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## **The Attribution of Responsibility in Cases of Stalking**

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## **Abstract**

There is a general belief that stranger stalkers present the greatest threat to the personal safety of victims, despite national victimisation surveys and applied research demonstrating that ex-partner stalkers are generally more persistent and violent. The just world hypothesis offers a possible explanation for this apparent contradiction. The current research used nine hypothetical scenarios, administered to 328 university students, to investigate the assumptions that underlie attributions of responsibility in cases of stalking. It explores whether these assumptions are consistent with the proposed mechanisms of the just world hypothesis, and whether they vary according to the nature of perpetrator-victim relationship and conduct severity. Thematic analysis revealed that the victim was perceived to be more responsible for the situation when the perpetrator was portrayed as an ex-partner rather than a stranger or acquaintance. Furthermore, victims were perceived to be more responsible when the perpetrator's behaviour was persistent and threatening. These findings are discussed in the context of the just world hypothesis and related to the proposed mechanisms by which a person can reinterpret a situation so that the perceived injustice disappears.

**Keywords:** stalking, perceptions, perpetrator-victim relationship, conduct severity, just world hypothesis

## Introduction

National victimisation surveys in the United Kingdom, the United States, and Australia have revealed that the majority of stalking incidents are perpetrated by someone known to the victim, such as a current or ex-partner, or friend (e.g., Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006; Baum, Catalano, Rand, & Rose, 2009; Budd & Mattinson, 2000). Applied research with perpetrators and victims of stalking has also demonstrated that ex-partner stalkers are generally more persistent and violent than stranger stalkers (e.g., James & Farnham, 2003; McEwan, Mullen, MacKenzie, & Ogloff, 2009; Rosenfeld & Lewis, 2005; Sheridan & Davies, 2001). A checklist created to aid police in the investigation of stalking cases includes ex-partner status as one of seven violence risk predictors (Sheridan & Roberts, 2011). This checklist was based on an International sample of 1,565 self-defined victims of stalking, the majority of whom resided in the United Kingdom (51%) and the United States (37%). Furthermore, a study that sought to better understand the dynamics of ex-partner risk revealed that severe post-relational stalking was related to high levels of partner violence during the relationship (Norris, Huss, & Palarea, 2011).

In contrast, ex-partner stalkers are less likely to be arrested or convicted for their behaviour than stranger stalkers. For example, research has shown that Australian police officers are *less* likely to use stalking legislation for cases involving ex-partners, and that the Crown Prosecution Service in the United Kingdom is *more* likely to drop cases involving ex-partners (Harris, 2000; Pearce & Easteal, 1999). In addition, perception research using hypothetical scenarios with student and community samples in the United Kingdom, the United States and Australia has shown that participants are more likely to believe behaviour constitutes stalking and necessitates police intervention

when the perpetrator is portrayed as a stranger rather than an ex-partner (Cass, 2011; Hills & Taplin, 1998; Phillips, Quirk, Rosenfeld, & O'Connor, 2004; Scott, Lloyd, & Gavin, 2010; Scott & Sheridan, 2011; Sheridan, Gillett, Davies, Blaauw, & Patel, 2003). Participants are also more likely to believe the perpetrator will cause the victim alarm, fear and harm when they are portrayed as strangers rather than ex-partners (Hills & Taplin, 1998; Scott et al., 2010; Scott & Sheridan, 2011). Finally, Scott and Sheridan found that the influence of the perpetrator-victim relationship on perceptions of stalking was present even when the perpetrator was persistent and threatening. A possible explanation for these findings and the comparatively low arrest and conviction rates for ex-partner stalkers is that lay perceptions reflect the workings of the just world hypothesis (Lerner & Simmons, 1966).

### ***Just World Hypothesis***

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). This motivation is a consequence of the perceived interdependence between people's own fate and the fate of others (Lerner, 1980; Lerner & Miller, 1978). Thus, the knowledge that other people can suffer unjustly would result in a person having to admit that they could also suffer unjustly. However, if a person can attribute other people's suffering to something they did or failed to do, his or her belief in a just world is restored (Lerner & Simmons, 1966). Lerner (1980) proposed three mechanisms by which a person can reinterpret a situation so that the perceived injustice disappears. The first involves reinterpreting the outcome so that the victim's fate is perceived to be desirable; resulting in some benefit or by making the victim a better person. The second

involves reinterpreting the cause so that the victim's fate is attributed to something he or she did or failed to do. The third involves reinterpreting the character of the victim so that by virtue of some personal quality, he or she deserved his or her fate.

Consistent with the just world hypothesis, a body of research has demonstrated that victims of date rape are perceived to be more responsible than victims of stranger rape (e.g., Bell, Kuriloff, & Lottes, 1994; Bridges & McGrail, 1989; Frese, Moya, & Megías, 2003; Grubb & Harrower, 2009). These findings have been interpreted as being a reflection of the ambiguities inherent in the interactions between people who already know one another, and the greater potential for misunderstandings between the perpetrator and the victim (Bell et al., 1994; Bridges, 1991). Research has also demonstrated that the motivation to reinterpret unjust situations increases with the seriousness of a person's misfortune. For example, Shaw and Sulzer (1964) found that greater responsibility was attributed to people in the context of extremely bad outcomes compared to slightly bad outcomes. Furthermore, Stokols and Schopler (1973) found that the victim of a miscarriage prior to college was evaluated less favourably when she experienced severe suffering rather than mild suffering.

In the context of stalking, four studies have examined the influence of the perpetrator-victim relationship on perceptions of victim responsibility, and all found that the victim was perceived to be more responsible for the perpetrator's behaviour when they were portrayed as ex-partners rather than strangers or acquaintances (Scott et al., 2010; Scott, Rajakaruna, & Sheridan, 2013; Scott & Sheridan, 2011; Sheridan et al., 2003). In contrast, the two studies to examine the influence of conduct severity on perceptions of victim responsibility found no difference in perceptions according to the seriousness of the victim's misfortune (Scott et al., 2013; Scott & Sheridan, 2011).

Although these studies are useful in highlighting the influence of the perpetrator-victim relationship on perceptions of victim responsibility, no research to date has attempted to understand the assumptions that underlie these perceptions. Sheridan et al. (2003) suggested that participants assigned greater responsibility to the victim when the perpetrator was an ex-partner because the victim was perceived as having done something in the past to cause the perpetrator's behaviour. However, previous research has only examined perceptions of victim responsibility via a single scale item (see Scott et al., 2010; Scott & Sheridan, 2011; Sheridan et al., 2003), and has not explored *how* the perpetrator-victim relationship shapes perceptions, or what relationship-related factors are important.

The current research therefore aims to investigate the assumptions that underlie attributions of responsibility in cases of stalking. It explores whether these assumptions are consistent with the proposed mechanisms of the just world hypothesis, and whether they vary according to the nature of the perpetrator-victim relationship and conduct severity.

### **Method**

Scott (2008) conducted a study in which participants were asked to indicate the victim's level of responsibility via a single scale item before being asked to elaborate on why they thought the victim was or was not responsible via an open-ended question. Complete details of the quantitative analyses of this and other scale items included in the study have already been published (see Scott & Sheridan, 2011). The current research describes the qualitative analysis of the open-ended question.

## ***Participants***

Participants comprised 328 undergraduate students with an average age of 20.68 years ( $SD = 3.12$ ). Two-hundred and sixty-three (80%) participants were female and 65 (20%) were male. Most participants were from the United Kingdom ( $n = 265$ , 81%), followed by other countries within the European Union ( $n = 32$ , 10%) and the rest of the world ( $n = 31$ , 9%). The research was conducted in accordance with the ethical requirements of the British Psychological Society.

## ***Materials***

The research used a two-page questionnaire comprising a scenario; five scale items relating to the behaviour described in the scenario; an open-ended question concerning the perceived level of victim responsibility; and questions relating to demographic information (gender, age and nationality).

Nine versions of the scenarios were constructed, representing the different levels of perpetrator-victim relationship and conduct severity. The scenarios described the behaviour of James who was seeking the attention of Katherine after she declined his offer of a date or ended a relationship with him. During a six-month period James had called Katherine at work, sent her flowers, approached her in cafés, and been seen close to her home (low-level and higher-level offence conditions only). The scenarios portrayed the perpetrator as male and the victim as female because national victimisation surveys suggest that most cases of stalking are perpetrated by men towards women (e.g., Finney, 2006; Osborne, 2011).

The perpetrator-victim relationship was manipulated so that James was portrayed as a stranger who had never met Katherine before he approached her at a friend's party;



an acquaintance who had known her for about a year; or an ex-partner who had dated her for about a year. In England and Wales, the Protection from Harassment Act (1997) distinguishes two criminal offences: the low-level offence of ‘harassment’ and the higher-level offence of ‘putting people in fear of violence’. These criminal offences were used in the development of the different levels of conduct severity, which were manipulated by varying the persistence and intent of the perpetrator. Persistence was low and the perpetrator’s intent was non-threatening in the ambiguous offence condition; persistence was high and the perpetrator’s intent was non-threatening in the low-level offence condition; and persistence was high and the perpetrator’s intent was threatening in the higher-level offence condition. Non-threatening intent was characterised by James expressing his love for Katherine and wanting to know why she would not go out with him. In contrast, threatening intent was characterised by James warning Katherine that if he could not have her no-one could and that it was not safe to be alone at night.

All scale items were measured on 11-point Likert scales and the first four asked participants to indicate the extent to which James’ behaviour constituted stalking, necessitated police intervention and/or criminal charges, caused Katherine alarm or personal distress and caused Katherine to fear that violence would be used against her. The final scale item asked participants to indicate the extent to which Katherine was responsible for encouraging James’ behaviour, and was followed by an open-ended question: ‘Please use the space provided below to elaborate on why you think Katherine is *or* is not responsible for encouraging James’ behaviour’.

## ***Procedure***

Students were invited to take part in the research following timetabled lectures and received no credit for their participation. They were informed that participation would involve reading a one-paragraph scenario and answering six questions regarding their perceptions of the behaviour described in the scenario. Students who agreed to participate in the research received a copy of the questionnaire containing one of the nine versions of the scenario. The questionnaire took approximately 10 minutes to complete and all participants were debriefed once the questionnaires had been collected.

## ***Data analysis***

The research investigated the underlying assumptions that shape attributions of victim responsibility in a variety of stalking scenarios, and the data comprised all instances in participants' open-ended responses that related to victim responsibility. A theoretical thematic analysis was carried out on the data according to the six steps outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). This analysis resulted in the identification of a number of themes around responsibility, which were then compared across perpetrator-victim relationship and conduct severity conditions. These themes are discussed in relation to the just world hypothesis and the three mechanisms proposed by Lerner (1980).

The first step of the analysis process involved the thorough familiarisation with the data, from which the generation of initial codes developed. The occurrence of each theme and the line at which it occurred within the data was noted, to ensure the data could be clearly linked with the themes emerging from the analysis. Once all of the data had been initially coded, further refinement of the themes (and sub-themes) was carried

out to identify overarching themes within the data. During this process, themes were continually compared to each other and refined, so no overlap in content occurred and individual themes were distinct. These processes were undertaken separately by two of the researchers and were then amalgamated in a final thematic framework. To ensure a good level of reliability between the two researchers, all responses were then recoded using the final framework. This process resulted in a Cohen's kappa of .90, demonstrating an 'almost perfect' strength of agreement (Landis & Koch, 1970).

### **Findings**

Quantitative analyses of the five scale items revealed that the perpetrator's behaviour was perceived to constitute stalking, necessitate police intervention, and cause the victim alarm or personal distress to a greater extent when the perpetrator and victim were portrayed as strangers rather than ex-partners (see Scott & Sheridan, 2011, for complete details). The victim was also perceived to be less responsible for encouraging the perpetrator's behaviour when they were portrayed as strangers rather than ex-partners. With regard to conduct severity, the perpetrator's behaviour was perceived to constitute stalking, necessitate police intervention, and cause the victim alarm or personal distress and fear of the use of violence to the greatest extent in the higher-level offence condition, followed by the low-level and ambiguous offence conditions.

Qualitative analysis of the open-ended question identified several themes that participants drew upon to justify their attributions of victim responsibility (see Appendix for theme definitions). Four of these themes related to Katherine's behaviour ('encouragement/lack of discouragement', 'no encouragement', 'speculation' and

‘recommendations’), two to James’s behaviour (‘responsibility’ and ‘mitigation’), and one to the scenario (‘lack of information’). It is through these themes that participants expressed the underlying assumptions that shaped their attributions of victim responsibility. Table 1 shows the number of participants drawing on each theme.

--- Table 1 about here ---

The most dominant theme comprised the assertion that Katherine did not encourage James’ behaviour in any way. This theme occurred often in the stranger and acquaintance conditions, but was far less prevalent in the ex-partner condition. Conversely, the theme that Katherine encouraged James’ behaviour occurred most often in the ex-partner condition followed by the acquaintance and stranger conditions. Complementing these two trends, James’ behaviour was more likely to be mitigated in the ex-partner and acquaintance conditions compared to the stranger condition. Further analysis revealed how the combination and occurrence of the different themes varied according to the nature of perpetrator-victim relationship and conduct severity.

### ***Stranger***

There was an overwhelming consensus that Katherine was not responsible for the situation with 78% of participants stating that she had not encouraged James’ behaviour:

“She has given him no form of encouragement that anything more would happen between them” (P049, L1-2, low-level)

“Katherine is not responsible for James’ behaviour” (P196, L1, higher-level)

Furthermore, 17% of participants stated that James was responsible for his own behaviour:

“James’ behaviour therefore is completely of his own accord” (P049, L2-3, low-level)

“He is following her round and pursuing her on his own accord through no encouragement by her” (P292, L2-3, low-level)

Despite the overwhelming consensus that Katherine had not encouraged James’ behaviour, evidence of rejection needed to be present and this lack of encouragement needed to be maintained if Katherine was to remain absolved of responsibility:

“From the start she has always said she is not interested” (P325, L1, ambiguous)

“She made it very clear right from the start that she was not interested in a relationship” (P145, L1-2, ambiguous)

“Saying no, ignoring phone calls and talking with friends, in my opinion makes it clear that she is not interested in him” (P307, L2-3, ambiguous)

Although much less frequent, 19% of participants attributed some responsibility to Katherine and stated that she had encouraged James’ behaviour. Her behaviour towards James, particularly after his behaviour had become problematic, was the dominant means through which encouragement was attributed; with the situation being reinterpreted so that Katherine was perceived to encourage James in two ways: through what she *did* do (encouragement) and through what she did *not* do (lack of discouragement). An example of encouragement can be seen in the following statement:

“However, by answering the phone to him on occasions, this could have been perceived by him as interest, which is a slightly mixed message” (P202, L2-3, low-level)

Katherine’s lack of discouragement was reflected in the various recommendations made by 20% of participants regarding the ways in which she *should* deal with James:

“She has to be very clear and should say that she doesn’t want him to look for contact anymore – if that is what she wants” (P010, L3-4, ambiguous)

“She could make a bigger effort to dissuade him” (P040, L1, ambiguous)

These recommendations emphasised Katherine’s need to clearly and explicitly state her rejection of James, thus suggesting that participants did not view ignoring James as sufficient in demonstrating a lack of encouragement (e.g., “It does not say anywhere in the text that she has actively tried to discourage him”, P310, L1, low-level). This statement also highlights another theme, lack of information, which was present throughout all three perpetrator-victim relationship conditions. Nineteen percent of participants commented that the scenarios did not contain enough detail, and used this ‘missing’ information to provide clues as to what actions, or lack of actions, might increase the likelihood of attributing responsibility to Katherine. This technique of questioning the ‘missing’ information in the scenarios allowed for a more subtle attribution of responsibility to the victim, and this is illustrated in the following extract:

“However, we don’t know her manner towards him when she speaks to him on the phone or speaks to him on the street. She might not be making it clear that she

wants him to leave her alone” (P070, L2-4, higher-level)

This perceived lack of detail in the scenarios allowed 20% of participants to speculate about Katherine’s behaviour; to fill in the gaps with hypothetical events that allowed Katherine’s behaviour to be questioned implicitly:

“Did she tell him again not to call, why did she pick up his call, did she try to do anything to stop him” (P109, L3-4, ambiguous)

“I don’t know whether she may be answering his text messages in an encouraging way or even if they have been having a sexual relationship without actually ‘going out’” (P118, L4-6, ambiguous)

The perceived lack of information also allowed one participant to speculate about Katherine’s character and two participants to speculate about the outcome of the situation so that her fate was perceived to be deserved or desirable:

“She may be responsible in terms of dressing up for parties” (P256, L2-3, low-level)

“Maybe she is pleased with the flowers etc” (P277, L3-4, higher-level)

Although the majority of participants stated that Katherine did not encourage James’s behaviour, there was increasing ambivalence towards Katherine’s level of responsibility as the conduct severity increased. Thirty-seven percent of participants in the higher-level offence condition stated that she had in some way encouraged James’s behaviour compared to 19% of participants in the low-level offence condition and 3% of participants in the ambiguous offence condition. In several cases participants

contradicted themselves within their responses, seemingly taking the opposing positions that Katherine both did and did not encourage James's behaviour. This contradiction can be seen in the juxtaposition of participants' reasoning about Katherine's responsibility within the scenario whereby she was absolved of responsibility within the first part of the response but subsequently blamed in the latter half of the response. For example:

“On meeting James, Katherine immediately declined his proposal of a date, indicating that she was in no way interested and therefore not leading him on. However, the fact that she continued to go to the cafes and knows he may follow her may suggest that she could have done more to avoid him” (P178, L1-4, higher-level)

“Katherine has declined James' request for a date which indicated that she was not interested. The only thing which Katherine is responsible for is that she still hasn't contacted the police and may encourage James' behaviour” (P142, L1-3, higher-level)

These quotes demonstrate the increasing shift of responsibility away from James to Katherine, with Katherine being required to adopt further more extreme and explicit methods to demonstrate her rejection of James (e.g., contacting the police and stop visiting the café). Even when participants stated that Katherine was not responsible for James's continued behaviour, there did appear to be hesitancy in their statements:

“She doesn't seem to want to talk to him” (P061, L2, higher-level)

“It doesn't seem like she has led him on” (P070, L1, higher-level)



“Katherine appears to show no interest in James whatsoever” (P295, L1, higher-level)

### ***Acquaintance***

Similar to the stranger condition, there was an overwhelming consensus that Katherine was not responsible for the situation with 73% of participants stating that she had not encouraged James’ behaviour. However, participants in the acquaintance condition were less certain about Katherine’s lack of responsibility for the stalking situation. Here, the 24% of participants who stated that she had encouraged James’ behaviour through what she *did* or *did not* do were more likely to use explicit statements regarding her responsibility than inferences. For example, “I think Katherine should take responsibility for James’ behaviour” (P191, L1, ambiguous), and “I think Katherine is quite responsible for encouraging James’ behaviour because she should make it clear that she really hasn’t got any feeling of having a relationship with James” (P236, L1-3, ambiguous). While some participants expressed certainty that Katherine had done nothing to encourage James (“Katherine made her lack of interest in a relationship with James clear and there is no evidence of any encouraging behaviour by her”, P173, L1-2, ambiguous), such unambiguous statements of support were less apparent than they were within the stranger condition. Instead, participants were again searching for additional information regarding Katherine’s actions in response to James’ behaviour with 17% of participants speculating about her behaviour:

“How responsible she would be is reliant on her responses. If they are encouraging she may be partly responsible” (P308, L3-4, ambiguous)

As with the stranger condition, assertions that Katherine encouraged James' behaviour were more prevalent in the higher-level offence condition than the low-level and ambiguous offence conditions: 34%, 14% and 24% respectively. Here ambivalence towards Katherine was often prefaced by a statement that she was not responsible for the situation, followed by a conjunction to express a contradiction such as 'but' or 'however'. The response that followed would then assign responsibility to Katherine should she act or not act in a certain way:

“She gave him a reason for turning him down therefore she has justified her choice to him and made it clear there is no hope (therefore not responsible). However, by allowing the behaviour to continue for so long without clearly warning him off or contacting the police she is not directly discouraging him”  
(P188, L1-4, higher-level)

These statements place caveats upon Katherine's responsibility (e.g., “Providing she does not reply to his various calls and such then she is not leading him on in any way”, P107, L2-3, higher-level). Such statements are very revealing as to how responsibility might be attributed to the victim. In the stranger condition, responsibility was attributed to Katherine on the basis of her behaviour after the events presented in the scenario began. However, in the acquaintance condition, the focus shifted to Katherine's behaviour prior to the events presented in the scenario. This questioning of Katherine again focused on the need for additional information about the situation with 26% of participants commenting that the scenarios did not contain enough detail:

“They knew each other for a while, during which time we do not know about their relationship” (P011, L2-3, ambiguous)

“More information is needed on their relationship during the year they knew each other before James asked her out to ascertain whether Katherine is responsible for James’s behaviour” (P083, L4-6, ambiguous)

Similar to the stranger condition, the perceived lack of information allowed four participants to speculate about Katherine’s character and two participants to speculate about the outcome of the situation so that her fate was perceived to be deserved or desirable:

“It is uncertain whether when she sees him she’s being flirty” (P047, L3-4, ambiguous)

“Perhaps she was initially flirtatious, the passage does not give enough information concerning initial aspects of their relationship” (P251, L1-2, higher-level)

“Perhaps the lack of information on formal warnings to end their friendship may leave room for her to find his behaviour flattering” (P002, L5-6, ambiguous)

### ***Ex-partner***

There was a continued focus upon the lack of information provided in the scenario in the ex-partner condition, with 22% of participants commenting that the scenarios did not contain enough detail and 22% of participants speculating about a range of possible behaviours that would potentially increase Katherine’s level of responsibility:

“I don’t know whether or not she’s encouraging James’ behaviour because the paragraph doesn’t give you any information of how she reacts to his behaviour,

whether she has already asked him to leave her alone or whether this behaviour's frightening her" (P096, L1-4, low-level).

Although 52% of participants stated that Katherine had not encouraged James' behaviour, the ex-partner condition differed to a certain extent from the stranger and acquaintance conditions in that participants were less clear regarding Katherine's lack of responsibility. Thirty-five percent of participants stated that she had encouraged James' behaviour through what she *did* or did *not* do, with comments ranging from explicit statements of responsibility to more subtle explanations of why Katherine's behaviour mitigated James' behaviour. For example, Katherine was sometimes perceived to be encouraging James by simply seeing him:

"She is encouraging James's behaviour to a certain extent because she still sees him" (P156, L1-2, ambiguous).

"It does not mention that she actively tries to avoid seeing him/answering the phone etc, which may suggest she is encouraging the behaviour slightly" (P090, L1-2, higher-level)

At other times, explanations were presented with counter reasoning so that Katherine was responsible if she behaved in one way, but not responsible if she behaved in another way:

"Is not responsible as she does not always answer the phone and doesn't seem to be interested anymore. May be responsible as she does not seem to have told him to leave her alone, so may appear to be in two minds about the situation" (P219, L1-3, ambiguous)

“Katherine is responsible for his behaviour if she gives hope to James. If he believes that in the future they may be together. But Katherine is not responsible if she tries to send him the ‘proper’ message” (P273, L1-3, ambiguous)

Other explanations acted to absolve James of responsibility and mitigate his behaviour. For example, his behaviour could be normalised without shifting blame to Katherine when it was considered within the context of romantic relationships:

“It’s normal for one partner to be ‘trying to patch things up’ for some time” (P066, L1-2, ambiguous)

“They dated for a year, so obviously James had feelings for her. These feelings can’t be expected to disappear suddenly” (P246, L1-2, ambiguous)

However, some responsibility was attributed to Katherine if she was not clear about why she ended the relationship with James:

“The reasons for which she broke up with him are not given, but she may not have been clear” (P078, L1-2, low-level)

“Maybe she hasn’t explained properly why she decided to split up with James” (P048, L1, ambiguous)

Moreover, the fact that they once had a relationship seemed to establish a duty for Katherine to respond to or deal with James’ behaviour (e.g., “Katherine is involved in the behaviour to an extent as she went out with him and broke off the relationship”, P024, L1-2, low-level). The previous relationship was also drawn upon in the higher-level offence condition, but here the emphasis was more victim-blaming. In the

ambiguous and low-level offence conditions Katherine bore some responsibility because of *how* she ended the relationship. In the higher-level offence condition she was considered responsible *because* she ended the relationship.

“On the other hand her breaking up with him led to his behaviour” (P009, L3, higher-level)

“On one hand she broke off the relationship and so has acted as a catalyst for his behaviour” (P153, L1-2, higher-level)

These opinions relate to the idea that Katherine was in some way leading James on:

“However, she may be slightly responsible in the sense that she was with him for a whole year, providing him with a huge misconception and leading him on” (P180, L2-4, higher-level)

“I believe Katherine is responsible for encouraging James... If she didn’t like the relationship why didn’t she finish it before” (P333, L1-3, higher-level)

Four participants expressed more extreme views about Katherine; two speculating about her character and two speculating about the outcome of the situation so that her fate was perceived to be deserved or desirable:

“If she is teasing him and giving him cause to think she may be interested then she is a lot more responsible” (P087, L3-4, low-level)

“There will probably still be some feelings there and it may well be that she enjoys bumping into him even if she doesn’t want a relationship and subconsciously sends signals of encouragement” (P228, L3-5, ambiguous)

“I think maybe she likes the attention and doesn’t take any actions to stop James”

(P333, L3-4, higher-level)

As with the stranger and acquaintance conditions, assertions that Katherine encouraged James’ behaviour were more prevalent in the higher-level offence condition than the low-level and ambiguous offence conditions: 43%, 32% and 28% respectively. Although the level of responsibility attributed to Katherine was based on her reactions to his unwanted behaviour there was much less uncertainty about her reactions in the higher-level offence condition. The conjunction ‘if’ was used less often and there was an assumption that Katherine *did* behave in ways that increased her level of responsibility:

“On the basis that she has answered some of his calls she has not severed all her links/contacts so she may have given him some false hope of them getting back together” (P126, L1-3, higher-level)

“However, it seems that she is still going to the same cafes where he knows where to find her” (P225, L2-3, higher-level)

“However, in answering the telephone and continuing to go to the cafes. She is reinforcing his behaviour as he is getting the reward of seeing her” (P243, L1-3, higher-level)

Responsibility was also attributed to Katherine in all conditions for being passive, and not actively discouraging him:

“She is encouraging him in as much as she has not asked him to stop contacting her and has not returned the flowers” (P186, L1-2, low-level)

“Katherine is partly responsible for James’ behaviour by ignoring the majority of his phone calls” (P288, L1-2, higher-level)

“The very fact that she is not responding may actually be the encouragement he needs to pressure her” (P189, L3, higher-level)

Finally, the 16% of participants who made recommendations regarding the ways in which Katherine should deal with James advocated a more serious approach to stopping his behaviour compared to participants in the stranger and acquaintance conditions:

“If possible she could change her phone and move house” (P144, L3, higher-level)

“She needs to take positive action to actively deter his presence” (P216, L2-4, higher-level)

“Use the police’s help to scare him, he might stop this extreme behaviour” (P234, L4-5, higher-level)

## **Discussion**

The findings of the current research shed light on the assumptions that underlie attributions of responsibility and highlight the mechanisms participants use to reinterpret the situation. Attributions of victim responsibility were shaped by assumptions relating to three key factors: the victim’s behaviour, the perpetrator’s behaviour, and how the situation is presented. On the whole these assumptions were consistent with the just world hypothesis, in that they often enabled the reinterpretation of the cause of the situation so that the victim’s fate was attributed to something she did



or failed to do. Such reinterpretations served to both attribute responsibility to the victim, and to mitigate the behaviour of the perpetrator. With regard to the other two mechanisms proposed by Lerner (1980), only a minority of participants reinterpreted the victim's character or the outcome of the situation so that her fate was perceived to be deserved or desirable. The finding that only a minority of participants reinterpreted the victim's character or the outcome of the situation may be a reflection of the scenario used, as very little information was provided about the character of the victim or her fate. It is nonetheless consistent with the suggestion that the use of one mechanism might preclude the use of another: "...if observers can attribute the victim's suffering to something the victim did or failed to do they will have less need to devalue his personal characteristics (other things being equal)" (Lerner & Simmons, 1966, p. 210).

There were several ways in which the victim was perceived to encourage the perpetrator's behaviour. These included answering or responding to the perpetrator's texts and phone calls, leading him on, and being vague in her responses to the perpetrator. Similarly, there were several ways in which the victim was perceived to actively discourage the perpetrator's behaviour. These included clearly stating a lack of interest in him, ignoring all phone calls, answering the phone and clearly saying 'go away', and contacting the police. In extreme examples, the victim was expected to modify her behaviour, eat in different restaurants and cafes, change her phone number, and even move house.

The extent to which participants reinterpreted the cause of the situation, the victim's character, and the outcome of the situation depended on their ability to fill in the gaps in the information provided. Without detailed information about what the victim said to the perpetrator during each encounter, how she responded to each phone

call, what she did to discourage him and so on, participants were free to speculate. Importantly, these speculations differed according to the nature of the perpetrator-victim relationship and conduct severity, allowing participants to attribute more responsibility to the victim when the perpetrator was portrayed as an ex-partner rather than a stranger or acquaintance. Furthermore, these speculations focused on the victim's behaviour leading up to the situation in the acquaintance and ex-partner conditions, but focused on the victim's behaviour after the situation had begun in the stranger condition. Finally, there was an increased ambivalence towards the victim's responsibility as the conduct severity increased, with assertions that the victim had in some way encouraged the perpetrator's behaviour being most prevalent in the higher-level offence condition.

The influence of the perpetrator-victim relationship on attributions of responsibility is consistent with previous studies which have found that victims are perceived to be more responsible when the perpetrator is an ex-partner rather than a stranger or acquaintance (Scott et al., 2010; Scott & Sheridan, 2011; Sheridan et al., 2003). However, while the influence of conduct severity is consistent with the research of Shaw and Sulzer (1964) and Stokols and Schopler (1973), it is inconsistent with research examining victim responsibility in the context of stalking (Scott et al., 2013; Scott and Sheridan, 2011). Neither of these studies found perceptions of victim responsibility to be influenced by the seriousness of the victim's misfortune. Given the suggestion that research using hypothetical scenarios characterised by low experimental realism are unlikely to create the required automatic response (see Lerner, 1997, 2003; Lerner & Miller, 1978), it is possible that the contrasting findings are a reflection of participants finding it easier to provide normatively appropriate responses to a scale

item than it was to an open-ended question. Further research is required to investigate this possibility.

The finding that participants' reinterpretations depended on their ability to fill in the gaps in the information provided has implications for the way evidence is presented to juries and how victims and their advocates should present in court. It is now generally accepted that jurors fill in the gaps and evaluate evidence on the basis of their experiences and prior knowledge (Carlson & Russo, 2001; Pennington & Hastie, 1992), including information presented in media reports (e.g., Hope, Memon, & McGeorge, 2004). As jurors' evaluations can be influenced in such a way, it is important that the evidence presented to juries is as understandable and complete as possible.

This finding also has important implications for understanding perceptions of stalking and the mechanisms of the just world hypothesis. First, it has highlighted that several specific assumptions shape perceptions of victim responsibility, and the subtle ways that these assumptions are influenced by the nature of the perpetrator-victim relationship and conduct severity. Moreover, the findings suggest the interpretive mechanisms involved in maintaining a belief in a just world are more nuanced than those originally proposed, particularly in relation to an ongoing situation such as stalking. As the duration of an unpleasant situation is extended so too are the salient factors that shape perceptions of that situation and attributions of victim responsibility. Rather than focus solely on events leading up to the situation, such as what the victim might (or might not have) done to *cause* the negative event, the findings highlight the importance of the victim's *reactions* to the situation after it had begun. For example, the role of the victim's reactions to the situation in shaping perceptions of responsibility varied considerably according to the nature of the perpetrator-victim relationship.

The current research used the phrase ‘belief in the just world’ and the three mechanisms proposed by Lerner (1980) to investigate the assumptions that underlie attributions of responsibility in cases of stalking. As Lerner (1997) pointed out, “The phrase ‘belief in a just world’ originally was intended to provide a useful metaphor rather than a psychological construct” (p. 30). Although the current research was developed in this vein, it is important to acknowledge that a number of individual difference measures have been developed, allowing the extent of an individual’s belief in a just world to be quantified (see Furnham, 2003, for review). The current research on attributions of responsibility in cases of stalking indicates that the reinterpretation of events in a way that is consistent with a just world are contingent on the victim’s behaviour, the perpetrator’s behaviour and how the situation is presented. Further research could draw on individual difference measures to develop an understanding of how a belief in a just world might interact with such contextual information to shape perceptions of stalking. Furthermore, perception research could be expanded to explore the influence of salient victim and/or participant characteristics on attributions of responsibility, thus complementing other research on just world beliefs in the context of intergroup relations (e.g., Aguiar, Vala, Correia, & Pereira, 2008; Correia, Vala, & Aguiar, 2007).

It is important to note that the current research focused on perceptions of victim responsibility by a predominantly female sample in the context of a male perpetrator seeking the attention of a female victim. A key factor in shaping attributions of victim responsibility was assumptions surrounding the nature of the perpetrator-victim relationship. In some instances assumptions related to romantic practices also shaped perceptions of perpetrator mitigation, and in turn attributions of victim responsibility.

As understandings of romance and intimate relationships are inherently gendered (Hollway, 1984), further research is required to examine the influence of perpetrator, victim and participant sex on perceptions of victim responsibility in cases of stalking. In addition, the adoption of a similar methodology to investigate perceptions of stalking more broadly would provide an opportunity to examine other possible explanations for the apparent contradiction between perceptions and reality. For example, some participants commented on the apparent normality of the perpetrator's behaviour in the context of relationship dissolution despite the focus of the research being on the responsibility of the victim. This finding is consistent with the research of Thompson and Dennison (2008) who found that many of the behaviours associated with stalking are perceived to be relatively normal following the dissolution of a relationship.

This study investigated the assumptions that underlie attributions of responsibility in cases of stalking. Most attributions of responsibility involved reinterpreting the cause of the situation so that the victim's fate was attributed to something she did or failed to do. However, these reinterpretations depended on participants' ability to fill in the gaps in the information provided, which in turn allowed them to speculate about the victim's behaviour and mitigate the perpetrator's behaviour. Ultimately, the findings suggest that victims need to consistently maintain a lack of encouragement in order to be absolved of responsibility. However, this expectation is not realistic given that stalking is chronic by nature and the associated behaviours are likely to change over time. Even if victims are consistent and repeatedly say 'no' in response to every major communication and/or approach, it is unlikely to resolve the situation as stalkers are likely to see any kind of response as reinforcing. It is important therefore that research continues to investigate this area in order to provide the most appropriate educational and legal interventions.

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Table 1

*Number (Percentage) of Participants Drawing on each Theme*

		Stranger	Acquaintance	Ex-partner
Encouragement/Lack of discouragement	Ambiguous	1 (3%)	9 (24%)	10 (28%)
	Low-level	7 (19%)	5 (14%)	12 (32%)
	Higher-level	13 (37%)	12 (34%)	16 (43%)
	Total	21 (19%)	26 (24%)	38 (35%)
No encouragement	Ambiguous	32 (84%)	27 (71%)	22 (61%)
	Low-level	25 (69%)	29 (81%)	13 (35%)
	Higher-level	28 (80%)	24 (69%)	22 (59%)
	Total	85 (78%)	80 (73%)	57 (52%)
Speculation	Ambiguous	9 (24%)	8 (21%)	10 (28%)
	Low-level	7 (19%)	7 (19%)	6 (16%)
	Higher-level	6 (17%)	4 (11%)	8 (22%)
	Total	22 (20%)	19 (17%)	24 (22%)
Recommendation	Ambiguous	8 (21%)	10 (26%)	8 (22%)
	Low-level	7 (19%)	7 (19%)	4 (11%)
	Higher-level	7 (20%)	3 (9%)	6 (16%)
	Total	22 (20%)	20 (18%)	18 (16%)
Lack of information	Ambiguous	9 (24%)	15 (39%)	7 (19%)
	Low-level	7 (19%)	7 (19%)	9 (24%)
	Higher-level	5 (14%)	6 (17%)	8 (22%)
	Total	21 (19%)	28 (26%)	24 (22%)

Responsibility (James)	Ambiguous	9 (24%)	0 (0%)	7 (19%)
	Low-level	6 (17%)	6 (17%)	7 (19%)
	Higher-level	4 (11%)	4 (11%)	5 (14%)
	Total	19 (17%)	10 (9%)	19 (17%)
Mitigation (James)	Ambiguous	1 (3%)	2 (5%)	5 (14%)
	Low-level	1 (3%)	4 (11%)	3 (8%)
	Higher-level	1 (3%)	6 (17%)	6 (16%)
	Total	3 (3%)	12 (11%)	14 (13%)

## Appendix

Table 2

*Theme Definitions*

Theme	Definition
Encouragement/Lack of discouragement	Reference to what Katherine did, or failed to do, that might have encouraged James' behaviour.
No encouragement	Explicit statements to the effect that Katherine did nothing to encourage James' behaviour.
Speculation	Speculation about what Katherine and James might have done beyond the information included in the scenarios.
Recommendation	Reference to actions that Katherine could have performed to either discourage James' behaviour or help resolve the situation.
Lack of information	Reference to information 'missing' from the scenarios and what is 'not known' about Katherine's behaviour, James' behaviour or the situation as a whole (often accompanied by 'speculation').
Responsibility (James)	Explicit statements to the effect that James is responsible for his own behaviour.
Mitigation (James)	Reference to factors that serve to justify or normalise James' behaviour.