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The Stalking of Public Figures: Management and Intervention

ABSTRACT: Public figures are at relatively high risk of unusual contact initiated by fixated individuals. Prior research on managing the threat presented by public figure stalkers concludes that although direct threats rarely precede attacks, there is usually evidence of pre-planning. Furthermore, some public figure attackers do attempt to communicate with their future intended victim prior to attack. Thus, early warning signs from unusual contact behavior can be a powerful tool in threat assessment and risk management. The current paper offers a systematic concept for managing public figure stalking and constitutes five stages: (i) screening, (ii) first analysis, (iii) passive research, (iv) active research and finally (v) considered management strategy. It is concluded that assessment and management of risk are dynamic procedures, requiring ongoing monitoring and flexibility. Furthermore, although different stalkers will engage in ostensibly similar behavior, their motives and underlying psychopathologies may vary considerably. As such, all interventions require individual construction.

KEYWORDS: forensic science, threat management, risk assessment, public figures, stalking, harassment

Unusual contact initiated by fixated persons is a major problem for public figures. Rates of victimization among those in the public eye appear to be much higher than among the general population. One example may illustrate this. During the inquiry following the murder of BBC Crimewatch presenter Jill Dando in 1999, London police listed 140 people demonstrating an “unhealthy interest or obsession” with her. Of course, these 140 likely represented but a small proportion of those fixated on Miss Dando. What makes public figures a special target for obsessional individuals? Because they are well known through the mass media (particularly television), many consumers feel they have some sort of personal knowledge of, or emotional proximity to, their favorite celebrity or other public figure. Back in 1956, Horton and Wohl (1) introduced the notion of a “para-social relationship” between screen characters and other celebrities and those who view them. They suggested that the mass media “give the illusion of face-to-face relationship with the performer” (p. 215) and that the performer and the audience are engaged in a “para-social interaction” based on the performer’s ability to appear to adjust his or her performance in response to a supposed audience response. A pathological aspect comes in when a person feels that he or she has a special relationship with the public person, e.g., a shared destiny. This only becomes problematic for the public figure when the individual in question decides to act on his or her fixation.

The label “public figure” implies very different professions. In the current work, the term “celebrity” refers simply to a famous person. The term “public figure” is used to encompass celebrities and also other persons who are notable and/or well known. Screen, music and sports celebrities are most frequently the recipients of unsolicited contact, but politicians and businesspeople also experience relatively high levels of victimization. In recent years politicians in

Western countries have tended to increase their emotional appeal, being more willing than previously to discuss their private lives. Because of their more down-to-earth and perhaps more vulnerable appearance, one may speculate that political figures are now more likely to become the target of romantically driven stalkers. For example, in Germany Chancellor Schroeder spoke on a talk show of splitting with his former wife. Twenty years previously, this would hardly been conceivable for someone in his position. The following example, taken from one of the author’s case files, illustrates the negative consequences that may follow when a public figure reveals personal details:

A female politician was stalked for several years by a male erotomaniac stalker who was operating under the delusional belief that a genuine reciprocal relationship existed between the two. He focused upon and had strong reactions to certain comments that she made publicly, where she revealed details of her private life. The stalking started after she stated during a media interview that she was single and seeking a romantic partner; facilitating a delusional response from the stalker.

Company figureheads and other business representatives are now more frequently discussed publicly than in the past, and are also more likely to be targeted by stalkers. There exist a number of possible factors that drive these individuals to stalk. For instance, more people own shares and other investments than ever before, and as such greater numbers consider themselves to be personally involved in the fate of companies. If certain individuals believe that their investments are being mismanaged, then they may be motivated to seek revenge upon whomsoever they perceive to be at fault. Alternatively, disgruntled ex-employees, or those who were denied employment within the organization in question may target organizations and/or their representatives. Other motivating factors include ethical concerns (e.g., animal rights activists) or delusions where sufferers believe that the organization is responsible for some grave ill (e.g., poisoning all the children in the world via gamma rays). Security officers and other representatives of major companies are tending to report that ever-increasing numbers of delusional

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and anger- or revenge-driven people are repeatedly sending letters and e-mails to their organization, or are telephoning and physically appearing at organizational and private residential premises. There is however, no solid data as yet to support these assertions. Any assumptions that stalking behavior perpetrated against businesspeople is increasing rapidly are therefore dangerous as there is always a tendency to assume that any form of criminal behavior is increasing (e.g., 2).

Some evidence does exist to suggest that both the incidence and prevalence of stalking have increased in recent years. For instance, both the 1998 British Crime Survey ($N = 9988$) and an Australian community study ($N = 1,844$) reported that younger participants were significantly more likely to report being stalked than were older participants (3,4). The alternative hypothesis however, is that younger persons are more likely to recall such incidents, and are also more likely to label them as aberrant than older individuals. Dietz and Martell (5) reported distinct rising numbers in the case files of the Capitol Police Intelligence Division and of a Los Angeles based corporation providing security consultation services to public figures. The authors believed that the perceived increase of the pursuit of the famous by mentally disordered persons reflected on the one hand a heightened psychological sensitivity among security experts. On the other hand, they also believed the figures to reflect a genuine increase of the underlying phenomenon, given that they coincided with the development of a new fame cult in Western societies: "When the Bible was the principal medium of communication with greatness and the only medium in most homes, the mentally ill most often had religious delusions. In a secular age in which television, radio, and the movies have replaced the role of the Bible in most lives, it should not surprise us that the mentally ill have delusions about the new secular "gods," particularly the gods of love and power." (5,16–2–16–3).

In 1991, Dietz and colleagues published two separate studies, analyzing threatening and other inappropriate letters that had been sent to Hollywood celebrities and to U.S. Congress members respectively (6,7). Although communications sent to entertainers and to politicians did differ—principally in respect of the former group receiving more romantic messages and the latter more violent messages—key similarities between the two groups of letter writers were seen. In particular, both sets of public figures received high volume amounts of unsolicited, inappropriate and threatening post, as well as a large number of inappropriate visits, mainly from persons who were mentally disordered. Many writers targeted multiple public figures, either in a serial or contemporaneous fashion.

Malsch, Visscher and Blaauw (8) sent questionnaires to public persons in the Netherlands. Among a sample of 105 respondents, 35 (33%) reported that they had been stalked since they had become public figures. Within the sample two subgroups were examined, "Celebrities" ($n = 37$, of whom 40% said they had been stalked) and "Politicians" ($n = 63$, of whom 21% stated that they had been stalked). For the two groups combined, the average duration of stalking episodes was 2.5 years. Hoffmann (9), employing a very similar approach, gave questionnaires to 53 television personalities. The majority (79%) reported that they had been stalked. Of this group, 86% reported experiences with more than one stalker. When asked about their "worst case" of stalking the duration was a little lower than that revealed by the Dutch group, i.e., 25 months. In almost two-thirds of cases (63%) the stalker made a physical approach. This rate may be higher than for other groups of celebrities given that television studios are easier to locate and enter than are the workplaces of other types of celebrities (e.g., film actors whose working locations change regularly). The Malsch et al. and the Hoffmann studies are the only known published works where

celebrities themselves provided the research data. Additional larger-scale studies, utilizing similar data collection methods, may or may not yield similar results. An example of a case where a television personality was approached by her stalker follows:

An emotionally immature, 19 year old man with mild learning difficulties began to wait outside the television studio where a 35-year-old local news presenter regularly made broadcasts. At first, he presented her with small gifts, usually home made (cards, cakes). The celebrity was very polite but attempted to maintain a distance between the two. The young man perceived that she was ungrateful for his gifts and began to make anonymous telephone death threats to the presenter. When the police questioned him he readily admitted to the threats, explaining that she deserved to be "as upset as I am" and that she had initiated the relationship by staring at him via his television with her "come to bed eyes."

The Hoffmann sample primarily constituted television hosts and news anchorpersons. One may speculate that this group is particularly vulnerable to a stalking threat, given the relative ease by which they may be incorporated into a relationship fantasy. That is, these individuals tend to be attractive but not to an intimidating degree, they do not act, they appear on television regularly (and are predictable) and they tend to present a warm, friendly and approachable demeanor. In short, they may be considered "attainable." In both the Malsch et al. and the Hoffmann samples, the emotional impact on celebrities was marked: most of the Malsch et al sample reported their experiences to the police, and in the Hoffmann sample 58% described feeling "burdened," 16 worried about their personal safety, several even moved house and one went into psychological therapy after being attacked by a stalker.

One may assume that fixations on public figures that result in serious violence are mainly the preserve of the United States. This is not the case however. For instance, Europe has seen a number of cases in recent years. Examples include the attempted knife attack on tennis star Monica Seles in Hamburg by a stalker who was fixated upon her competitor Steffi Graf, the previously mentioned shooting of Jill Dando in London and the assassination of right-wing politician Pim Fortuyn in the Netherlands.

Although we have said that public figures are more likely to be targeted than the general public, experience of stalker violence is far more common for members of the general public. Of course, given that public figures represent a small proportion of all persons, the vast majority of all stalking victims will be "normal persons." Although no statistical base rate exists there are a few figures that may offer some hints. In an early evaluation of their own cases the threat management unit of the Los Angeles Police Department examined different subgroups of stalkers (10). Their erotomanic and love obsessional categories comprised mainly star stalkers and in none of these 39 cases was any incident of physical aggression reported. Neither was violence identified in the Dutch survey of 35 celebrity victims (8), and in Hoffmann's sample of 43 German cases (9), just one attack occurred. Compared to general rates of physical violence identified in stalking victim surveys (which Spitzberg, 11, identified via meta-analysis of 42 studies as 33%) the numbers for public figures are comparatively low. Generally speaking, the research on stalking has reliably demonstrated that ex-intimate stalkers are those most likely to assault their victims. Indeed, Meloy, Davis and Lovette (12) found that prior sexual intimacy between victim and stalker resulted in at least an 11-fold increase in potential for violence. Cases of violence perpetrated by celebrity ex-partner stalkers are relatively rare, but does occur.

For instance, the former husband of a British television actress was fined and made subject of a restraining order after he admitted six charges under the England and Wales Protection from Harassment Act.

In the Exceptional Case Study Project of the American Secret Service an attempt was made to analyze in detail the entire corpus of persons who had attacked public figures or attempted to do so in the United States between 1949 and 1996 (13,14). Media research, as well as the files of the police, the secret service and other official sources and the questioning of security experts from the private and state sectors, revealed 83 individuals who attacked, assassinated or near-lethally approached a public target. Due to the fact that the protection of politicians is one of the main tasks of the Secret Service and incidents in this area are well documented, more than 50% of the sample consisted of cases affecting the president or other political protectees. Just every fifth incident included a movie, sports or media celebrity. It is likely that this latter group were under-represented.

There are many attacks on celebrities and other public figures that go unreported by the media, and some of these represent serious attacks or attempted assaults. Many public figures do not want the public at large to be aware of their victim status for various reasons. This means that some serious cases involving public figures may not result in the prosecution of the offender, given the reluctance of celebrity victims to enter the public arena and testify against their stalker. Indeed, when Madonna was ordered to court (forced by the prosecution) to testify in person against a deeply disturbed individual who had targeted her she commented, "we have somehow made his fantasies come true (in that) I am sitting in front of him and that is what he wants" (see 15).

If one studies attacks on celebrities, politicians and other public figures, in almost every case there was a period of planning and preparation prior to the violent act. These are not usually the impulsive actions of people who suddenly lose control. Rather, the perpetrators are often mentally unbalanced and unhappy individuals who use violence in the hope of resolving their problems or at least relieving their situation. The Secret Service who looked closely at the biographies of such attackers reached the following conclusion: "An assassination attempt is the end result of a process of thinking and behavior . . . At some point—often after a life crisis—attackers and near-lethal approachers begin to see the idea of assassination as acceptable and desirable. They may gather information about previous assassins, take special interest in one or more potential public official targets, and/or begin to view assassination as a way to achieve their objectives, such as becoming famous or notorious, being removed from society, or getting killed" (13, p. 80). Meloy (16) uses the term "predatory violence" to describe the psychological path leading to an attack on a celebrity. He argues that its evolutionary genesis was to facilitate hunting and therefore survival but in the current age it more often serves other goals such as revenge or power. The behavioral and physical pattern of predatory violence is made up of minimal autonomic arousal, no emotion, the absence of an acute threatening situation, and, most important for those involved in intervention, planning. Predatory violence may constitute an active and dangerous dynamic even in the most psychotic of individuals:

After the breaking up of her marriage, Ms. S fell into a state of paranoid schizophrenia. She claimed that underground flesh factories existed in Germany in which humans were killed and manufactured. She claimed that politicians knew about these factories but did nothing to close them. She tried to draw public attention to these outrageous events, putting up

posters in the street and placing advertisements in newspapers. After these attempts failed she focused more and more on the idea of committing a violent act in order to warn the general public of the slaughter underneath the surface. Ms. S started preparing and planning an attack, or, in the terms of threat assessment professionals, she displayed attack-related behavior. She applied to the authorities twice for a gun license; needless to say she failed in these attempts. She then visited a local Italian restaurant and tried to buy a weapon, probably believing the proprietor to have organized crime connections. Finally she decided to use a knife. She phoned different party headquarters for dates and locations of the upcoming election campaign. The 42-year-old woman concealed the knife in a bouquet of flowers. Pretending to be a fan of social democratic leader Oscar Lafontaine she bypassed security and wounded him seriously with a stab to his neck.

A systematic approach to detecting problematic contacts with public persons and managing stalking and harassing cases is imperative. The following concept is already in use by the offices of some celebrities and some major companies who have representatives who are well known in the media (E. von Groote, personal communication, October 2004).

Screening

This is the first stage, enabling potentially problematic contacts to be recognized as early as is possible. It is usually easier to stop or manage a stalking case in its early stages because the stalker's emotional investment is minimal. Therefore the fixation is perhaps still moderate and early detection can prevent the development of a deeper fixation. There exists empirical evidence to suggest that analysis of unusual communications to or concerning famous people may have the potential to predict problematic behavior of stalkers and mentally ill persons. From analysis of more than 1500 case files stored by a private security company, Dietz and Martell (5) found 231 individuals (or 15%) who had communicated with celebrities were also known to have physically approached the celebrity. Even violent attackers and assassins sometimes sought contact with their targets prior to engaging in extreme measures. An additional study reported that 23% of 83 violent offenders who attacked or who approached with intent to attack a public figure since 1949 had communicated with the target prior to the index offence (14). Moreover, 77% had a history of verbal or written communication concerning the target. Very few however, made a direct threat concerning the target to the actual target.

It may be argued that the rate of prior contact may be even underestimated, given that not all unusual communications are detected and/or reported by those who work for public figures. In the Fein and Vossekuil study (14), some incidents involved prior conspicuous contacts that should have had alerted security personnel at an early stage. Thus, it may be that some suspicious communications, if acted upon, could have prevented attacks from taking place. Any would-be-assassins whose unsafe communications were recognized and acted upon may not have made it into the sample, thereby lowering the rate of attacks preceded by such communications. From these studies, it may be surmised that early warning signs from unusual contact behavior can be a powerful tool in threat assessment and risk management. Here follow some suggestions for specific screening techniques.

Screening Mechanisms

Screening mechanisms may include:

- Checklists of indicators of risky contacts. This list should be as comprehensive and objective as possible. The non-expert is likely to judge communications with sexual content, or insulting letters, as indicative of possible danger. Unfortunately, the psychology of public figure stalkers is not so clear-cut. The expert may detect important psychological indicators of danger in a letter that may appear to be ostensibly harmless, even pleasant. Alternatively, the expert can screen out those obscene or otherwise distasteful letters whose authors are not likely to escalate their activities. Thus, any checklist needs to be as unambiguous as possible. Checklists need to be the subject of quantitative research to ensure that they are both reliable and valid. Some studies have specified risk factors among approach behaviors towards public figures (17–19) but research in this arena is at an embryonic stage. For the time being, some useful variables may be derived from the wider research on the prediction of violence (e.g., school adjustment, presence or absence of various mental illnesses or personality disorders, previous offence history), whilst others may be gleaned in part from analyses of actual attacks on public figures (e.g., 5). Still others may be obtained from the now rather sizeable-shared knowledge concerning the dynamics of stalking behavior. Those individuals who are responsible for screening the mail of celebrities and other public figures should be sufficiently trained so that they understand which factors are important and also *why* certain indicators of risk are significant. Many persons who have not undergone at least very basic training have been seen to pay no attention to “crazy” mail, throwing it away and thereby destroying what may be a valuable indicator of risk and/or future evidence (for instance: a male wrote love letters to a female television presenter. One day he arrived at the television station and attempted to choke her. The emotional tone in his letters had recently shifted from declarations of love to angry diatribes. These were however, thrown away unread by television station administrators. Investigators became aware of the emotional shift in the letters retrospectively as the offender had retained copies).
- Face-to-face strategies. Although many public figures may live and work in high security environments, it is not usually too difficult for a violent stalker to come within close proximity of their target. The majority of public figures must inevitably appear in public (e.g., on the football pitch, at political conferences or disaster sites, at book or CD signing sessions). Also, public figures who are not particularly famous or wealthy often live relatively normal lives. They are, therefore, particularly vulnerable to unwanted contacts. Public figures themselves and relevant security personnel should pre-plan escape routes, a no response strategy, or develop some basic behavioral skills concerning interaction with aggressive or mentally disturbed people who may approach them. In Fein and Vossekuil’s Secret Service study (14), 40% of public figure attackers were known to have traveled to visit the home, office or temporary site of their target at least once before moving to attack the target. Furthermore, 23% approached the target prior to the attack and 10% had previously followed or stalked the public figure. Public figures perceived to be under threat from violent stalkers should brief those close to them on how interact with unavoidable approaches from the risky individual(s). Public figures in general should be informed about how to recog-

nize more subtle signs of potential violence, such as fans who appear a little too regularly, or graffiti aimed at the celebrity placed close to his or her home.

- Obtain confirmation. If the public figure and/or their personnel are concerned that a contact may represent a potential problem, then they should obtain confirmation (or disconfirmation) from an expert.

First Analysis

At the second stage of assessing risk, any letters, e-mails, gifts or other material sent by the stalker are examined, as are any reports concerning contact, and any other evidence or information are analyzed at this stage. Essentially, a “psychological profile” of the stalker or harasser is created. Each case is dealt with on an individual basis as although many cases will share similarities, no one stalker is identical in motivation, intent and approach. Furthermore, individual factors relevant to the public figure will impact on how easy or difficult it is for a potential stalker to access him or her. The following points and more may form part of the first analysis:

- A full history of the case
- Possible triggers to contact
- Motivations for contact
- Evidence of escalation
- Intent
- Statistical and dynamic risk factors
- Risk of escalation
- Strength of fixation on person or issue
- The individual’s current state of mind (for instance, are they delusional in relation to the target? Do they blame the target for some perceived injustice? Are they currently using drugs or alcohol?)

At the end of this stage a decision will be made as to whether the stalker presents a risk to the public figure. If the decision is negative, then further communications will be assessed but no further management strategy will be employed unless additional communications or contacts indicate a need to take a more active approach. If the individual is believed to present a viable risk, then the relevant personnel should move the stage three.

Passive Research

Try to obtain more information on the stalker, e.g.:

- Research the internet (for instance, one of the authors worked on a case where a stalker with a paranoid schizophrenia who had followed a celebrity to her home talked openly in a chat room about assassinations)
- Interview any personnel (e.g., television studio security operatives) known to have had recent professional contact with the stalker (to try and establish the individual’s mental state, the nature of their fixation, triggers and intent)
- Individual’s stalking history (for instance, is this person known to have contacted other public figures?)
- Individual’s criminal history (for example, is this person known to have acted out violently?)
- Individual’s relationship history (with family as well as romantic relationships)
- Individual’s educational level and employment history
- Psychiatric features (including successes or failures of any previous treatments or interventions)

- Alcohol and drug use/abuse history
- Does this person respect authority/the law? (i.e., will they abide by any limitations placed on their behavior?)

If sufficient information may be obtained via passive research, and if it strongly suggests that the individual presents no viable risk, the screening process should be continued but no intervention is required. If however there is evidence to suggest risk then in some cases stage four should be implemented.

Active Research

This is a more high-risk strategy to obtain information but it may be useful in certain cases. Active research methods can include:

- Talking to the stalker or harasser (in an open way or secretly)
- Talking to people known to or close to the stalker, e.g., family, neighbors (in an open way or secretly).
- Target-related behavior should be sought, such as material relating to or evidence of research on the target, or conducting so called final-act-behaviors. This phenomenon also occurs when people plan to commit suicide and wish to put their affairs in order e.g., ensuring the financial well being of their families. An example follows: Before traveling to Hamburg to attack tennis star Monica Seles Gunter P took the posters of his idol Steffi Graf off the wall. He put them in a suitcase and buried them in the garden. Gunter P expected that he had to go to jail for some years after his knife attack on Seles, and wanted to ensure that his most precious possessions were in a safe place.
- When talking to the stalker and/or his or her contacts or associates is conducted openly, it inevitably becomes a major part of the management strategy. One should very carefully consider taking this step, given that it may serve to reinforce the stalker's behavior. For instance, the stalker may perceive that s/he is important and interesting to the celebrity and is having an impact on the celebrity's life, or the stalker may become vengeful towards the celebrity ("I tried to give her so much and all she did was to send this stupid psychologist to me. I will make her pay").

Management Strategies

Each case needs its own individual management strategy that is dependent upon factors that include the resources of the victim, whether the stalker can easily initiate physical contact with the victim, and many more. One of the most important points is to create as much distance (both physical and emotional) as possible between the stalker and the public figure, given that any perceived 'bond' between them will only serve to reinforce the stalker's actions. A full management strategy in those cases where the stalker is deemed to present a risk to the target public figure may include:

- Instruct the public figure. For instance, if the stalker does physically appear, how should the public figure react? One case example involves a man who targeted a well-known female singer. He traveled 6000 miles to appear bearing gifts at her father's home. This was after he had sent flowers to the singer, signing only his first name and leaving his mobile telephone number. She believed the flowers to be from a friend with the same Christian name, and mistakenly called the stalker. When she did not respond to further gifts the stalker became increasingly angry. The singer was advised that the

stalker would likely attempt an approach and that if she had no option but to speak with him, she should do no more than treat him politely and include other fans in any necessary conversation. The stalker did indeed resurface and the strategy was successful in preventing escalation.

- Assess security, with the aim of increasing security or alerting security personnel where necessary.
- Screen all individuals who have access to the public figure or their premises (e.g., drivers, waiters, mail and delivery operatives, utility operatives, cleaners, cooks, security personnel themselves). The stalker may use a ruse to come close to the celebrity.
- Contact the police, psychiatric facilities, the family of the stalker (where appropriate), and other agencies and persons, with the aim of gathering as much information as possible. Information management is a crucial point in managing stalking cases. A woman followed an actor for two years. He had a bad gut feeling about her and went to see a police psychologist who said that no action could be taken against the woman. Finally she tried to attack the actor with a weapon at his home. The case was managed by one of the authors by coordinating police officers, psychiatric experts and an attorney. For example, the psychiatric hospital where the stalker was brought to originally did not know that she also threatened to attack the actor again after being released. Therefore the police log including this information was sent to the facility. This made it possible to detain and treat the stalker at the hospital for a longer period of time. As the stalker was set free for some days due to a judicial problem, it proved to be important that the efforts of police, a lawyer and the security of the film studio were adjusted to assure the safety of the actor. Of course, mental health and other records will not always be available. In the United States, for instance, confidentiality laws will normally prevent access to psychiatric records (with the notable exception of instances involving threats towards the President).
- Control the behavior of the stalker. It must be borne in mind that many stalkers are fully aware of the law and its limitations. Only socially adapted stalkers are likely to conform to legal restrictions. Most stalkers who actually approach their targets are not socially well adapted. Indeed, sadistic stalkers (see 20) will derive pleasure from overcoming legal "obstacles." Nevertheless, if there had been already an escalation, or the stalker has repeatedly managed to come close to physical contact with the public figure, this strategy may be useful. If evidence is demonstrated to other agencies, the police and courts may be able to implement more dynamic interventions.
- Defensive controlling of behavior. It may in some cases be fruitful to activate other institutions. Partners for intervention may be for example a community based psychiatric service or the family of the stalker. For instance, a mentally disturbed person was sending worrying letters to a company figurehead. The wife of the mentally ill man was contacted discreetly and was enlightened about schizophrenia and the possibilities of treating this disorder. The woman appreciated the information because she was anxious about the increasingly poor mental state of her husband and did not know how to react in a helpful way. Treatment was initiated and no more harassment was reported by the company.

Conclusions

Risk assessment and management are dynamic procedures. If the stalker engages in a novel activity, then the case must be reanalyzed.

If the first management strategy fails to produce the desired effects, an alternative must be produced and implemented.

Management and interventions affecting people who are fixated on public persons is still a young discipline. On the other hand specific research and practical work in the last one or two decades has formed a canon of shared knowledge so that a label for this new field was created: threat management. For some time discussions have been taking place inside the community concerning which management strategies are the most promising. Particularly, police experts argue that more aggressive interventions often work well, even with public figure stalkers. One study supports this management philosophy. Williams, Lane and Zona (21) evaluated interventions made by their Threat Management Unit (part of the Los Angeles Police Department). Without discriminating between cases of celebrity and “normal” stalking they found that in most incidents an offensive policy stopped the harassing and in not a single case was an escalation into violence observed. Perhaps in some cases police intervention had destroyed the stalker’s fantasy of a special relationship with the celebrity. Also, fixated persons may have been forced to realize that they were not half of a “private” affair between the celebrity and themselves, but that s/he was in conflict with a third party: the police.

The success of any intervention however, will depend on a number of factors. For instance, Hoffmann (9) noted that when intervening in stalking cases against German TV personalities, asking the obsessed fan to end the contact behavior was the most ineffective option. It is not unusual to find that at the beginning of a stalking incident or prior to an escalation, that celebrity or his or her representatives had reacted to a communication attempt. For example in the early days of her career, a female TV presenter received love letters from a young viewer who wrote that he was in love with her. He even managed to discover her private telephone number. The presenter felt sorry for him and talked to him at the phone for over one hour, trying to gently break to him why his idea of a relationship was not realistic. Today—fifteen years later—the man is an aggressive stalker and is still justifying his harassing behavior by citing the telephone conversation that took place one and a half decades ago.

The case example provided above highlights the primary importance of constructing bespoke interventions. The underlying psychopathology of an individual stalker will have a significant impact on how the stalker will react to a particular response. For instance, Silva and colleagues (22,23) completed two studies on delusional misidentification syndromes and potential violence toward public figures. Those suffering from delusional misidentification mistakenly believe that themselves or others are misidentified physically and/or psychologically. For instance, a person may believe that another individual has been cloned and the clone is therefore a false imposter (see 23). Violent behavior has been associated with these types of delusions (24). In their 1991 study (22), Silva and colleagues noted that eight of 12 patients whom misidentified one or more public figures had previously been violent to other (non public) individuals. Indeed the case involving German politician Oscar Lafontaine (above) is suggestive of an offender suffering from a misidentification syndrome. Previous work by other researchers has identified that a substantial proportion of stalkers suffer from personality disorders (e.g., 25,26). As such, even though different public figure stalkers may engage in ostensibly similar approach behaviors, some will be more responsive to police or clinical intervention and other sanctions, largely as a function of their varying psychopathologies. More research, again based on the successes and failures of real life interventions, is therefore necessary in order to refine the current strategy. Ideally, the resultant revised

model would incorporate additional modules that could be applied where relevant, tailored towards the fixated individual’s diagnosed or likely psychopathologies.

The striking description of public figure stalkers as “identity vampires” (P. Dietz, personal communication to one of the authors, July 2001) may reveal the deepest inner motivation for this form of fixation. Probably due to deficits in their early lives the fantasized or real connection to a famous personality is crucial for their psychological equilibrium because they are trying to override deep-rooted feelings of worthlessness. What was found to be noticeable measuring psychological dimensions of postintimate stalkers is also true for harassers of public figures namely their “extraordinary strong sensitivities to abandonment, rejection, and/or loss” (27, p. 176). This is why a perceived rejection by the public figure—may it be real or only imagined by the stalker—has the potential for a serious escalation. Some of the most violent and lethal attacks on public figures had been fuelled by that dynamic. Therefore, in the management process, any statement referring to a feeling of refusal must be analyzed very carefully and one must also consider resultant developments in the case. If there is for example any event that may lead to a direct encounter between the public figure and the stalker, the public figure and security staff should be instructed on how to interact with this specific individual. Or if there is a court decision that may have consequences for the stalker, then security arrangements should be intensified around this date. This is further support for the argument that a ‘painting by numbers’ approach is inappropriate when dealing with individuals who are fixated on public figures. One has to try to understand the point of view of the stalker even if it is determined by mental disorder. One has to monitor the communication and the behavior and only on that basis can appropriate case management strategies can be developed.

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