

Stalking, Threatening, and Attacking Public Figures: A Review

Stalking, Threatening, and Attacking Public Figures: A Psychological and Behavioral Analysis Edited by **J. Reid Meloy, Lorraine Sheridan, and Jens Hoffman**, Oxford, UK, Oxford University Press, 2008. 474 pp. \$65.00 (Hardcover) ISBN: 978-0-19-532638

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Keywords Stalking · Threat management · Threat assessment · Public figures

Celebrities and politicians have been neglected. With the typical media frenzy that surrounds public figures, it may seem odd to say that these individuals have been overlooked. However, when it comes to research examining the stalking of public figures, this statement carries some truth.

Since the advent of the first anti-stalking law in California in 1990, research on stalking has continued to grow. Despite early conceptions of the crime as primarily a problem facing celebrities and politicians—indeed the murder of actress Rebecca Schaeffer is often acknowledged as the trigger for anti-stalking legislation—subsequent research has revealed that the majority of stalking cases involve acquaintances, typically former intimates (see Spitzberg and Cupach 2007 for review). Accordingly, much of the research on stalking began to focus on intimate partner stalking, and the stalking of public figures has taken an empirical back seat.

Of course, turning some attention to study the stalking of public figures is no small task, given that celebrities and politicians, as a population of study, would obviously be difficult group to sample. Nonetheless, in the book *Stalking, Threatening, and Attacking Public Figures*, J. Reid Meloy, Lorraine Sheridan and Jens Hoffmann show

the reader some of the methodological tools one could employ. With chapters employing archival, case study and survey methodologies, their text offers insight into everything from the everyday parasocial relationships a fan may form with a celebrity (e.g., Chapter 13) to the extreme homicidal intentions of predatory stalkers (e.g., Chapters 4 & 10).

Throughout the chapters in the text, common themes emerge:

- highlighting the importance of mental illness to understand many cases of public figure stalking (e.g., see Chapter 3),
- discussing the motivations driving stalkers (e.g., Chapter 3, 5, 6),
- debating the utility of certain variables (e.g., presence/absence of threats, mental illness) in predicting the likelihood of approach behavior and escalation to violence (e.g., Chapters 5, 6, 14, 15, 19, 20), and
- constructing typologies of stalkers that often combine motivation and likelihood of violence (e.g., Chapters 1, 5, 16).

Meanwhile, unique chapters, such as Biesterfeld and Meloy's (Chapter 7) that features a walk through of the history of assassins, add to the richness of the text.

Note, simply because this book has a focus on public figures does not mean that the text is not of use to those interested in stalking which affects other targets. For instance, Dunn's (Chapter 14) summary of the actions the LAPD Threat Management Unit takes when tackling a stalking case bears considerable practical applicability to stalking cases in general. Also, the Stalking Assessment and Management (SAM) measure developed by Kropp and colleagues

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(Chapter 15) is an exciting recent development with potential applicability to general stalking case management. Further, Scalora, Zimmerman and Wells (Chapter 19) model of threat assessment approach factors could be integrated with proposed models of intimate partner stalking (e.g., White et al. 2000), to potentially provide a unified theoretical model.

Within such a model, different weights could be given to variables that may prove more predictive of public figure-stranger stalking—such as the presence of delusional or psychopathic mental disorders discussed in many chapters—than intimate stalking. Also of interest would be the variables where the different types of stalking overlapped, such as with the role of attachment (e.g., Chapter 8) and the importance of desires for romantic relationships and attachment-related goals. For instance, Smith (Chapter 20) showed that even in the difficult cases submitted to the FBI's National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime, the threatening letters that included mention of love, marriage, or romance proved one of the best predictors of risk-enhancement. And, in a number of the chapters discussing motives or typologies of stalkers, attachment-related motives came into play, especially for celebrity targets. Revenge for perceived slights or infidelities was also among motives listed for public figure stalkers, and this is a common motive among all stalkers (see Spitzberg and Cupach 2007, for a review of stalker typologies). Thus,

there is much to make this book worthwhile to researchers and advocates working with all sorts of stalking cases.

In sum, I believe this book is groundbreaking. In 1998, Dr. Meloy edited the first text summarizing clinical and forensic empirical work on *The Psychology of Stalking*. At that time, the research on stalking was still in its infancy. It has flourished since the publication of Meloy's seminal volume. Now, ten years later, Meloy and colleagues present us with another volume on the forefront of psychological research on stalking. This time the focus is on stalking of public figures. Once again, the book provides an inclusive portrait of the existing research in the area. As the text provides a state-of-the-art picture of methods to employ and questions to pursue, perhaps, ten years from now, stalking research in this area will also be described as flourishing.

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