict reports of stalking perpetration.

Method

Participants

Data were collected from a convenience sample of 180 undergraduate students from a large southeastern university. The data of 178 participants were included in the statistical analyses. Data of two participants were removed because they did not specify an age that met requirements for study participation and/or they did not respond to a majority of the survey items. To qualify for participation, students had to be at least 18 years old. All participants ranged in ages from 18 to 44 ($M = 20.18$ years, $SD = 3.13$ years). The majority of participants were women ($n = 117$, 65.7%), 60 were men (33.7%), and one identified as other (0.6%). Most participants identified as heterosexual (92.1%) with the others identifying as lesbian, bisexual, gay, or other (7.9%). Most students (62.9%) identified as Caucasian while 20.3% identified as African American, 7.9% as Hispanic or Latino, 5.6% as Asian American, and the remaining 2.8% identified as Other. Most participants indicated residing off campus (63.5%) rather than on campus (36.5%). Furthermore, 50.6% of respondents classified as freshmen, 25.3% as

sophomores, 14.6% as juniors, and 9.6% as seniors.

Measures

Participants completed a 56-item online questionnaire using Qualtrics survey software, including stalking myth acceptance (SMA), stalking perpetration (SP), and demographic survey items. Participants completed a 22-item SMA survey. On a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*), participants indicated their level of opposition, indifference, or agreeance to each statement. Items from a stalking myth acceptance questionnaire devised by Dunlap, Lynch, Jewell, Wasarhaley and Golding (2014) were modified. Many items originally reflected heterosexual norms, only including scenarios in which women were victims and men were perpetrators. Items were changed to increase the inclusivity of different gender roles and relationship types (e.g., changing "a woman" and "a man" to "a person"). An example of a stalking myth included in the survey is: "Some people actually want to be stalked because they see it as a compliment." Each participant's numerically coded answers to these questions were summed, creating a total SMA score variable, with scores ranging from 22 (indicating strong opposition to every stalking myth item) to 110 (indicating strong endorsement of all stalking myth items). A Cronbach's alpha of .89 indicated very good consistency among the SMA items for this sample.

Participants also completed an 18-item SP survey. An example of a perpetration item included in the survey is: "Have you done things to scare or threaten someone by letting him/her know you had been there?" On a 3-point scale ranging from 1 (*definitely not*) to 3 (*definitely*), respondents indicated whether they had ever engaged in

each behavior outside of any requirements for work. Items based on the National Violence Against Women Survey (Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998) were modified to address perpetration instead of victimization, and other items were added to address stalking using technology. The stalking perpetration behaviors that were assessed ranged in severity and intrusiveness. A binary SP variable was created from responses on the stalking perpetrator items, such that participants were identified as a perpetrator if they indicated having "definitely" committed at least two of the 18 described acts, or a non-perpetrator if they indicated committing one or none of the behaviors. A Cronbach's alpha of .82 indicated good consistency among the items. Additionally, participants answered "yes" or "no" to the question, "Have you ever stalked someone". The answers to this question were used to determine participants' self-identification as a stalking perpetrator or non-perpetrator.

Procedure

Undergraduate students enrolled in introductory psychology courses were recruited for participation through the university's SONA Research Experience System. After signing up and agreeing to the terms of the informed consent, participants were able to complete the online, IRB-approved questionnaire to satisfy course research requirements or for research credit. The questionnaire took less than 30 minutes on average to complete. Participants could withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

Results

Descriptive statistics revealed that 35.4% of participants (n = 63; 39.3% of women and 26.7% of men) met the researcher definition of a stalking perpetrator, yet only 3.9% of participants (n = 7) self-identified as stalking perpetrators. Moreover, the majority of perpetrators were Caucasian (60.3%), with the second largest group identifying as African American (20.6%) followed by those who identified as Hispanic or Latino (9.5%), Asian American (7.9%), and Other (1.6%). The majority of students who classified as stalking perpetrators were between the ages of 18 and 21 (80.9%), and 71.5% of perpetrators were in their first or second year of school, which is not surprising given that approximately 75% of our sample was classified as a first- or second-year student. Additionally, the average level of acceptance of each stalking myth was generally low (M = 2.06, corresponding to "Disagree" on the 5-point scale).

A multiple linear regression was used to assess how demographic variables may predict attitudes towards stalking. Analyses ensured no violation of the assumptions of normality, linearity, multicollinearity, and homoscedasticity. The full model contained six demographic independent variables (participant gender, age, race, campus residency status, year in school, and sexual orientation), and was statistically significant, $F(6,170) = 2.33$, $p = .04$. The model as a whole explained 7.6% (R squared) of the variance in total SMA scores, which ranged from 22 to 84. Two of the six predictor variables included in the model made statistically significant contributions in the prediction of SMA. Gender was a significant predictor ($beta$ = -4.50, p = .01, eta = .19) such that men were more likely to endorse stalking myths (M = 48.53, SD = 12.66) compared to women (M = 43.99, SD = 10.50). Further, sexual orientation was a significant predictor of SMA ($beta$ = 4.16, p = .03, eta = .15) such that participants identifying as "heterosexual" (M = 45.64, SD = 11.08) were the most likely to endorse stalking myths; participants identifying as

"gay" were the least likely ($M = 31.00$, $SD = 4.24$); and SMA scores for participants identifying as "lesbian" ($M = 44.50$, $SD = 13.43$) and "bisexual" ($M = 42.56$, $SD = 14.00$) were in the middle of heterosexual and gay participants.

A binary logistic regression was performed to assess the ability of a number of participant characteristics and SMA to predict reported SP. The full model contained seven independent variables (participant gender, age, race, campus residency status, year in school, sexual orientation, and total SMA score), and was statistically significant, $\chi^2(7, 176) = 22.24$, $p = .04$, indicating that the model was able to distinguish between researcher-identified stalking perpetrators and non-perpetrators. The model as a whole explained between 11.9% (Cox and Snell R squared) and 16.3% (Nagelkerke R squared) of the variance in SP and correctly classified 70.5% of all cases. A total of three of the seven predictor variables included in the model made statistically significant contributions in the prediction of SP: gender (Wald = 7.12, $p = .008$, phi = .13), sexual orientation (Wald = 4.59, $p = .03$, phi = .21), and SMA (Wald = 4.18, $p = .04$, eta = .55). Results of a chi-square analysis indicate a significant difference in reported stalking perpetration between heterosexual participants and those identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual or other (LGBO; $\chi^2 (1, 178) = 5.55$, $p = .02$). Specifically, a significantly larger proportion of all LGBO participants (64.3%) than heterosexual participants (32.9%) classified as stalking perpetrators. An odds ratio of 3.67 indicates that in the present sample heterosexual participants were almost four times less likely to report having engaged in two or more stalking behaviors than LGBO participants. In a chi-square test, SP was also analyzed by gender; however, these results were not statistically significant.

Discussion

Given that 35.4% of participants were researcher-identified as stalking perpetrators, there is clear evidence confirming the pervasiveness of IPV among college students in this sample. What is even more troubling is that there are ten times more people who are engaging in stalking behaviors who do not believe that they are doing so. This discrepancy highlights a continuing need for education and prevention programs that address the basic definition of and behaviors that constitute stalking.

An examination of the relationship between demographic variables and SMA scores revealed that gender and sexual orientation were significant predictors of overall stalking myth endorsement. Specifically, men had higher overall SMA scores than women, findings that partially support our hypothesis. These results are similar to previous findings that men are more supportive of rape myths (Barnett, Sligar, & Wang, 2018; Suarez & Gadalla, 2010; Vandiver & Dupalo, 2012). The significant association between gender and rape myths implicate androcentric cultural norms in the facilitation of rape culture (Suarez & Gadalla, 2010). In light of the similar association between gender and SMA found in this study, this idea seems applicable to stalking as well.

Further evidence in support of our hypothesis demonstrated that heterosexual participants were more likely to endorse stalking myths than others who identified as part of a minority sexual orientation. This result was not surprising because researchers have previously found that other negative attitudes about interpersonal violence, such as rape myth acceptance, correlate positively with heteronormative attitudes like misogyny

and homophobia (Suarez & Gadalla, 2010). However, results from our study found that neither race nor year in school significantly predicted SMA scores, differing from previous research in which both variables significantly predicted attitudes towards rape (Suarez & Gadalla, 2010). Furthermore, even though our model was significant, it only accounted for a marginal amount of the variability of SMA. Thus, it is apparent that other constructs not measured in this study may more saliently predict and contribute to myths about stalking. For example, because men had higher average SMA scores than women, other gender-based attitudes such as gender stereotyping, androcentric attitudes, or misogynistic attitudes may better predict SMA.

With regard to the relationship between demographic variables and stalking perpetration, our results partially supported the hypothesis that demographic variables would predict IPV perpetration. Specifically, gender and sexual orientation were significant predictors of SP in our model. Contrary to previous results that indicate men as more likely to perpetrate IPV, a larger proportion of women than men classified as stalking perpetrators in the present sample. Although our research did not demonstrate significant differences on the perpetration of individual stalking tactics between men and women, the unexpected finding that women in this sample perpetrated stalking more frequently than men needs to be explored further.

Sexual orientation was also a significant demographic predictor of SP, with LGBO students being more likely to perpetrate than heterosexual students. Previous research demonstrated that students who identify with a minority sexual orientation experienced higher rates of dating violence victimization than heterosexual

participants (Edwards et al., 2015). Parallel to those findings, participants in our study who identified as gay were almost four times more likely than heterosexual participants to report having engaged in two or more stalking behaviors. Our results in conjunction with those by Edwards and colleagues suggest that education and prevention efforts should be tailored to people in all types of relationships, not just those that are heteronormative.

Contrary to previous findings (Brieding, 2014; McNamara & Marsil, 2012), neither age nor year in school was a significant demographic predictor of stalking perpetration, a finding that did not support our hypothesis. In other words, college students were equally likely to perpetrate regardless of age or time spent in college. Finally, SMA scores also significantly predicted reports of perpetration, a finding that supports our hypothesis that increased endorsements of stalking myths would correspond to increased reports of stalking perpetration. This directly mirrors previous findings of a positive relationship between rape myth acceptance and rape proclivity (Bohner, Siebler, & Schmelcher, 2006). Taken together, it is apparent that attitudes towards IPV play a significant role in its occurrence.

Although the present study furthered our understanding of the predictive factors of and attitudes about stalking, there were a few limitations worth noting. For instance, we used a convenience sample, which limits generalizability to other populations. Furthermore, a survey design leads to correlational conclusions, and one must be careful not to infer causality. Finally, we did not include items that explicitly measured whether fear was elicited by stalking perpetration, which is a fundamental element of stalking definitions. Notably, it is

appropriate to assess fear that is reported by the stalking victim rather than estimated by the perpetrator because the perpetrator may or may not intend to cause fear. Because we measured stalking perpetration instead of victimization, we attempted to incorporate a tangential measure of fear by asking about the perpetration of repeated, unwanted behaviors against the recipient's will, wishes, or knowledge (e.g., using words such as "spying" and "sneaking").

Despite these limitations, our findings make important contributions to our understanding of the predictive factors of stalking. Although stalking myth acceptance was low overall, our study revealed unacceptable prevalence rates of stalking among college students coupled with an inability to recognize one's own behavior as meeting the criteria for stalking perpetration. Furthermore, we established the existence of a significant link between attitudes and stalking perpetration. Collectively, these findings reveal information that may be utilized in the construction of more effective education, intervention, and prevention programming for college students.

Future research should further explore gender-based differences in SMA and SP. Investigating factors of adherence to and attitudes towards gender roles, misogyny, and consent as they relate to stalking myth acceptance and perpetration further our understanding of stalking and the social norms that perpetuate all forms of IPV. Measures of sexism (Chapleau, Oswald, & Russel, 2007), ageism, classism, racism (Suarez & Gadalla, 2010), and religiosity and religious intolerance (Barnett et al., 2018) have strong relationships with rape myth endorsement; therefore, inclusion of these measures may also make significant contributions to our knowledge of the predictive factors of stalking. A more salient

understanding of how such attitudes develop, how they are perpetuated, and how they contribute to stalking perpetration is key to devising educational programs aimed to reduce interpersonal violence among college students and changing the social norms on college campuses to one of violence intolerance.

Overarchingly, attitudes towards IPV are functions of social and cultural prescriptions, as research indicates that stalking myths are typically learned and augmented through peer interaction (Fox et al., 2011) and romanticized in the media (Lippman, 2018). Because instances of IPV such as stalking are pervasive on college campuses, university administrators should prioritize implementing preventative programs that target social and cultural norms that are culprits in the facilitation of IPV. Such efforts should include education that addresses the false beliefs that perpetuate and justify a culture of violence.

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