

# **Associations Between Stalking Myth Endorsement and Unwanted Pursuit Behaviors Among College Students**

**Julia R. Lippman and L. Monique Ward**

“Rape myths” are false or exaggerated beliefs about rape, and evidence suggests that endorsement of rape myths may contribute to rape perpetration and—insofar as it might inhibit people’s abilities to assess risk cues—rape victimization (Suarez & Gadalla, 2010; Yeater, Treat, Viken, & McFall, 2010). What is less well-understood is whether or not these relations extend to other forms of gendered violence. In this research brief, we report new data examining behavioral correlates of stalking myth endorsement among college men and women.

The construct of stalking myths is a relatively new one, so no consensus has emerged on how to best measure it. However, two similar scales have been developed, each of which assesses similar myths about stalking, including the beliefs that stalking is benign; that stalkers pursue others because they receive encouragement or a lack of active discouragement; and that stalking is flattering (Kamphuis, Galeazzi, De Fazio, Emmelkamp, Farnham, Groenen, James, & Vervaeke, 2005; Sinclair, 2006). Both Kamphuis et al. and Sinclair linked stalking myth endorsement to consequential perceptions of stalking: Kamphuis et al. found that European police officers who endorsed higher levels of stalking myths were less likely to think that stalking scenarios described in vignettes were professionally relevant, and Sinclair found that stalking myth endorsement was a significant predictor of judgments in stalking cases using a mock jury paradigm.

Although stalking myth endorsement has been linked to perceptions of stalking, it is less clear how stalking myth endorsement relates to behavioral outcomes. Given related research on

rape, we hypothesized that stalking myth endorsement would be positively associated with perpetration of unwanted pursuit among men and women (H1) and that stalking myth endorsement would also be positively associated with unwanted pursuit victimization among men and women (H2).

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Participants were 750 college undergraduates (65.6% female) with an average age of 18.65 ( $SD = .89$ ). A majority of the sample (73.6%) was Caucasian, with fewer participants identifying as Asian (14.9%), African-American (3.8%), Latino/a (3.2%), multi-racial (2.3%), or Middle-Eastern (2.2%).

### **Procedure**

Participants were recruited from the Introductory Psychology Subject Pool, and they were offered course credit for their participation in this study. Participants signed up to participate using an online system through which they received instructions to report to the lab where the survey was administered. Upon their arrival, participants were given an informed consent form and seated in small groups with chairs that were spaced so as to give each participant privacy. Each participant was then provided with a pen-and-paper survey that included measures assessing attitudes toward and behavioral experiences with stalking, as well as other measures that are not analyzed here. The full survey took approximately 45 minutes to complete.

### **Measures**

**Stalking myths.** Stalking myths were measured using a 19-item version of the Attitudes on Stalking Questionnaire (McKeon, Mullen, & Ogloff, as cited in Kamphuis, Galeazzi, De Fazio, Emmelkamp, Farnham, Groenen, James, & Vervaeke). This 19-item measure assesses

endorsement of three types of myths about stalking: *stalking is a nuisance* (e.g., “Stalkers are a nuisance but they are not criminals”); *blaming the victim* (e.g., “Stalkers only continue because they get some sort of encouragement”); and *stalking is flattery* (e.g., “Women find it flattering to be persistently pursued.”). Items were rated on a 7-point scale anchored by *absolutely untrue* and *absolute true*. The reliability for this scale was excellent ( $\alpha = .93$ ).

**Unwanted pursuit.** Unwanted pursuit perpetration was measured via a 10-item scale based on items developed by Cupach and Spitzberg (2004). A stem read: “Have you ever tried to get anyone to be or stay in a romantic or sexual relationship with you by...” Sample items included “leaving unwanted messages of affection” and “monitoring their behavior.” Response options were *0=no, never*; *1=yes, once*; and *2=yes, more than one time*. Reliability was good ( $\alpha = .77$ ). Being the target of unwanted pursuit was measured using the same scale, but minor adjustments were made to the stem (“Has anyone ever tried to get you to be or stay in a romantic or sexual relationship by...”) and to individual items, where necessary (e.g., “monitoring your behavior”). Reliability was good ( $\alpha = .86$ ).

## Results

Participants reported relatively low levels of stalking myth endorsement, although men reported stronger endorsement of stalking myths than women. Men were also more likely to perpetrate unwanted pursuit than women. However, women were more likely to be the targets of unwanted pursuit than men. Mean differences and the psychometric properties of these variables are reported in Table 1.

Hypothesis 1 predicted that stalking myth endorsement would be positively associated with perpetration of unwanted pursuit among both men and women. This hypothesis was supported: as displayed in Table 2, among both men and women, stronger stalking myth

endorsement was associated with reports of having perpetrated higher levels of unwanted pursuit.

Hypothesis 2 predicted that stalking myth endorsement would be positively associated with being the target of unwanted pursuit among both men and women. This hypothesis was not supported for men; men's stalking myth endorsement was unrelated to being the target of unwanted pursuit. However, among women, stronger endorsement of stalking myths was associated with a history of being the target of a greater amount of unwanted pursuit. These results are also displayed in Table 2.

### **Discussion**

This research brief provides evidence for the criterion validity of the measure of stalking myths by demonstrating links between stalking myth endorsement and pursuit behaviors. Specifically, we find evidence that stronger stalking myth endorsement is associated with higher levels of perpetration of unwanted pursuit among both men and women, and with being the target of unwanted pursuit among women only.

It is important to note that these data are cross-sectional, and thus they do not indicate that higher levels of stalking myth endorsement *cause* stalking perpetration or victimization. For example, it may be that people who see the listed "myths" as less problematic are more likely to admit to perpetrating unwanted pursuit behaviors but not more likely to engage in this behavior, or that stalking myths serve as neutralizing cognitions for people who have been the target of unwanted pursuit. Longitudinal work could help disentangle causality and mechanisms. In the absence of longitudinal work examining these associations, however, these data represent an important first step to understanding the link between stalking myths and stalking perpetration and victimization.

## References

- Cupach, W. R., & Spitzberg, B. H. (2004). *The dark side of relationship pursuit: From attraction to obsession and stalking*. Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Kamphuis, J. H., Galeazzi, G. M., Fazio, L. D., Emmelkamp, P. M. G., Farnham, F., Groenen, A., et al. (2005). Stalking--perceptions and attitudes amongst helping professions. An EU cross-national comparison. *Clinical Psychology & Psychotherapy*, *12*(3), 215-225. doi: 10.1002/cpp.451
- Sinclair, H. C. (2006, March). Stalking myth-conceptions: Consequences of myth endorsement for the perception of stalking cases. Paper presented at the meeting of the American Psychology-Law Society, St. Petersburg, FL.
- Suarez, E., & Gadalla, T. (2010). Stop blaming the victim: A meta-analysis on rape myths. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, *25*(11), 2010-2035. doi: 10.1177/0886260509354503
- Yeater, E. A., Treat, T. A., Viken, R. J., & McFall, R. M. (2010). Cognitive processes underlying women's risk judgments: Associations with sexual victimization history and rape myth acceptance. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, *78*(3), 375-386. doi:10.1037/a0019297

Table 1  
*Mean Differences by Gender for Main Survey Variables*

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Possible range</i>	<i>Women</i>		<i>Men</i>		<i>t</i>	<i>(df)</i>
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Stalking Myth Acceptance	1-7	2.05	.85	2.59	.95	7.25**	417.18
Unwanted Pursuit Perpetration	0-2	.16	.23	.24	.31	3.42**	390.51
Unwanted Pursuit Target	0-2	.44	.45	.34	.39	-2.98**	554.63

\*\*  $p < .01$

Table 2  
*Intercorrelations Among Key Variables*

	Stalking Myth Endorsement	Unwanted Pursuit—Perpetration	Unwanted Pursuit—Target
Stalking Myth Endorsement		.20**	.13**
Unwanted Pursuit—Perpetration	.20**		.56**
Unwanted Pursuit—Target	.08	.57**	

\*\*  $p < .01$

Women are above the diagonal; men are below the diagonal.