

## Celebrities as Victims of Stalking

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There exists a widespread assumption that the celebrity experience has received the lion's share of research and other professional interest in stalking. Although it is true that legislation against and therefore early research into stalking was triggered in part by several high-profile celebrity cases, the vast majority of the literature examines general, noncelebrity victims. Although hundreds of studies and reports of stalking from a number of disciplines exist, probably less than 1% of these are devoted to celebrity victims. So, although celebrity cases inevitably receive media attention—sometimes on a global scale—little is known about the course and nature of celebrity stalking. Also, we have no reliable figures related to the extent of celebrity stalking, although anecdotal accounts and indications from relevant professionals would strongly suggest that most celebrities can expect to be the recipients of unhealthy attention at some point during their careers. In this chapter, we seek to provide an overview of the types of disturbing communication and pursuit the famous are forced to bear, and their disruptive and sometimes devastating effects.

Although systematic research documenting the experiences of stalking victims started only as recently as the last few years of the 20th century, good progress has been made. Most studies have been conducted in English-speaking countries, that is, the United States (e.g., Hall, 1998), Australia (e.g., Pathé & Mullen, 1997), and Great Britain (e.g., Sheridan, Davis, & Boon, 2001). A smaller number of works have been carried out in continental European countries, including the Netherlands (e.g., Kamphuis & Emmelkamp, 2001) and Germany (Dressing, Kuehner, & Gass, 2005), and elsewhere in non-Western countries,

which include Japan (Chapman & Spitzberg, 2003), Trinidad (Jagessar & Sheridan, 2004), and Iran (Kordvani, 2000). Many of the studies have revealed similar behavioral patterns among harassers, and it is also certain that stalking often has significant negative emotional, physical, social, and economic effects on the victim (e.g., Blaauw, Winkel, Arensman, Sheridan, & Freeve, 2002; Davis, Coker, & Sanderson, 2002; Mechanic, Uhlmansiek, Weaver, & Resick, 2000; Mohandie, Meloy, McGowan, & Williams, 2006; Purcell, Pathé, & Mullen, 2002). Similar findings relating to celebrity victims are in extremely short supply.

In this chapter, we review what has been learned from the few studies that have attempted to record the experiences of celebrity victims. We will also present findings from our own research and professional intervention work. The focus will be not on public figures in general but on celebrities in a more narrow sense, meaning persons widely known for their activities in the entertainment, information, arts, and sports sectors.

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### **Previous Findings**

In the Netherlands, 105 public figures who had experienced “repeated harassment originating from an obsession with the victim as a public figure” (p. 6) took part in a study that sought to determine some characteristics of public figure stalkers and their victims (Malsch, Visscher, & Blaauw, 2002). This is the only investigation known to date where public figures themselves provided the study data by responding to questionnaires and participating in interviews. Celebrity agents and publishing house employees distributed questionnaires among clients whom they believed had been targeted by stalkers. Members of the Dutch Government were also mailed questionnaires. Thus, the sample comprised politicians, writers, performing musicians, actors, and television and radio presenters. Of the 105 public figures who responded, 35 (33%) self-reported that they had been stalked. A majority (76%) were males. The most common methods of harassment were telephone calls, letters, faxes and e-mails, the sending of flowers and gifts, physical following, surveillance of the victim’s home, and harassment of family and friends. Many of the stalkers were said to be mentally disordered, with 34% of the public figures reporting that their stalker had undergone psychiatric treatment. Most of the public figures questioned took the stalking very seriously, with the majority reporting to the police.

A general finding in the Malsch et al. (2002) study was that the stalkers of politicians tended to remain distant, while the stalkers of those in the entertainment world were more likely to physically pursue their target. It was noted that those respondents who more regularly appeared on the television and radio had a greater chance of experiencing multiple stalking. Thus, the extent of media exposure may be an important risk factor. The same effect was not found, however, among politicians. Dietz et al.’s studies (1991a, 1991b) of inappropriate communications sent to politicians and Hollywood celebrities

also noted distinctions between these two public figure groups. Simple presence or absence of approaches made to the two groups cannot be commented upon as pursuers were compared with nonpursuers. In the Dietz et al. studies, communications to celebrities were more intimate and informal than those to Congress members. They were more likely to contain enclosures, and these enclosures were more personal in nature. Those sending inappropriate communications to celebrities were less likely to cast themselves as enemies than were those writing to politicians. They were more likely to express idolization, and be more interested in love, marriage, and sex. The Congress communicators focused far more on perceived personal injustices and violent themes. Celebrity communicators often focused on the world of Hollywood and on the celebrity himself or herself. They expressed a wish to meet the celebrity, while those who communicated with politicians wanted their concerns and injustices to be addressed. This may all be diluted into issues of romance versus issues of power and violence (Dietz et al.). As such, within the current study, we expected that themes of yearning for intimacy and romance would feature strongly in the pursuit of celebrities.

### **A Study of Television Personalities as Victims of Stalking**

Some research suggests that television personalities have a higher risk of stalking victimization than other subgroups of public figures. Meloy, Mohandie, and Green (Chapter 2) found that among their sample of celebrity stalkers, most of the multiple stalking cases focused upon female newscasters or television show actresses. This may be the case because television hosts and news anchorpersons can be easily incorporated into the relationship fantasy of a stalker (Hoffmann & Sheridan, 2005). By the nature of their role, they usually portray a warm, caring, and approachable demeanor, and tend to be physically attractive but not to an intimidating degree. In other words, they are more likely than the majority of public figures to be viewed as realistically attainable, and their actions carry a greater likelihood of being incorporated into a “reciprocal” fantasy. Because of their regular and predictable appearances on the television screen, they may become a pathologically fixated person’s fantasy object, offering focus and interest to an otherwise lackluster life.

### **Method**

A 55-item questionnaire was constructed specifically for this study and was distributed nationwide to well-known television personalities in Germany. The questions covered a variety of topics that included demographic details for the celebrity, the extent of the celebrity’s fame and public appearances, experiences of unusual fan contacts and stalking, reactions to any harassing behavior, and the psychological impact of any stalking victimization. In the study, the term “stalking” was not utilized. Instead, the public figure was asked if he or she had experienced “a series of unusual contacts by a fan or a similar

person that lasted for weeks, months, or years.” The intention here was to ensure that responses were not unduly influenced by individual perceptions of what constitutes “stalking.” A behaviorally oriented definition characterized by repetitive and socially inadequate contact was reasoned to make cases more comparable. The first author has good working contacts with the largest television network in Germany, allowing him to personally address invitations to participate in the study to 55 celebrities employed by the network. Fifty-three returned the questionnaire: a response rate of 96%. Further details concerning methodology may be found in Hoffmann (2005).

### **Demographic Characteristics of the Sample**

The sex ratio between the celebrities was reasonably uniform in that 57% ( $n = 30$ ) were female. The average age was 38.4 years ( $SD = 9.05$ ) with a range of 23 to 63 years. Almost all of the public figures were working as news anchorpersons, television presenters, sportscasters, or weatherpersons. One participant was a comedian. Two thirds of the television personalities were employed in roles concerning the provision of information to the populace, and the roles of one third lay in the field of entertainment. The average duration of a respondent’s celebrity status was 9.15 years ( $SD = 6.19$ ) ranging from 3 months to 25 years. In addition to their primary field of repute, a majority of the television personalities also obtained media attention from other sources of activity. Half of the sample (51%) stated that they were guests on other TV shows at least once a year (talk, quiz, or game shows), and almost two thirds of respondents (62%) had been the subject of media reports at least once per year, half more than five times a year.

### **Unusual Contacts and Mails**

In order to obtain an idea of the base rate of pathological communications received by celebrities, the television personalities were asked to estimate the proportion of unusual letters mailed to them. The vast majority of the participants stated that the “unusual” rate was 5% or less of all communications. In most cases (47%), the content of unusual communications was love related, followed by religious or political tracts (19%) and insults (9%). Overt threats were almost nonexistent.

Strange or disturbing items were sent to almost half of the participants (47%). These mailings can be grouped into the following categories: personal gifts, bizarre items, and pornographic material. Examples of personal gifts were jewelry, perfume, or home-made cookies or cakes. One well-known news presenter noted that if a fan sent home-baked treats to him, he gave them to colleagues in order to test them before eating any samples himself! Some personal gifts seemed to represent devotional objects. These included paintings or photographic compositions of the celebrity. Other items had a more bizarre quality and were difficult to encode. Examples here included very long columns

of numbers, collages of seemingly random news clips, or lone slices of pizza. Without knowing more about the sender, the meaning of these items remains unclear. Pornographic material was also posted to a number of respondents, including sex toys and pornographic magazines. The most shocking items included bodily fluids such as blood, sperm, or condoms filled with urine.

These experiences of German celebrities mirrored the results of Dietz's work from 1991. Analyzing persons who sent threatening and otherwise inappropriate letters to Hollywood celebrities, Dietz et al. (1991a) found that almost the same percentage (55%) sent enclosures along with their communications, ranging from innocuous items such as poetry or business cards to the bizarre, including ammunition and a coyote head.

### Stalking

Among our sample, 79% ( $n = 42$ ) reported having been stalked at some point in their career. To our knowledge, this is the first incidence rate of stalking for a public figure sample. Although this base rate may be higher than in other public figure groups because television personalities would seem to be a particularly frequent target of stalkers, it is clear that celebrity status carries with it a heightened risk of being targeted. Although the data sets are by no means comparable, it is worth noting that when examined against a German population sample (Dressing et al., 2005), the rate for the public figure group was more than six times higher (79% vs. 12%).

There existed a marked distinction regarding the gender distribution of victimization as compared to most other stalking studies. Of the female television personalities, 83% said they had been stalked, as had a high number of their male colleagues (74%). In the Dutch study of public figure victims, the percentage of male and female respondents who reported being stalked was also similar. In many other studies of stalking, both among noncelebrity populations (Spitzberg, 2002) and within celebrity groups (Dietz & Martell, 1989), an average of 70% to 80% of all stalking victims have been women. These differing findings may be explained at least in part by the possibility that other studies focused on more severe cases of harassment than did the current survey. It is well established that the less threatening the stalking, the more likely victim gender is equally distributed (Hoffmann, 2005). Alternatively, there may be some attributes of television personalities and/or their stalkers that help equalize the incidence of inappropriate methods of communication between the sexes. Although normally stalkers and the public figures they target are of the opposite sex (Dietz & Martell, 1989), this is not always the case. Here, 79% of all celebrity victims—regardless of their own gender—reported experiences with a male stalker, compared with 50% that had been targeted at least once by a female stalker. This ratio reflects the general finding that stalkers more often are men than women (Spitzberg, 2002).

The celebrities were asked to record their longest period of harassment by one individual. The average length was 25 months ( $SD = 27.61$  months),

ranging from periods of 1 month to more than 10 years. Although these were the most extreme stalking cases the television personalities reported, this number also fits well with findings from the general research on stalking. In a meta-analysis of 175 stalking studies, Spitzberg and Cupach (2007) found that the average case of stalking lasted for 22 months, or close to 2 years. In other public figure samples that included celebrities, the mean stalking duration is reasonably diverse, ranging from 16 (Chapter 2) to 32 months (Malsch et al., 2002). The differing samples and methodologies employed by these studies do not allow for fruitful comparisons. Being harassed is a periodic experience for public figures. Only a minority (14%; or  $n = 6$ ) of the stalked television personalities declared that they had been targeted just once. The majority had been the target of a stalker more frequently, most between two and five times in their career (62%;  $n = 26$ ). Similarly, in Malsch et al.'s study, 59% of respondents stated that they had been targeted more than once.

Letters sent by the stalkers were clearly dominated by themes of love and adoration. Every celebrity subject who had received letters from an obsessed fan mentioned that at least one of these writings expressed feelings of affection. Delusional topics were recorded next most frequently (59% of cases), followed by religious, political, and esoteric themes (51% of cases). Both threats (26%) and insults (26%) occurred in a sizeable minority of cases. Although not matching Dietz et al.'s (1991a) percentages, these predominant themes reflect those revealed by their study of letters sent to Hollywood celebrities almost two decades earlier.

Surprisingly often (74% of cases;  $n = 39$ ), obsessive fans tried to contact the television personalities via telephone. In the majority of cases (80%), the celebrities were contacted at their place of work, but almost half were telephoned at their home number (46%). Stopping the harassing phone calls often proved problematic, with 61% of the public figures reporting difficulties. When the content of the telephone calls was broken down, declarations of love were predominant (84%), whereas insults (19%), threats (11%), or pornographic comments (3%) occurred to a lesser extent. It is not known whether or how the content of calls evolved over time. The fact that demonstrations of love and adoration were most common, both in stalking letters and in telephone calls, corresponds with findings produced within other countries. Dietz's analyses of inappropriate letters to Hollywood stars (Dietz & Martell, 1989; Dietz et al., 1991a) as well as Malsch's survey of Dutch celebrities (2002) reached similar conclusions.

Almost half the sample (43%;  $n = 23$ ) were physically approached by an obsessive individual. A quarter of the television personalities (25%;  $n = 13$ ) reported that this had happened on only one occasion, but a fifth (19%;  $n = 10$ ) had experienced multiple incidents. In virtually all cases, the celebrity's workplace was the location of encounter on at least one occasion (96%;  $n = 22$ ). This high rate is easily attributable to the profession of the public figures, since most worked regularly at a well-known television station, the location of which could be easily traced. Still, there were many cases

of approaches made elsewhere. Almost three quarters of respondents (74%;  $n = 17$ ) stated that they experienced inappropriate approaches while making public appearances, at their own homes (40%;  $n = 9$ ), or at the home or workplace of a relative of the public figure (14%;  $n = 3$ ).

Participants were asked about the kind of behavior exhibited by their harassers. Only a few chose to address the television personality directly (17%;  $n = 4$ ). In a majority of the cases the obsessed fan expressed his or her affection in a less physical manner (91%;  $n = 21$ ). For instance, some would stand, lay, or sit wordlessly in the presence of the celebrity (57%;  $n = 13$ ), while others inquired regularly as to the whereabouts of the television personality (74%;  $n = 17$ ). Only a small minority displayed aggressive behaviors (13%;  $n = 3$ ).

Just one violent attack was reported within the present study. The victim was a female television presenter. The stalker had initially sent her love letters, but after some time the emotional tone in his letters shifted from adoration to angry diatribes. Finally, the stalker drove to the television station, breached security, located the office of the news presenter, and then attempted to choke her. Fortunately, she managed to escape and therefore avoided severe physical injury. Reporting psychological trauma, she underwent psychotherapy in order to try and come to terms with the incident. Consistent with two other studies from which some kind of base rate can be derived, violence in cases of celebrity stalking occurs relatively rarely. One out of 53 television personalities in the current work produces a violence incidence rate of 2%, which is an identical percentage to that produced by Meloy et al.'s study of a much greater number of U.S.-based celebrity stalking cases (Chapter 2). In Malsch's Dutch study, none of 35 stalked public figures were attacked aggressively. Among studies of noncelebrity cases—particularly where the perpetrator is a former intimate partner of the victim—the violence rate may be more than 25 times higher (Mohandie et al., 2006).

The celebrities were asked to report in more detail the worst incident they had ever experienced with an inappropriate communicator. Next to the violent attack, reports of physical approach and pursuit were particularly unpleasant. Other distressing behavior from obsessive individuals included following the television personalities by car, breaking into their offices, seeking out the homes of the parents of the public figure, and regularly traveling hundreds of miles to see the celebrity in a public appearance. Other obsessive individuals threatened suicide, wrote about violent fantasies in which they cut off the public figure's body parts, or announced intended acts of revenge from right wing extremist groups. In another incident, a stalker wrote several times that he would pick up the celebrity and take her away to live with him; his letters also contained enthusiastic references to his armory. In several cases, phone calls to private telephone lines were felt to be alarming. In one of these cases, the stalker pretended to be a journalist and later posed as a police detective who was investigating a sexual crime, using this rather obvious ruse to ask questions about the intimate life of a female presenter.

## Risk Factors

Little is known for sure about those attributes of public figures that may lead to him or her becoming a particularly attractive target to stalkers. The only empirical study that has so far addressed this issue (Chapter 2) found that female newscasters and television show actresses receive disproportionately higher levels of this form of harassment. Anecdotal reports from experts in the field of threat assessment also provide clues. Gavin de Becker, a major figure in the field of managing celebrity stalking, believes that female singers top the list of public figures at risk. "Songs go much more to visceral elements of our makeup than movies do. We've all had the experience of thinking, 'That song really says what I am feeling now.' So songs are very powerful, which is why female singers will have more problems than any other media figure" (quoted from Gross, 2000, p. 177). Forensic psychiatrist Park Dietz believes social charisma to be of particular relevance: "The nicer one appears to be, and the more approachable, the more one will attract the serious and persistent and deluded subjects. Their public personae foster an illusion of intimacy and receptivity and a willingness to come close in a nonthreatening manner to subjects who generally have difficulty with social relationships" (quoted from Gross, 2000, pp. 177–178). This would support our earlier view that television hosts and news anchorpersons who make regular and predictable appearances are particularly vulnerable.

Although the current work only examined television personalities, we nevertheless attempted to further investigate some relevant dimensions. For the purpose of statistical analyses, a variable labeled "extent of stalking victimization" was aggregated from the following individual variables: "longest experience of stalking," "number of stalkers," and "aggressive stalking." Analyses of variance were conducted to explore which factors appeared to increase the risk of a celebrity becoming a victim of serious stalking. The level of familiarity of the television personality as measured by his or her viewing rates was statistically controlled, but it appeared that this variable had no influence on the results.

Two factors were found to influence the extent of stalking as experienced by our television celebrities. The most powerful predictor was wider media coverage. That is, the extent to which the public figure had been the subject of coverage in other media was related to a greater risk of them becoming the victim of more serious stalking ( $F = 4,602$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < .05$ ). In Malsch et al.'s (2002) study, media exposure was positively related to more severe and frequent stalking among television and radio celebrities. Being regularly seen in the media, particularly in entertainment formats, would imply that celebrities more often reveal details of their private life and present a more immediate and personal identity to the public. One central quality of celebrity stalkers is that they confound fantasy and reality aspects in their perceptions of their relationships with others. As such, it is not surprising that they may connect easier to celebrities with a more private appeal. This result supports Dietz's already



introduced argument that a presentation of both private details and frankness can encourage fantasies of mutual attachments. Advice to public figures to hide their private persona (for example by avoiding taking part in photo shoots in their own homes) clearly makes sense (de Becker, 1997).

The second factor significantly related to extent of stalking victimization in the current study was the time of the celebrity's television appearances. Those who worked mostly in the late evening and night-time were more seriously stalked. It may be that night-time provides a better setting for fantasy development and elaboration (Dietz & Martell, 1989). This idea was further supported when audience figures were checked, as no correlation between later appearances and higher viewing figures was observed.

An interesting and somewhat surprising aspect of the present work concerned those factors that did *not* influence the extent of stalking victimization. Contrary to the results of Meloy, Mohandie, and Green (Chapter 2), it was not the younger and/or the female celebrities that were most often targeted. In fact, age and gender did not have any significant impact. This contradicts the general impression that young females are very often exposed to both wanted and unwanted communications of love and sexual content. Also, media products and the entertainment industry perpetuate the notion that being a beautiful young woman is the best way to attract attention. Explanations as to why this important cultural and evolutionary factor did not play such a central role in fixations on public figures in this study may be grounded in the argument that common approach behavior may differ markedly from pathological attachments (Roberts, 2007).

In accordance with such thoughts, further analysis of the data revealed that the more pathological the communication became, the less relevant target gender appeared to be. Different levels of unusual contact behavior were analyzed with a focus on the amount of love-related communication received by the celebrities. The mildest form of pathological contact was unusual letters that were not classified as "stalking" by the television personalities. These represented a border region of unusual communication that had already left the realm of regular fan contacts. Here a clear gender effect was observable. The rate of love-related content in the letters to females was much higher than that contained within the mail sent to their male colleagues ( $t = -2.67$ ,  $df = 51$ ,  $p < .01$ ). The next pathological stage was "stalking behavior" in the form of series of unusual letters that lasted for weeks, months, or years. In this rather mild category of stalking, the same form of gender difference was found, although not as distinctly as before ( $t = -2.39$ ,  $df = 39$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Finally, a more intrusive kind of stalking communication was analyzed by examining the content of repeated phone calls. At this point, significant differences in the proportion of love-related messages to our male and female television personalities disappeared. In sum, it may be preliminarily stated that the more pathological, obsessive, and harassing the stalking behavior becomes, the less the gender of the celebrity would seem to play a role.

### Effects of Stalking Victimization

As noted at the beginning of this chapter, it is well known that stalking can lead to significant mentally, physically, and socially deleterious effects in its victims. Physical and emotional effects that have been recorded include distrust of others, persistent nausea and/or headaches, exacerbation of existing medical conditions, substance use and abuse, confusion, nervousness, anxiety, stomach problems, chronic sleep disturbances, persistent weakness or tiredness, and appetite disruption (see e.g., Bjerregaard, 2000; Brewster, 1999; Dressing, Kuehner, & Gass, 2005; Nicastro, Cousins, & Spitzberg, 2000; Sheridan, Davies, & Boon, 2001; Westrup, Fremouw, Thompson, & Lewis, 1999). Actual percentages reported by individual studies vary, mainly because of differences in definitions and sampling, but are usually very high. Furthermore, symptoms are usually found regardless of whether the victim was physically attacked. At least one symptom of posttraumatic stress disorder was reported by a majority of Pathé and Mullen's (1997) victims, and Kamphuis and Emmelkamp (2001) noted that 59% of their victim sample reported symptoms comparable to those exhibited by victims of more generally recognized trauma. Social and economic losses arising from being stalked have also been observed and these include taking security measures, losing or changing jobs, moving homes, changing telephone numbers, repairing or replacing property damaged by the stalker, paying legal and medical fees, changing routines or staying indoors, and avoiding social activities (see e.g., Bjerregaard, 2000; Blaauw et al., 2002; Brewster, 1999; Dressing et al., 2005; Kamphuis & Emmelkamp, 2001; Mohandie, Meloy, McGowan, & Williams, 2006; Pathé & Mullen, 1997; Purcell, Pathé, & Mullen, 2002; Sheridan, 2001; Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998; Westrup et al., 1999). In the current work, the celebrities were asked about specific effects of being stalked; Table 9.1 summarizes the findings.

Figures produced by Dressing et al.'s (2005) German population study are also included in Table 9.1. Although it must again be noted that the two data sets are not comparable, the figures are not entirely different. The largest difference in Table 9.1 concerns moving homes, with celebrity victims being

**Table 9.1.** Celebrity victims' ( $n = 42$ ) reactions to stalking compared with victims in the general population ( $n = 78$ ) (Dressing et al., 2005)

Reaction to stalking	Celebrity (%)	General population (%)
Agitation	74	57
Fear	59	44
Changing lifestyle	63	72
Changing residence	6	17
Additional security measures	9	17
Report to the police	9	20

less likely to do so than nonpublic figure victims. Perhaps it is the case that celebrity victims feel that it is rather pointless to go to the trouble of relocating when the stalker may easily locate them at their workplace or when making public appearances. It may be concluded that celebrity victims are not immune to the well-documented negative effects of being targeted by a stalker. In the current work, female television personalities ( $F = 5,363$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and those who were physically approached ( $F = 4,104$ ,  $df = 3$ ,  $p < .05$ ) by a stalker reported higher levels of psychological stress.

### Case Example 1

The following case study illustrates the negative effects that stalking can have on its celebrity victims.

An attractive 32-year-old female local news presenter received a letter from a 30-year-old man. In this letter, he stated his name and warned, "Remember that name, you'll be hearing from me." The news presenter received a total of 80 letters from this individual over a 6-month period. Over time, the letters became more and more overtly sexual. They contained constant references to stalking, such as, "Every celebrity needs a stalker." When the news presenter became engaged to be married, and wore her engagement ring on air, the stalker's letters intensified and he made repeated references to sexual and violent scenarios. The stalker talked about the murder of BBC presenter Jill Dando, writing: "I think the whole Jill Dando thing was great. I was hoping a celebrity would get killed by a stalker or someone. It's made it even better that she read the news." The news presenter was terrified. She was unable to sleep at night, and would check all the rooms in her house to ensure he was not there because she knew he was trying to discover her home address. It became difficult for her to work, partly because she was conscious that the stalker would react to what she wore and said on air. The stalker visited his victim at the television studios where she worked. He watched her and other staff members and would then write to tell her what he had seen. As time went on, the stalker's letters detailed his fantasies about becoming a serial killer and he explained that he had a psychotic disorder. He moved houses, living too far away to see his victim's regional news bulletins. Instead he paid to have videotapes posted to his new address. He made threats against the newsreader's fiancé. Each of his letters now ran to 30 to 40 pages. The newsreader reported her stalker to the police. When they searched his home, police found a textbook for law students on harassment, and a handbook on how to be a stalker that the accused was writing. The stalker was jailed for 2½ years and banned for life from having any contact with his victim. In court he said he would have gone to her home had he been able to discover her address. Following the sentence, the victim said: "The death of Jill Dando brought it home that TV presenters, however well-loved and with a good-natured image, are a target for people out there that can do something like that and find out where you live. Even now I still look behind me."

### **Intervention Strategies**

In accordance with advice given in guidebooks written for victims of general stalking (Spence-Diehl, 1999; Pathé, 2002) and in line with recommendations offered for celebrity victims (de Becker, 1997), the television personalities reported that ignoring an obsessive fan was the best strategy for bringing stalking to an end. None of the public figures thought this intervention to be unsuccessful. In contrast, strategies that may feed the stalker's fantasy of a reciprocal relationship appeared to have unsatisfactory effects. For example, personal appeals to an obsessive fan to stop his harassing behavior have the result that the stalker receives direct attention from the celebrity. Being recognized is one of the core motives for stalking. Recognition provided by a famous person may elevate feelings of self-importance and entitlement, further encouraging the stalker to seek to establish a special relationship with the public figure. Therefore, every direct contact has the potential to escalate the stalking. We also asked those television personalities who had responded to an obsessive fan by letter or telephone if their reaction had made things worse. One third agreed. Likewise, the interference of a third party does not always bring positive results. The stalker can view the third party as a messenger from the celebrity and therefore his expectations of being recognized are fulfilled. Also, a rejection from a third party often allows the stalker to retain his fantasy that one day there will be a relationship with the public figure. He may, for example, believe that if he and the celebrity were to meet then the latter would realize their inevitable joint fate. Alternatively, third parties can be blamed for keeping the stalker and his target apart.

### **Case Example 2**

A presenter at the beginning of her career received letters from a young man who seemed very desperate. He declared that he had fallen deeply in love with her after seeing her on his television screen. He begged for a reply, supplying his address and telephone number in the letters. Being a friendly and compassionate person and having had no previous experience of unusual contact by viewers, the presenter decided to telephone him and explain that she was married and therefore it would be more fruitful for him to focus his love interest on other, more available, young women. This call lasted no longer than 1 hour but a decade and a half later, the man is still obsessively fixated on the presenter and claims that this personal conversation forever changed his life. Directly after the phone call, his contact behavior escalated. Along with numerous letters and calls to the workplace of the television personality, he managed to find out her private address and started loitering in front of her house. His letters indicated that over the years he was increasingly suffering from a psychotic illness. Unfortunately at one point, a well-meant intervention by male friends of the presenter worsened the situation. The friends warned the stalker in a threatening manner that he should stop his harassing behavior. From this

moment onward, the adoring tone in the stalker's communications changed to expressions of hate and revenge, and he began a long lasting campaign of psychological terror against the presenter.

It is instructive that a strict rebuff by the celebrity is generally far more effective than a friendly appeal to an obsessive fan. There exists a general dynamic in stalking that when a rejection is formulated by the victim in a manner that is not completely clear and unambiguous, the stalker often finds another argument to support his idea of a special union (de Becker, 1997). This is the consequence of the typical cognitive distortions and psychological defenses of stalkers. These distortions center on issues of close relationships and rejection and can be the result of early attachment pathology (see Meloy, 2007) (Chapter 8). Therefore, a strict rebuff provides the stalker with less opportunity to construct a scenario where the public figure is still interested in him than does a polite and more defensive reaction. At first glance, this advice would appear inconsistent: on the one hand any kind of reaction from a celebrity can enhance the stalker's feeling of entitlement, but on the other hand a strict rebuff may succeed. A possible explanation for this ostensible contradiction is that not all offensive and unusual approaches and contacts a public figure experiences are from fixated persons for whom fantasy and reality are blurred.

Research demonstrates that more people than are generally believed have an extraordinary interest in celebrities and sometimes strive for contact with a public figure. First referred to as the "parasocial relationship" and later conceptualized under the term of "celebrity worship," this phenomenon has gained increasing scientific interest (Sheridan, Maltby, & Gillett, 2006) (Chapters 12 and 13). The approach behavior of fans has also been examined, showing that "active fans" may go to great lengths to physically encounter a celebrity or to find out details about them such as a home address (Emerson, Ferris, & Brooks Gardner, 1998; Ferris, 2001). Unlike stalkers, these people would in most cases accept a clear line drawn by the public figure they are interested in. A similar type of individual is described by de Becker (1994) as the "naïve pursuer." Often unsophisticated, this character simply does not realize or appreciate the social inappropriateness of his approach behavior. He keeps on harassing until someone makes it unequivocally clear to him that his approach is unacceptable and counterproductive. According to de Becker, direct communication is most fruitful in such cases, invariably causing the naïve pursuer to halt his quest (see Table 9.2).

In the current study, after ignoring the obsessive fan, calling in the police appeared to be the next fruitful intervention strategy. Only 7% of the television personalities reported that this strategy had no success at all. These data confirm the results of a 1996 study conducted by the Threat Management Unit of the Los Angeles Police Department. One of the key aspects of activity of this police unit is to manage cases of celebrity stalking (see Chapter 14). Evaluating their interventions in cases of both celebrity and noncelebrity stalking, Williams, Lane, and Zona (1996) found that for most incidents, an

**Table 9.2.** Success rate of interventions by celebrities against obsessive fans

<b>Intervention strategy</b>	<b>No success (%)</b>	<b>Partial success (%)</b>	<b>Full success (%)</b>
Ignoring obsessive fan	0	42	58
Call in police	7	77	26
Strict rebuff	13	59	28
Interfering third party	20	40	40
Direct appeal to obsessive fan	26	39	35

offensive policy stopped the harassment. Still, anecdotal wisdom suggests that sometimes police intervention can escalate a stalking incident, particularly in cases where the law is not consequently enforced (for instance when the breaking of restraining orders goes unpunished). The key factors for an effective and successful approach seem to be determination and fast action of the responsible police unit (Chapter 14). So why does professional police intervention often curtail or at least contain the activities of the celebrity stalker? It is likely that in some cases it destroys the stalker's fantasy of a special relationship with the public figure. That is, the fixated person is forced to realize that they are not half of a "private" affair between the celebrity and themselves, but now are in conflict with a third party—the police (Hoffmann & Sheridan, 2005).

### **Special Aspects of the Stalking Victimization of Celebrities**

It is clear that celebrities are a favored target of stalkers, probably more than any other group within Western societies. Although the rate of physical violence is much lower than that seen among the high-risk group of ex-partner stalking victims, the psychological impact on celebrities can still be dramatic. An internationally well-known celebrity reported to one of the authors that owing to the experience of being pursued by an extremely obsessive and cunning stalker for over 4 years, she seriously considered ending her career. She said she loved her professional life, but worrying about the stalker's next steps had negative effects on all aspects of her life. Thus, she hoped that removing herself from public attention would cause the stalker to lose interest. This feeling of helplessness and entrapment is typical among stalking victims, but we must be aware of some special distinctions that apply only to celebrity cases.

In the first detailed case example presented above, a news presenter reported having difficulties at work, because she was worried how the stalker would react to her on-air appearance and behavior. This is not an isolated experience among celebrity stalking cases. Sometimes public figures are fundamentally shaken when they receive knowledge of how an obsessive fan perceives or interprets their public persona. Celebrities may feel very uncomfortable because they realize that they ultimately have limited control over their public image. One television personality admitted to one of the authors

that because of a very aggressive delusional stalker he almost had to give up his own talk show. He was preoccupied with how his stalker perceived his behavior and as a result the quality of his interviews noticeably depreciated.

Unlike most victims who will have had some sort of prior social relationship with their harasser (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007), celebrities are often unable to recognize their stalker. Having read his letters or having heard his voice on CDs or answering services, the stalker may feel psychologically close but physically invisible. Occasionally, public figures are worried because they will know from a stalker's communicated facts that he has been close by at a public appearance or even in a private context but they were unable to detect him. Having no clue as to the appearance of the stalker, they feel unsafe being out in public, which can lead, in turn, to social withdrawal. In some cases known to the authors, celebrities have engaged security services to make secret footage of the stalker in an attempt to assuage such fears. In one case known to us, the detectives were not too skilled such that the stalker came to notice their activities in front of his house. He interpreted the photographing as an indicator that the celebrity was positively interested in him and immediately intensified his contact behavior.

Contrary to public belief, in the experience of the authors, celebrities do not usually receive special attention or priority handling from authorities. Depending on legislation within the celebrity's country of residence, even when harassed or threatened to an alarming extent, police can sometimes only explain that they are powerless. For example, a male actor was attacked with a knife by a mentally ill stalker. He managed to escape uninjured and the stalker was sent to a mental institution. Before she was apprehended, the stalker told the actor that she would kill him upon being released. Because of legal complications, she was set free a few weeks later, although psychiatrists still believed her to be dangerous. The actor called the police and asked for help. A policewoman informed him that he should not worry, saying that the stalker was "only a female."

Reactions to media stories concerning the stalking of public figures often fail to elicit much sympathy from the general public. This lack of sympathy is supported by arguments such as "stalking is the price of fame," "you are not famous until you have your first stalker," or "well what do they expect after prostituting themselves in the media?" Celebrities are faced with a dilemma when it comes to media exposure. Particularly during early career stages, media appearances enhance market value, but they also heighten the risk of becoming a victim of stalking. As has been learnt by practical experience, and also suggested by the current study, intimate disclosures by public figures attract obsessive fans. At the same time, this is the material craved by the media, and therefore personal revelations guarantee the celebrity wide coverage (e.g., see [tmz.com](http://tmz.com)). It is especially so that statements on romantic issues can trigger stalking activities. One case illustrates this. A female public figure was harassed by an erotomaniac individual who turned up at almost all her public appearances. Fortunately, his activities gradually decreased until he

was not seen for 6 months. Then, in a media interview, the public figure talked about her loneliness and how she wished that the right man would step into her life. A few days later the stalker suddenly reappeared. He also began writing letters in which he referred to this statement made by the public figure.

A recent legal ruling may help protect celebrities in England and Wales. In December 2006, the British Court of Appeal upheld an earlier High Court judgment that had found that Canadian singer-composer Loreena McKennitt's privacy had been intruded upon when a former friend and employee self-published a book about her. McKennitt commented, "I am very grateful to the courts . . . who have recognized that every person has an equal right to a private life. If an aspect of career places one directly in the public eye or if extraordinary events make an ordinary person newsworthy for a time, we all still should have the basic human dignity of privacy for our home and family life." This case generated great interest among media and law professionals because it clarified the implications of the Human Rights Act 1998 on English law, and made clear that public figures will be protected when they have a "reasonable expectation of privacy," unless there is a serious public interest in the material in question. Of course, the level of protection awarded to celebrities who purposefully court the media to raise their professional profile is likely to be much reduced or even nonexistent.

Another important distinction between famous and nonfamous victims is that the former tend to underestimate the degree of pathological fixation and the persistence of and dangers presented by stalkers. Talking about the smallest details in public can lead to the detection of their private whereabouts. In one case, a television personality discussed his favorite place to go on holiday. An obsessed fan spent three summers at this location looking for the presenter in every hotel before she found him. This direct contact was the beginning of a stalking campaign that lasted for years. It must be made clear that stalkers can put inordinate amounts of time and effort into stalking activity. This is best conceptualized by considering one's own life. For many people, life is made up of work, family, hobbies, socializing, taking care of the home and pets, and so on. When we think about our achievements, we can appreciate all the time and effort we have put into realizing them. Stalkers can put the same amount of time and effort into little else but the stalking.

A somewhat tricky dynamic in celebrity stalking is that media reports about an incident may themselves represent one of the stalker's goals. There are two primary underlying reasons for this. First, public attention has the potential to feed the pathologically narcissistic needs of many public figure stalkers (Chapter 8), and second, the stalker will be connected with the celebrity through media coverage. Another problem is that the judicial system sometimes forces a direct encounter between the public figure and the fixated person (Chapter 18). This became apparent in the case of pop star Madonna, who was forced against her will to stand in court in the same room as her aggressive stalker. Madonna was fully aware of the psychological dynamics in the stalker, declaring, "I feel incredibly disturbed that the man who has



repeatedly threatened my life is sitting across from me and we have somehow made his fantasies come true (in that) I am sitting in front of him and that is what he wants" (Saunders, 1998, pp. 40–41).

## Conclusions

This chapter has provided details of the stalking experiences of a sample of German television personalities. Despite differences in sampling, methodology, and country of origin, important similarities have been found between this and several earlier works. For instance, television presenters may be at particular risk, expressions of romantic love are dominant, many celebrities are sent strange items along with missives from the stalker, celebrities are negatively affected by being stalked, celebrities are likely to be stalked more than once, and many celebrity stalkers will be delusional. Important distinctions have been seen between celebrity victims and general population victims. For example, celebrity victims have among their number a higher proportion of males than do general population victims, and stalkers of celebrities are much more likely to be delusional. These findings underline the dangers of assuming that findings and advice from the general stalking literature will apply in public figure cases. The current findings make clear the need to take celebrity stalking seriously, particularly given the grave emotional, social, and professional effects on victims. The stalking of celebrities is too often trivialized and seen as an inevitable side effect of fame. Increasing our knowledge of the dynamics of celebrity stalking cases and the motivations and characteristics of offenders can only serve to increase the efficacy of intervention strategies.

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