

**International Perceptions of Stalking and Responsibility:  
The Influence of Prior Relationship and Severity of Behavior**

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## **Biographical Sketches**

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## Abstract

This study investigates the influence of prior relationship and severity of behavior on perceptions of stalking and responsibility with a combined sample of 1,080 members of the community from Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom. Participants were presented with 1 of 12 versions of a hypothetical stalking scenario and responded to scale items regarding the behavior of a male perpetrator towards a female target. Prior relationship and severity of behavior influenced perceptions of stalking and responsibility, and the pattern of findings was consistent across the three countries. The perpetrator's behavior was perceived to constitute stalking, and necessitate police intervention and a criminal conviction to the greatest extent when the perpetrator and victim were portrayed as strangers. In addition, the target was perceived to be the *least* responsible and the perpetrator was perceived to be the *most* responsible when they were portrayed as strangers.

Keywords: stalking, perceptions, prior relationship, severity of behavior, just world hypothesis

Researchers have made significant advancements in understanding the phenomenon of stalking since the first anti-stalking law was passed in the United States in 1990. As Meloy and Felthous (2011) stated, "...a pattern of behavior that was once looked upon by law enforcement with curiosity, indifference, and even disdain, has become a felony in many jurisdictions around the world" (p. 139). However, the protracted nature of stalking makes it a difficult crime to define and legislate against, which has led to significant variations in stalking laws worldwide. In Australia and the United States, anti-stalking laws generally focus on the perpetrator's repetition of, or engagement in, specified conduct and his or her intention to cause the target apprehension, fear or harm (Ogilvie, 2000; Tran, 2003). In contrast, legislation in the United Kingdom does not require the repetition of specific conduct or proof of intent. Instead, the Protection from Harassment Act 1997 uses a 'reasonable person' test to determine whether a course of conduct amounts to stalking according to ss2A and 4A. These sections were introduced by the Protection of Freedoms Act 2012 and provide for the criminal offences of 'stalking' and 'stalking involving fear of violence or serious alarm or distress'.

In assessing the prevalence of stalking, crime surveys have shown that stalking is a serious problem that affects an estimated three percent of women in Australia, two percent of women in the United States and four percent of women in the United Kingdom annually (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006; Baum, Catalano, Rand, & Rose, 2009; Osborne, 2011). Crime surveys have also demonstrated that most incidents of stalking are perpetrated by someone known to the victim, such as an acquaintance or ex-partner (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006; Baum et al., 2009). It is important to acknowledge, however, that prevalence estimates are not directly comparable due to cross-national definitional variations. In Australia, the Personal Safety Survey defined stalking as the occurrence of more than one type of stalking behavior, or the repetition of the same stalking behavior, that the victim

believed was undertaken with the intention of causing fear or harm (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006); in the United States, the Supplemental Victimization Survey defined stalking as the occurrence of at least one type of specified stalking behavior on at least two separate occasions that caused the victim fear (Baum et al., 2009); and in the United Kingdom, the British Crime Survey defined stalking as the occurrence of one or more incidents of specified stalking behavior that caused the victim fear, distress or alarm (Osborne, 2011).

A growing body of applied and perception research relating to stalking indicates that perceptions often fail to reflect the reality of stalking behavior. For example, whilst applied research indicates that ex-partners represent the most persistent and dangerous relational subtype of stalker (e.g., James & Farnham, 2003; McEwan, Mullen, MacKenzie, & Ogloff, 2009; Pathé & Mullen, 1997; Rosenfeld & Lewis, 2005; Sheridan & Davies, 2001), perception research indicates that the same behavior is often considered to be more serious when perpetrated by a stranger (Hills & Taplin, 1998; Phillips, Quirk, Rosenfeld, & O'Connor, 2004; Scott, Lloyd, & Gavin, 2010; Scott & Sheridan, 2011; Sheridan, Gillett, Davies, Blaauw, & Patel, 2003). Therefore, it is important that research focuses upon understanding what factors influence perceptions of stalking so that common misperceptions can be identified and addressed through education and training programs.

Research utilizing hypothetical stalking scenarios has investigated the influence of various situational and personal characteristics on perceptions of stalking in Australia, the United States, and the United Kingdom. Characteristics that are commonly investigated include the prior relationship between the perpetrator and the target and severity of behavior. Research examining the influence of severity of behavior with student and community samples has shown that behavior is perceived to constitute stalking, represent a crime and necessitate police intervention to a greater extent when the perpetrator is persistent and there

is explicit evidence of intent (Dennison, 2007; Dennison & Thomson, 2002; Phillips et al., 2004; Scott & Sheridan, 2011). Dennison and Thomson (2002) and Dennison (2007) also found that participants were more likely to believe the perpetrator anticipated and intended to cause the target fear or apprehension when the perpetrator was persistent. Similarly, Scott and Sheridan (2011) found that the target was perceived to experience more alarm, personal distress, and fear of violence when the perpetrator was persistent and there was explicit evidence of intent. In the context of perception research, persistence refers to the frequency of behavior (e.g., single vs. repeat behavior; occasional vs. frequent behavior), while intent refers to whether or not the perpetrator has explicitly threatened the victim.

In examining the influence of prior relationship, research has focused on three relational subtypes (stranger, acquaintance and ex-partner). As noted earlier, behavior is often considered to be more serious when the perpetrator and target are portrayed as strangers in comparison to ex-partners. For example, Hills and Taplin (1998) found that participants in an Australian community sample were more likely to believe behavior would invoke fear when it was perpetrated by a stranger rather than an ex-partner. Similarly, Phillips et al. (2004) and Cass (2011) found that participants in two U.S. student samples perceived behavior to constitute stalking to a greater extent when the perpetrator and target were portrayed as strangers. Sheridan et al. (2003) and Scott and Sheridan (2011) also found that participants in two U.K. student samples were more likely to believe behavior constituted stalking and necessitated police intervention when it was perpetrated by a stranger rather than an ex-partner. In addition, participants perceived the target to experience more alarm or personal distress when the perpetrator and target were portrayed as strangers.

When reviewing this research, it is important to highlight the various ways in which the three relational subtypes have been presented. For example, stranger scenarios have described how the perpetrator first saw the target at a bar (Cass, 2011), on the television (Phillips et al.,

2004) or at the local supermarket (Sheridan et al., 2003); as well as how the perpetrator and target met at a friend's party (Scott & Sheridan, 2011). Acquaintance scenarios have described how the perpetrator and target were work colleagues or classmates (Cass, 2001; Phillips et al., 2004; Sheridan et al., 2003); while ex-partner scenarios have described how the perpetrator and target had previously dated (Cass, 2011; Phillips et al., 2004; Scott & Sheridan, 2011) or were previously married (Sheridan et al., 2003). In the context of ex-partner scenarios, none of these studies described any history of violence between the perpetrator and the target.

A number of explanations have been put forward for the finding that perceptions often fail to reflect the reality that ex-partners represent the most persistent and dangerous relational subtype of stalker. One explanation, initially proposed by Hills and Taplin (1998) relates to people's fear of the unknown. As Hills and Taplin pointed out, the characteristics, motives and behaviors of stranger stalkers are unknown, making the situation harder to predict and control. More recent research has also drawn attention to the perceived unpredictability of strangers in the context of stalking and sexual assault, and the false belief that it is easier to control the behavior of a known person (Cass, 2011; Scott, 2003). Another explanation, initially proposed by Sheridan et al. (2003), relates to people's belief in a 'just world'. According to the just world hypothesis, people are motivated to view the world as a safe place in which people get what they deserve and deserve what they get (Lerner & Simmons, 1966). When confronted with a victim of a crime, Lerner (1997) argues that people will reason on the basis of knowledge regarding a victim's behavior in order to assign responsibility to them and preserve their belief in a just world. In the context of stalking, it might be easier to mitigate the behavior of the perpetrator and assign responsibility to the victim when they are ex-partners rather than strangers because of their shared history (Scott et al., 2010). This theory may provide an explanation for the findings of perception research,

where more responsibility is attributed to the target when the perpetrator is portrayed as an ex-partner rather than a stranger (Scott et al., 2010; Scott & Sheridan, 2011; Sheridan et al., 2003). A final explanation as to why ex-partner stalkers may be perceived as less serious than stranger stalkers relates to the difficulties associated with distinguishing stalking behaviors from 'normal' behaviors following a relationship breakup (Dennison, 2007), especially given that stalking-like behavior is common (Dennison & Stewart, 2006; Haugaard & Seri, 2003).

Whilst research generally indicates consistency in findings regarding the effect of prior relationship on perceptions of stalking, a number of inconsistencies have been noted. For example, research conducted by Dennison and Thomson (2000) in Australia and Kinkade, Burns, and Fuentes (2005) in the United States found no influence for prior relationship on perceptions of stalking. Furthermore, research conducted by Dennison and Thomson (2002) in Australia revealed no main effect for prior relationship although it did reveal an interaction effect between prior relationship and persistence on perceptions of stalking. Specifically, when persistence was low, behavior was more likely to be classified as stalking when the perpetrator was portrayed as an ex-partner rather than a stranger. This finding is in direct contrast to research conducted by Scott and Sheridan (2011) in the United Kingdom who found that behavior was more likely to be classified as stalking when the perpetrator was described as a stranger irrespective of the level of persistence. It is possible that these inconsistent findings were caused by methodological differences. For example, Kinkade et al. (2005) described how the perpetrator and target met at a high school reunion. In one scenario the perpetrator and target had dated previously and in another scenario they had not. Consequently, the investigation of prior relationship appeared to be limited to acquaintance and ex-partner stalkers. Ceiling effects were observed in Dennison and Thomson's (2000) study, with 98 percent of their sample indicating that the described behavior constituted stalking. Finally, in both of Dennison and Thomson's studies the stranger scenario described



a chance encounter between the perpetrator and the target, the acquaintance scenario described how the perpetrator and target were work colleagues, and the ex-partner scenario described how the perpetrator and target had previously dated. Importantly, the ex-partner was described as possessive in the relationship, a description which may have influenced the findings.

In an attempt to determine whether the inconsistent findings of Dennison and Thomson (2002) were the result of cross-national or methodological differences, Scott et al. (2010) examined the influence of prior relationship on perceptions of stalking with Australian and U.K. student samples. They found that the perpetrator's behavior was perceived to constitute stalking, necessitate police intervention, and cause fear or apprehension and mental or physical harm, to a greater extent when the perpetrator and target were portrayed as strangers rather than acquaintances or ex-partners. Furthermore, the pattern of findings was consistent in Australia and the United Kingdom. Although this study provided the first examination of the influence of prior relationship on perceptions of stalking across these two countries, Scott et al. acknowledged that it was limited to the use of 'non-possessive' ex-partner scenarios. They also acknowledged that their study was limited to the use of student samples and scenarios characterized by low levels of intent and persistence, commenting on the need for further research to replicate and extend the study with other samples and more serious stalking situations in order to determine the robustness of their conclusions.

The present study therefore investigates the influence of prior relationship and severity of behavior on perceptions of stalking and responsibility in Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom. It represents novel research and extends Scott et al.'s (2010) study through the inclusion of non-possessive and possessive ex-partner conditions; the use of community samples from three countries including the United States; and the inclusion of three severity of behavior conditions whereby the perpetrator's persistence and intent were

manipulated. The present study also extends perception research by examining both target and perpetrator responsibility for the first time.

Two sets of research questions were proposed. First, whether prior relationship, severity of behavior and country influence perceptions of stalking and the extent to which the perpetrator's behavior:

1. constitutes stalking,
2. necessitates police intervention,
3. necessitates a criminal conviction,
4. will cause the target alarm or personal distress, and
5. will cause the target fear of violence.

Second, whether prior relationship, severity of behavior and country influence perceptions of responsibility and the extent to which:

1. the target is responsible for the situation, and
2. the perpetrator is responsible for the situation.

## **Method**

### **Design**

The study employed a  $4 \times 3 \times 3$  (prior relationship  $\times$  severity of behavior  $\times$  country) independent measures design. Prior relationship was manipulated so that the perpetrator was portrayed as a stranger, an acquaintance, a non-possessive ex-partner or a possessive ex-partner. Severity of behavior was manipulated by varying the perpetrator's persistence and intent so that his behavior represented an ambiguous, a low-level or a higher-level offence. With regard to country, samples comprised members of the community from Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom.

## **Participants**

The total sample comprised 1,080 members of the community from Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom; representing 360 participants (180 men and 180 women) from each country. In order to avoid within-sample differences in stalking legislation, participants from Australia resided in the State of Victoria (consistent with Dennison & Thomson, 2000, 2002; Scott et al., 2010), participants from the United States resided in the State of New York (consistent with Phillips et al., 2004), and participants from the United Kingdom resided in England (consistent with Scott et al., 2010; Scott & Sheridan, 2011; Sheridan et al., 2003). Participant ages ranged from 18 to 60 in Australia and the United States and from 19 to 60 in the United Kingdom. Participants from Australia had an average age of 39.36 years ( $SD = 12.03$ ); participants from the United States had an average age of 41.13 years ( $SD = 11.81$ ); and participants from the United Kingdom had an average age of 39.21 years ( $SD = 11.05$ ). The number of participants ( $n = 30$ ), and the proportion of men (50%) and women (50%), was consistent across all experimental conditions.

## **Materials**

Participants completed an online questionnaire that included 1 of 12 versions of a hypothetical stalking scenario, five scale items concerning perceptions of stalking, nine scale items concerning perceptions of responsibility, and two questions relating to participants' demographic information (sex and age). The 12 versions of the scenario represented all combinations of the prior relationship and severity of behavior manipulations. An example scenario for the stranger-ambiguous offence condition is provided below:

Sarah and James first met when Sarah renewed the lease on her apartment at the estate agents where James works. As Sarah was leaving the office James asked her out on a date. Sarah thanked him for the offer, but politely declined. During the two months that followed, James sent Sarah three or so text messages asking why she was not interested

in him. James also approached Sarah once on her way to work and telephoned her at home. Sarah asked James not to call her, but he still called occasionally. When Sarah screened her calls James left a message expressing his interest in a relationship. Most recently, James approached Sarah while she was walking her dog in the local park.

James asked Sarah to change her mind on the grounds that they could be good together.

Prior relationship was manipulated so that Sarah and James either met when Sarah renewed the lease on her apartment at the estate agents where James works (stranger condition), had worked together at the same estate agents office for six months (acquaintance condition), or had worked at the same estate agent's office and been romantically involved for six months (non-possessive and possessive ex-partner conditions). In the non-possessive ex-partner condition Sarah ended the relationship because they wanted different things and in the possessive ex-partner condition Sarah ended the relationship because James was possessive.

The severity of behavior was manipulated by varying James' persistence (low vs. high) and intent (non-threatening vs. threatening). James' persistence was low in the ambiguous offence condition (James sent Sarah three or so text messages, he approached her once on her way to work and he still called occasionally after she had asked him not to); and high in the low-level and higher-level offence conditions (James sent Sarah 30 text messages, he approached her several times on her way to work and he still called frequently after she had asked him not to). James' intent was non-threatening in the ambiguous and low-level offence conditions (James sent text messages asking why she was not interested in him, he left messages expressing his interest in a relationship, and he asked her to change her mind on the grounds that they could be good together); and threatening in the higher-level offence condition (James sent text messages telling Sarah that he would not go away easily, he left

messages warning her not to ignore him, and he told her that if he could not have her he would make sure no-one else could).

The five stalking items were measured on 11-point Likert scales. Items 1, 2 and 3 ranged from 'Definitely not' to 'Definitely' and items 4 and 5 ranged from 'Not at all' to 'Extremely':

1. To what extent do you consider James' (the perpetrator's) behavior to constitute stalking?
2. Do you think James' (the perpetrator's) behavior will cause Sarah (the target) alarm or personal distress?
3. Do you think James' (the perpetrator's) behavior will cause Sarah (the target) to fear that he will use violence against her?
4. To what extent does James' (the perpetrator's) behavior necessitate police intervention?
5. To what extent is a criminal conviction necessary for the resolution of this situation?

The nine responsibility items were measured on 7-point Likert scales. All items ranged from 'Not at all' to 'Completely':

1. How much do you blame Sarah (the target) for what happened?
2. To what extent did Sarah (the target) communicate that she was not interested in a relationship with James (the perpetrator)?
3. To what extent was James (the perpetrator) responsible for what happened?
4. How much do you consider the situation to be Sarah's (the target's) fault?
5. How much do you blame James (the perpetrator) for what happened?
6. Do you think James (the perpetrator) could persuade Sarah (the target) to become interested in a relationship sometime in the future?
7. How much do you consider the situation to be James' (the perpetrator's) fault?

8. Was it reasonable for James (the perpetrator) to believe that Sarah (the target) would be interested in a relationship sometime in the future?
9. To what extent was Sarah (the target) responsible for what happened?

These responsibility items are modified versions of items taken from Sleath and Bull's (2010) Victim and Perpetrator Blame Scale, originally developed to assess the responsibility attributed to the perpetrator and victim of a rape scenario. When a principal component analysis (PCA) was performed two factors were identified: target responsibility and perpetrator responsibility. Consequently, averages were calculated for the items that loaded onto target responsibility (items 1, 4, 6, 8 and 9, Cronbach's  $\alpha = .91$ ), and for the items that loaded onto perpetrator responsibility (items 2, 3, 5 and 7, Cronbach's  $\alpha = .83$ ). Further details regarding the PCA are provided in the Results section.

### **Procedure**

Participants were recruited by Research Now, a global online sampling and data collection company that has access to over six million panel members in 37 countries ([www.researchnow.com.au](http://www.researchnow.com.au)). Research Now distributed invitation emails to representative samples of panel members from the State of New South Wales, the State of New York and England, inviting them to participate in the study. Interested panel members read the informed consent form before being presented with an online questionnaire that took about 15 minutes to complete. Participants were then directed to a debrief page on completion of the questionnaire. All participants received the equivalent of AU\$1 for taking part in the study, which received approval from the university ethics committee and was conducted in accordance with the requirements of the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research, the American Psychological Association and the British Psychological Society.

Participants were simultaneously recruited for three separate studies examining the influence of various legal and extra-legal factors on perceptions of stalking and responsibility

in Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom, so the following response rates are for the combined samples of panel members. Invitation emails were distributed to 14,140 panel members in Australia, 16,690 panel members in the United States and 13,494 panel members in the United Kingdom. Of those contacted in Australia, 2,276 (16.1%) responded and 1,278 (9.0%) completed the questionnaire. Of those contacted in the United States, 2,048 (12.3%) responded and 1,269 (7.6%) completed the questionnaire; and of those contacted in the United Kingdom 1,841 (13.6%) responded and 1,260 (9.3%) completed the questionnaire.

## Results

### Perceptions of Stalking

A  $4 \times 3 \times 3$  multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was performed to determine the influence of prior relationship, severity of behavior and country on the combined stalking items. MANOVA was chosen despite violations of the homogeneity of covariances assumption because Box's M Test can be overly strict with large samples and the analysis is considered robust when the proportion of participants is consistent across all experimental conditions (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007). Correlation coefficients for the five scale items ranged from .527 (stalking and conviction) to .785 (intervention and violence).

Significant main effects for the combined dependent variables were obtained for prior relationship,  $F(15, 2871) = 5.20, p < .001, \eta^2 = .02$ , severity of behavior,  $F(10, 2082) = 51.72, p < .001, \eta^2 = .20$ , and country,  $F(10, 2080) = 4.63, p < .001, \eta^2 = .02$ . There were no significant interaction effects. Separate univariate analyses of variance (ANOVAs) utilizing Bonferroni corrected alpha values of .01 and post-hoc analyses (Tukey USD) utilizing alpha values of .05 were then performed on the individual stalking items. The associated  $F$  ratios, significance values, means and standard deviations are provided in Tables 1 and 2.

Prior relationship influenced whether the perpetrator's behavior was perceived to constitute stalking,  $F(3, 1044) = 18.80, p < .001, \eta^2 = .05$ , and necessitate police intervention

and a criminal conviction,  $F(3, 1044) = 19.78, p < .001, \eta^2 = .05$  and  $F(3, 1044) = 13.21, p < .001, \eta^2 = .04$  respectively. It also influenced perceptions of whether the target would experience alarm or personal distress and fear of violence,  $F(3, 1044) = 12.52, p < .001, \eta^2 = .04$  and  $F(3, 1044) = 11.59, p < .001, \eta^2 = .03$  respectively. Post-hoc analyses revealed that the perpetrator's behavior was perceived to constitute stalking, and necessitate police intervention and a criminal conviction to a greater extent when he was portrayed as a stranger or an acquaintance rather than a non-possessive or possessive ex-partner (all  $p \leq .019$ ). The target was also perceived to experience less alarm or personal distress and fear of violence when the perpetrator was portrayed as a stranger or acquaintance rather than a non-possessive or possessive ex-partner (all  $p \leq .027$ ).

Severity of behavior influenced whether the perpetrator's behavior was perceived to constitute stalking,  $F(2, 1044) = 119.70, p < .001, \eta^2 = .19$ , and necessitate police intervention and a criminal conviction,  $F(2, 1044) = 192.79, p < .001, \eta^2 = .27$  and  $F(2, 1044) = 145.77, p < .001, \eta^2 = .22$  respectively. It also influenced perceptions of whether the target would experience alarm or personal distress and fear of violence,  $F(2, 1044) = 119.82, p < .001, \eta^2 = .19$  and  $F(2, 1044) = 253.55, p < .001, \eta^2 = .33$  respectively. Post-hoc analyses revealed significant differences across all three severity of behavior conditions for all five stalking items. The perpetrator's behavior was perceived to constitute stalking, and necessitate police intervention and a criminal conviction to the greatest extent in the higher-level offence condition followed by the low-level and ambiguous offence conditions (all  $p < .001$ ). The target was also perceived to experience the most alarm or personal distress and fear of violence in the higher-level offence condition followed by the low-level and ambiguous offence conditions (all  $p < .001$ ).

Country influenced whether the perpetrator's behavior was perceived to necessitate police intervention and a criminal conviction,  $F(2, 1044) = 5.59, p = .004, \eta^2 = .01$  and  $F(2,$



1044) = 12.54,  $p = .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .02$  respectively. It also influenced perceptions of whether the target would experience fear of violence,  $F(2, 1044) = 9.14$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .02$ . However, country did not influence whether the perpetrator's behavior was perceived to constitute stalking, or perceptions of whether the target would experience alarm or personal distress. Post-hoc analyses revealed that participants from the United States perceived the perpetrator's behavior to necessitate police intervention and a criminal conviction to a greater extent than participants from the United Kingdom ( $p = .003$  and  $p < .001$  respectively). Participants from the United States also perceived the perpetrator's behavior to necessitate a criminal conviction to a greater extent than participants from Australia ( $p < .001$ ). With regard to fear of violence, participants from Australia and the United States were more likely to believe the target would experience fear than participants from the United Kingdom ( $p = .015$  and  $p < .001$  respectively).

### **Perceptions of Responsibility**

Consistent with Sleath and Bull (2010), a PCA with varimax rotation was performed on the nine responsibility items to obtain an insight into the underlying structure of participants' understandings of target and perpetrator responsibility. Two factors with Eigen values over one were identified that accounted for 72.57% of variance. The first factor (target responsibility) comprised five items relating to the level of blame and responsibility attributed to the target, and the second factor (perpetrator responsibility) comprised four items relating to the level of blame and responsibility attributed to the perpetrator. PCA was also performed on the nine responsibility items for each country separately. The loadings of the nine items reflected the same structure, with the two factors accounting for 72.28%, 76.29% and 68.66% of the variance in Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom respectively. As mentioned previously, averages were calculated for the items that loaded

onto the two factors and these averages were used for the subsequent analyses. Table 3 shows the loadings for the nine items from the PCA with varimax rotation.

A  $4 \times 3 \times 3$  MANOVA was performed to determine the influence of prior relationship, severity of behavior and country on the combined responsibility factors. Again, MANOVA was chosen despite violations of the homogeneity of covariances assumption because the analysis is considered robust when the proportion of participants is consistent across all experimental conditions (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007). The correlation coefficient for target and perpetrator responsibility was  $-.565$ .

Significant main effects were obtained for prior relationship,  $F(6, 2086) = 16.73, p < .001, \eta^2 = .05$ , severity of behavior,  $F(4, 2086) = 13.24, p < .001, \eta^2 = .03$ , and country,  $F(4, 2086) = 3.64, p = .006, \eta^2 = .01$ . There were no significant interaction effects. Separate ANOVAs utilizing Bonferroni corrected alpha values of  $.025$  and post-hoc analyses (Tukey USD) utilizing alpha values of  $.05$  were then performed on target and perpetrator responsibility. The associated F ratios, significance values, means and standard deviations are provided in Tables 4 and 5.

Prior relationship influenced perceptions of target and perpetrator responsibility,  $F(3, 1044) = 8.65, p < .001, \eta^2 = .02$  and  $F(3, 1044) = 33.98, p < .001, \eta^2 = .09$  respectively. Post-hoc analyses revealed that the target was perceived to be less responsible for the situation when the perpetrator was portrayed as a stranger rather than a non-possessive or possessive ex-partner ( $p < .001$  and  $p = .047$  respectively). The target was also perceived to be less responsible for the situation when the perpetrator was portrayed as an acquaintance rather than a non-possessive ex-partner ( $p = .001$ ). In contrast, the perpetrator was perceived to be more responsible for the situation when he was portrayed as a stranger or an acquaintance rather than a non-possessive or possessive ex-partner (all  $p \leq .001$ ). The perpetrator was also

perceived to be more responsible for the situation when he was portrayed as a possessive ex-partner rather than a non-possessive ex-partner ( $p = .007$ ).

Severity of behavior influenced perceptions of target and perpetrator responsibility,  $F(2, 1044) = 14.79, p < .001, \eta^2 = .03$  and  $F(2, 1044) = 22.99, p < .001, \eta^2 = .04$  respectively. Post-hoc analyses revealed the target was perceived to be less responsible for the situation in the higher-level offence condition compared to the ambiguous and low-level offence conditions (both  $p < .001$ ). With regard to perpetrator responsibility, the analyses revealed significant differences across all three severity of behavior conditions. The perpetrator was perceived to be most responsible for the situation in the higher-level offence condition followed by the low-level and ambiguous offence conditions (all  $p \leq .003$ ).

Finally, country influenced perceptions of target responsibility,  $F(2, 1044) = 5.83, p = .003, \eta^2 = .01$ , but did not influence perceptions of perpetrator responsibility. Post-hoc analyses revealed that participants from Australia and the United Kingdom were less likely to believe the target was responsible for the situation than participants from the United States ( $p = .004$  and  $p = .025$  respectively).

## **Discussion**

The present study investigated the influence of prior relationship, severity of behavior and country on perceptions of stalking and responsibility. It was novel and extended perception research by including non-possessive and possessive ex-partner conditions, using community samples from three countries, and examining both target and perpetrator responsibility for the first time.

### **Prior Relationship**

Consistent with the majority of previous research, participants were more likely to believe the described behavior constituted stalking and necessitated both police intervention and a criminal conviction when the perpetrator was portrayed as a stranger or acquaintance

rather than a non-possessive or possessive ex-partner (Cass, 2011; Phillips et al., 2004; Scott et al., 2010; Scott & Sheridan, 2011; Sheridan et al., 2003). Participants were also more likely to believe the target would experience alarm and fear of violence when the perpetrator was portrayed as a stranger or acquaintance rather than a non-possessive or possessive ex-partner (Hills & Taplin, 1998; Scott et al., 2010; Scott & Sheridan, 2011; Sheridan et al., 2003). These significant findings were consistent across the three countries and contrast with the findings of Dennison and Thomson (2000, 2002) and Kinkade et al. (2005), suggesting that previous inconsistencies reflect methodological rather than cross-national differences. However, there were small non-significant differences across the two ex-partner conditions, with the behavior of a non-possessive ex-partner being considered less serious than the behavior of a possessive ex-partner. As such, Dennison and Thomson's (2002) contrasting findings were most likely caused by the use of more detailed scenarios in which the possessiveness of the ex-partner was more obvious. Further research is necessary therefore to determine the point at which the *nature* of the shared history (e.g., possessive, abusive or violent) between the perpetrator and the target influences perceptions of stalking over and above the mere *presence* of the shared history.

With regard to responsibility, the target was perceived to be less responsible for the situation when the behavior was perpetrated by a stranger rather than a non-possessive or possessive ex-partner, or perpetrated by an acquaintance rather than a non-possessive ex-partner. In contrast, the perpetrator was perceived to be more responsible for the situation when the behavior was perpetrated by a stranger or acquaintance rather than a non-possessive or possessive ex-partner, or perpetrated by a possessive ex-partner rather than a non-possessive ex-partner. The finding for target responsibility is consistent with previous research (Scott et al., 2010; Scott & Sheridan, 2011; Sheridan et al., 2003); while the findings for both target and perpetrator responsibility are consistent with the workings of the just

world hypothesis and the reality that ex-partner stalkers are less likely to be arrested or convicted than stranger stalkers (Harris, 2000; Pearce & Easteal, 1999). As Scott et al. (2010) suggested, it might be easier to mitigate the behavior of the perpetrator and assign responsibility to the target when they are portrayed as ex-partners because of their shared history. However, it is unlikely that the just world hypothesis provides a full explanation for the influence of prior relationship on perceptions of stalking and responsibility (Scott & Sheridan, 2011). For example, researchers have drawn attention to people's fear of the unknown and the false belief that it is easier to predict and control the behavior of a known person (e.g., Cass, 2011; Hills & Taplin, 1998; Scott, 2003). Further research is necessary therefore to explore the influence of fear of the unknown and other alternative explanations on perceptions of stalking and responsibility.

Further research in this area is particularly important because misperceptions can impact on the discretionary decision making of victims, members of the community, police officers and legal professionals. With regard to victims, research suggests that stalking victimization is often not reported to the police because of the belief that it represents a minor incident or a personal matter (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006; Baum et al., 2009). Research also suggests that victims tend to seek assistance from family and friends when determining how best to respond to various types of crime (Greenberg & Ruback, 1992). It is important therefore that victims, as well as their family and friends, are educated regarding the risks associated with stalking; otherwise they may not take suitable precautions or report the behavior to the police.

The relevance of education and training programs for the police has been demonstrated by research in Australia and the United Kingdom, which has shown that police officers often share similar misperceptions to students and members of the community (e.g., Scott, Nixon, & Sheridan, 2013; Pearce & Easteal, 1999; Weller, Hope, & Sheridan, 2013). For example,

Pearce and Eastal found that police officers in their Australian sample were less likely to use stalking legislation when investigating cases involving ex-partners on the grounds that they are 'domestic' situations that warrant less serious intervention. Furthermore, Weller et al. and Scott et al. found that non-specialist police officers in two U.K. samples were more likely to believe behavior constituted stalking when it was perpetrated by a stranger rather than an acquaintance or ex-partner. As such, training programs need to address aspects of stalking where perceptions differ markedly from reality; with particular attention given to legal definitions of stalking, the risks associated with stalking and appropriate criminal justice responses to stalking. Otherwise, police officers may underestimate the risks, particularly in the context of acquaintance and ex-partner stalkers, and fail to respond appropriately. Although developed to guide decision making in response to stalking behavior, risk assessment tools such as the Stalking Risk Profile (MacKenzie, McEwan, Pathé, James, Ogloff, & Mullen, 2009) can assist in addressing common misperceptions.

### **Severity of Behavior**

Consistent with previous research, the perpetrator's behavior was perceived to constitute stalking, and to necessitate police intervention and a criminal conviction to a greater extent when persistence was high rather than low and intent was threatening rather than non-threatening (Dennison, 2007; Dennison & Thomson, 2002; Phillips et al., 2004; Scott & Sheridan, 2011). The target was also perceived to experience more alarm and fear of violence when persistence was high and intent was threatening (Dennison, 2007; Scott & Sheridan, 2011). With regard to responsibility, the target was perceived to be less responsible when persistence was high rather than low, and the perpetrator was perceived to be more responsible when persistence was high rather than low and intent was threatening rather than non-threatening. Although these findings suggest there are clear behavioral indicators that influence perceptions of stalking, the findings for responsibility contrast with the non-

significant findings of Scott and Sheridan (2011) and are inconsistent with the workings of the just world hypothesis. According to the just world hypothesis, the motivation to assign responsibility to the target should increase as the severity of behavior increases (Lerner & Simmons, 1966).

It is important to acknowledge, however, that unlike other types of intrusive crime, stalking does not comprise a single distressing incident. Instead, it comprises a series of related incidents over a protracted period of time (Pathé & Mullen, 2005). Consequently, it is not only possible to attribute responsibility to the target on the basis of their behavior prior to the stalking situation, but also on the basis of their behavior during the stalking situation. With regard to the contrasting findings of Scott and Sheridan, the target in their study did not ask the perpetrator to stop any of his behavior, whereas the target in the current study explicitly asked the perpetrator to stop calling her. It is possible therefore that the target's behavior in the current study prevented further responsibility from being attributed to her as the severity of behavior increased. Further research is required to explore these findings and develop a better understanding of the influence of target reactions to stalking situations on perceptions of perpetrator and victim responsibility.

### **Country**

Overall, the findings suggest that participants from the United States hold more punitive attitudes towards stalking compared to participants from Australia and the United Kingdom. Participants from the United States were more likely to believe the perpetrator's behavior necessitated police intervention than participants from the United Kingdom, and necessitated a criminal conviction than participants from Australia and the United Kingdom. Participants from Australia and the United States were also more likely to believe the target would experience fear of violence than participants from the United Kingdom. With regard to responsibility, participants from the United States were more likely to believe the target was

responsible for the situation than participants from Australia and the United Kingdom. Although there were few significant differences in perceptions between Australia and the United Kingdom compared to Scott et al. (2010), the pattern of findings was similar with participants from Australia perceiving the perpetrator's behavior to be more serious.

A cross-national study by Blumstein, Tonry, and Van Ness (2005) compared punitiveness for six types of crime across eight countries (including Australia, the United States, and the United Kingdom) and offers some insight into the findings. Blumstein et al. found that the United States was the most punitive country in the sample for all six types of crime and although no explanation was offered as to why the United States was so punitive, they stated that "legal and political culture, institutional arrangements, and constitutional traditions and values shape both crime and punishment in ways that no one has yet figured out how to quantify credibly" (Blumstein et al., 2005, p. 349). Thus, a multitude of factors could have contributed to the apparent cross-national differences between Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom; including variations in legislation and understandings of anti-stalking laws, differences in the media coverage of stalking cases, and cultural differences in norms and expectations regarding courtship behavior. Further research is necessary to determine the applicability of these and other factors in relation to cross-national differences in perceptions of stalking and responsibility.

With regard to limitations, it is important to acknowledge that this study was limited to the use of panel members originally recruited by Research Now for market research purposes. Although this procedure allowed for the distribution of invitation emails to representative community samples from three countries, it is unknown how representative the final samples were. Further research is required therefore to determine the robustness of these findings when other recruitment techniques are utilized. In addition, this study was limited to the manipulation of three levels of severity of behavior (low persistence and non-threatening,



high persistence and threatening, and high persistence and threatening) in the context of a man stalking a woman. Further research is necessary to investigate the influence of a fourth level of severity of behavior on perceptions of stalking and responsibility (low persistence and threatening) in the context of other opposite-sex and same-sex stalking situations.

Finally, this study was limited to perceptions of stalking and responsibility in the absence of legislation. Consequently, further research is required to determine whether the misperceptions identified in this and similar studies remain when participants are presented with the respective stalking legislations. Exploratory research with a U.K. student sample found that mock juries presented with a summary of the Protection from Harassment Act 1997 were more likely to perceive behavior as stalking when the perpetrator and target were portrayed as strangers rather than acquaintances or ex-partners (Scott & Gavin, 2011).

This study investigated the influence of prior relationship and severity of behavior on perceptions of stalking and responsibility in Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom. It demonstrated that stranger and acquaintance stalkers are perceived to present a greater threat to the personal safety of victims than ex-partner stalkers, and that the influence of prior relationship remained consistent irrespective of the perpetrator's persistence and intent. Although there were slight differences across countries, the overall pattern of findings was consistent and in line with the majority of previous research which has shown that perceptions often fail to reflect the reality that ex-partners represent the most persistent and dangerous relational subtype of stalker. Effective education and training programs are required therefore for victims, members of the community, police officers and legal professionals on aspects of stalking where perceptions differ markedly from reality.

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Table 1

*Multivariate and univariate analyses of variance F ratios for the five stalking items by prior relationship, severity of behavior and country*

Variable	ANOVA					
	MANOVA	Stalking	Intervention	Conviction	Alarm	Violence
	<i>F</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>F</i>
Relationship	5.20 <sup>***</sup>	18.80 <sup>***</sup>	19.78 <sup>***</sup>	13.21 <sup>***</sup>	12.52 <sup>***</sup>	11.59 <sup>***</sup>
Severity	51.72 <sup>***</sup>	119.70 <sup>***</sup>	192.79 <sup>***</sup>	145.77 <sup>***</sup>	119.82 <sup>***</sup>	253.55 <sup>***</sup>
Country	4.63 <sup>***</sup>	3.02	5.59 <sup>**</sup>	12.54 <sup>***</sup>	.87	9.14 <sup>***</sup>
R × S	1.15	2.48	2.19	1.11	2.70	1.85
R × C	1.09	.97	1.14	.98	1.30	1.18
S × C	1.52	.89	.85	.45	.14	.88
R × S × C	.77	.69	.95	.93	.49	.57

*Note.* *F* ratios are Wilks' Lambda approximations of *F*s. MANOVA = multivariate analysis of variance;

ANOVA = univariate analysis of variance. Bonferroni corrected alpha value = .01. <sup>\*\*</sup>  $p < .01$ , <sup>\*\*\*</sup>  $p < .001$ .

Table 2

*Means and standard deviations for the five stalking items as a function of prior relationship, severity of behavior and country*

Condition	Stalking items									
	Stalking		Intervention		Conviction		Alarm		Violence	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
<b>Relationship</b>										
Stranger	8.50 <sub>a,b</sub>	1.70	7.30 <sub>a,b</sub>	2.37	5.53 <sub>a,b</sub>	2.68	8.54 <sub>a,b</sub>	1.84	7.29 <sub>a,b</sub>	2.24
Acquaintance	8.33 <sub>c,d</sub>	2.02	7.00 <sub>c,d</sub>	2.56	5.42 <sub>c,d</sub>	2.86	8.39 <sub>c,d</sub>	1.93	7.25 <sub>c,d</sub>	2.47
Ex-partner (NP)	7.46 <sub>a,c</sub>	2.32	5.91 <sub>a,c</sub>	2.96	4.35 <sub>a,c</sub>	2.88	7.69 <sub>a,c</sub>	2.22	6.37 <sub>a,c</sub>	2.85
Ex-partner (P)	7.67 <sub>b,d</sub>	2.33	6.31 <sub>b,d</sub>	3.01	4.79 <sub>b,d</sub>	2.95	7.90 <sub>b,d</sub>	2.26	6.74 <sub>b,d</sub>	2.77
<b>Severity</b>										
Ambiguous	6.89 <sub>a</sub>	2.30	5.00 <sub>a</sub>	2.78	3.58 <sub>a</sub>	2.71	7.04 <sub>a</sub>	2.22	5.33 <sub>a</sub>	2.46
Low-level	7.99 <sub>a</sub>	2.00	6.48 <sub>a</sub>	2.48	4.74 <sub>a</sub>	2.66	8.15 <sub>a</sub>	1.96	6.56 <sub>a</sub>	2.36
Higher-level	9.09 <sub>a</sub>	1.48	8.41 <sub>a</sub>	1.89	6.73 <sub>a</sub>	2.32	9.20 <sub>a</sub>	1.44	8.85 <sub>a</sub>	1.61
<b>Country</b>										
Australia	8.06	2.24	6.61	2.78	4.79 <sub>a</sub>	2.85	8.21	2.12	6.99 <sub>a</sub>	2.55
United States	8.12	2.01	6.93 <sub>a</sub>	2.70	5.56 <sub>a,b</sub>	2.89	8.15	2.06	7.21 <sub>b</sub>	2.57
United Kingdom	7.79	2.19	6.35 <sub>a</sub>	2.86	4.72 <sub>b</sub>	2.83	8.03	2.11	6.54 <sub>a,b</sub>	2.70

*Note.* (NP) = non-possessive, (P) = possessive. Column means sharing subscripts are significantly different ( $p < .05$ ).



Table 3

*Principal components analysis with varimax rotation for the nine responsibility items*

Scale item	Factor loading		
	Target responsibility	Perpetrator responsibility	Communality
Item 1	<b>.85</b>	-.29	.81
Item 9	<b>.84</b>	-.37	.83
Item 4	<b>.83</b>	-.39	.84
Item 6	<b>.80</b>	-.14	.66
Item 8	<b>.75</b>	-.17	.60
Item 5	-.23	<b>.88</b>	.83
Item 7	-.25	<b>.85</b>	.78
Item 3	-.27	<b>.83</b>	.76
Item 2	-.20	<b>.62</b>	.42

*Note.* Boldface indicates highest factor loadings.

Table 4

*Multivariate and univariate analyses of variance F ratios for the two responsibility factors by prior relationship, severity of behavior and country*

Variable	ANOVA		
	MANOVA	Target responsibility	Perpetrator responsibility
	<i>F</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>F</i>
Relationship	16.73***	8.65***	33.98***
Severity	13.24***	14.79***	22.99***
Country	3.64**	5.83**	.22
R × P	1.09	1.05	1.63
R × C	.95	1.21	1.24
P × C	.88	.88	.32
R × P × C	1.19	1.45	.93

*Note.* *F* ratios are Wilks' Lambda approximations of *F*s. MANOVA = multivariate analysis of variance;

ANOVA = univariate analysis of variance. Bonferroni corrected alpha value = .025. \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

Table 5

*Means and standard deviations for the two responsibility factors as a function of prior relationship, severity of behavior and country*

Condition	Responsibility factors			
	Target responsibility		Perpetrator responsibility	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
<b>Relationship</b>				
Stranger	.91 <sub>a,b</sub>	1.35	6.36 <sub>a,b</sub>	1.04
Acquaintance	.98 <sub>c</sub>	1.42	6.28 <sub>c,d</sub>	1.01
Ex-partner (NP)	1.44 <sub>a,c</sub>	1.41	5.47 <sub>a,c,e</sub>	1.37
Ex-partner (P)	1.21 <sub>b</sub>	1.29	5.78 <sub>b,d,e</sub>	1.17
<b>Severity</b>				
Ambiguous	1.34 <sub>a</sub>	1.42	5.67 <sub>a</sub>	1.27
Low-level	1.23 <sub>b</sub>	1.43	5.96 <sub>a</sub>	1.21
Higher-level	.83 <sub>a,b</sub>	1.24	6.24 <sub>a</sub>	1.05
<b>Country</b>				
Australia	1.07 <sub>a</sub>	1.29	5.94	1.20
United States	1.33 <sub>a,b</sub>	1.61	5.94	1.21
United Kingdom	1.01 <sub>b</sub>	1.20	5.99	1.19

*Note.* (NP) = non-possessive, (P) = possessive. Column means sharing subscripts are significantly different ( $p \leq .05$ ).