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Correlates of Help-Seeking Following Stalking Victimization:

A Study of College Women

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### Abstract

The current study explored factors related to college women's coping processes associated with stalking using an online survey methodology. Results ( $N= 305$  college women reporting stalking victimization within the last three years) showed that 85% of women disclosed their stalking experiences most commonly to female friends. Additionally, women used a variety of coping mechanisms in response to their stalking victimization; although avoiding thinking about or acting on the stalking experience were the most common strategies, victims rated direct forms of coping as more effective in deterring the stalking behavior. Women's coping responses to stalking were related to a number of personal (e.g., hypergender ideologies), relational (e.g., social support), and assault characteristic (e.g., stalking frequency, self-blame) variables. These data underscore the importance of programs and services aimed towards supporting survivors' coping from stalking victimization.

### Correlates of Help-Seeking Following Stalking Victimization:

#### A Study of College Women

A heightened interest in stalking and unwanted pursuit behaviors has become an increasingly popular topic for both the media and social psychology. Although rare, cases of stalking can erupt into severe physical violence, such as in the highly publicized murder of Rebecca Schaeffner in 1989 (Mechanic, 2003; Mechanic, Uhlmansiek, Weaver, & Resick, 2000). After years of being stalked by a crazed fan, Schaeffner was shot and killed by her pursuer on her doorstep. Both fictional and real life instances of stalking have been chronicled in print and film for years; yet despite popular attention, stalking has only recently been explored by researchers (Mechanic, 2003).

#### **Stalking Definitions and Rates**

A difficult aspect of accurately researching and analyzing stalking rates within the population is the continuum of legal and behavioral definitions used to identify stalking and its related pursuit behavior. On one end of the continuum, very conservative definitions stipulate that stalking involves a perpetrator following a victim “stealthily, such as a hunter following prey” (Haugaard & Seri, 2003, p. 280). This traditional and narrow stalking definition implies a “fear inducing, willful, malicious, and repeated following and harassing” of a victim (Langhinrichsen-Rohling & Taylor, 2003; National Center for Victims of Crime, 2012), and may also involve an erotomanic delusional sense of passion of the pursuer for their victim.

While some stalkers do engage in this literal stealthy following, in many instances perpetrators divert from such a stereotypic behavior and do not physically follow their targets. For this reason, stalking is often studied in conjunction with numerous intrusive behavioral definitions, including obsessive relational intrusion (ORI) and unwanted pursuit behaviors

(Jordan, Wilcox, & Pritchard, 2007; Langhinrichsen-Rohling, Palarea, Cohen, Rohlin, 2000; Mechanic, 2003; Mechanic et al., 2000; Spitzberg, Nicastro, & Cousins, 1998). ORI specifically refers to invading a victim's physical space (e.g. showing up at one's residence) or repeated and unwanted pursuit of victims' physical and/or symbolic privacy by any other person who presumes or desires contact or a relationship with the victim (Spitzberg et al., 1998). Similarly, unwanted pursuit behaviors are characterized by ongoing and unwanted pursuit of a romantic relationship taking the form of anything from persistent calls for a date, to archetypal physical following behaviors (Langhinrichsen-Rohling et al., 2000). Unwanted pursuit behaviors involve people who are not currently in a consensual romantic relationship, and may involve strangers (if the pursuit occurs before any possible romantic relationship) or ex-romantic partners (if the pursuit occurs after a relationship's termination).

The National Violence Against Women Survey (NVAWS) (Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998) was the first comprehensive assessment of the prevalence of stalking through a nationally representative sample of American men and women. Relying on a conservative stalking definition including presence of a reasonable threat, the NVAWS found that over 8% of American women and 2% of American men had been stalked at some point in their lives, translating to an approximate 1 million women being stalked annually in the United States (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). Before this breakthrough study, stalking rates in the United States had been greatly misrepresented estimates. Prior rates were extrapolated from small convenience samples of stalkers who had been gathered from mental health and law enforcement settings (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). Tjaden and Thoennes (2000) demonstrated that data gathered by law enforcement agencies such as in early stalking research, vastly underrepresent actual cases of domestic violence. For example, while reviewing domestic violence reports, Tjaden and

Thoennes (2000) found that 1 in 6 domestic violence cases involved stalking behaviors, yet many of these perpetrators were never officially reported as stalkers. Therefore, the actual number of reported stalking perpetrators as gathered by law enforcement and mental health agencies may not reflect actual numbers of stalking cases (Mechanic, 2003).

Since the initial publication of the NVAWS, public awareness of stalking and its prevalence have continued to gain popular interest. Regardless of this increased attention, thorough research pertaining to stalking remains in its infancy. Among the few studies investigating stalking behavior in the United States, results indicate that college-aged women in college settings are more likely to be victims of stalking than women in the general population (Haugaard & Seri, 2003; Jordan et al., 2007; Langhinrichsen-Rohling et al., 2003; Westrup, Fremouw, Thompson, & Lewis, 1999). Somewhere between 27% and 30% of college women between the ages of 18 and 25 report some form of stalking or unwanted pursuit behavior according to more inclusive stalking definitions. When more exclusive and stringent definitions of stalking are applied (e.g., being physically followed or spied on), Buhi, Clayton, and Hepler-Surrency (2009) found that 20% of their sample of college women reported victimization.

Because college-aged women report the higher rates of stalking than any subset of the population, this study specifically focuses on this demographic. Moreover, unless otherwise noted, we use stalking, obsessional relational intrusion, and unwanted pursuit interchangeably throughout the paper to refer to physical stalking as well as other unwanted pursuit and obsessional relational intrusion behaviors (e.g., seeking information from others, unexpectedly appearing at a target's home or workplace, following, spying, etc). In light of the emergence and accessibility of technology among the college-aged young adults, we also included unwanted and

excessive texts, emails, and Facebook/Myspace wall postings or messages in our conceptualization of stalking and unwanted pursuit behaviors.

### **Characteristics and Consequences of Stalking on College Campuses**

College women experiencing unwanted pursuit behaviors typically attribute their victimization to either the termination of or refusal to initiate a romantic relationship between themselves and their pursuer (Langhinrichsen-Rohling et al., 2000). There are many reasons for which college women, in particular, experience heightened rates of stalking. General relationship research shows many individuals experience their first romantic or dating relationships during the first year or two of college (Reagan, 2012), and therefore, may have little experience deciphering and understanding appropriate versus inappropriate behavior after the termination of the relationship (Haugaard & Seri, 2003). Ravensburg and Miller (2004) further suggest the high prevalence of stalking experienced among college-aged young adults may result from developmental immaturities and insufficiencies, such as an inability to initiate and maintain interpersonal relationships appropriately with the knowledge of social boundaries. Young adults' potential developmental shortcomings can be exacerbated for college students due to the tight-knit social structure of college residential life, where students share constant and close contact with one another (Ravensburg & Miller, 2004). Thus, the social and environmental structure of college life in addition to limited experiences with interpersonal relationships may place young women at an increased risk for experiencing stalking.

Stalking and unwanted pursuit behaviors on college campuses often involve former or current romantic partners (Buhi et al., 2009; Dutton & Winstead, 2011; Fremouw, Westrup, & Pennypacker, 1997; Spitzberg et al., 1998). Forty to 47% of female college students report being involved in a serious dating/romantic relationship with their pursuer at some point in their lives

(Ravensburg & Miller, 2004). Instances of stalking experienced by college-aged women are often motivated by jealousy, which typically leads pursuers to engage in proximity-seeking behaviors such as showing up unexpectedly (Langhinrichsen-Rohling et al., 2000). Over 80% of victims report victimization *prior* to termination of the romantic relationship with the perpetrator, suggesting a chronic nature of stalking on college campuses which may be motivated by jealousy during the relationship (Spitzberg et al., 1998). Further, over three-quarters of stalking-related instances experienced by college women continue for a year or longer, with over half of victims receiving overt threats from their pursuer (Spitzberg et al., 1998). The most common forms of stalking behavior experienced by college women fall under a wide range of obsessional relational intrusion and unwanted pursuit behaviors (i.e., sending gifts, excessive phone calls or texts, and sometimes literal following and monitoring) (Langhinrichsen-Rohling et al., 2000; Spitzberg et al., 1998).

Like many forms of IPV, stalking is associated with other forms of abuse and negative psychological health (Kuehner, Gass, & Dressing, 2012). High rates of stalking-related violence, including physical assault, sexual assault, and emotional abuse have been reported by 25% to 37% of college women who have been stalked when broader stalking and unwanted pursuit definitions are utilized (Mechanic, 2003; Westrup et al., 1999). Female college students reporting stalking and unwanted pursuit experiences have been shown to have greater negative psychological challenges including posttraumatic stress, depression, interpersonal sensitivity, and obsessive-compulsive behaviors following victimization (Dutton & Winestead, 2011; Langhinrichsen-Rohling et al., 2003; Mechanic et al., 2000; Westrup et al., 1999). Westrup et al. (1999) note that very few studies have examined the psychosocial effects of stalking on young adult victims, although the psychological suffering (e.g., anxiety and depressive symptoms) of

college female stalking victims has been demonstrated to be significantly higher than both victims of harassment as well as a non-victimized groups. Greater frequency and intensity of stalking experiences increases the likelihood that the victim will experience negative psychological effects as a result (Dutton & Winestead, 2011). Details surrounding victimization characteristics may well be related to the ways in which women cope with experiences of stalking.

### **Disclosure and Coping Strategies**

There is a scant amount of research regarding victim acknowledgement and reporting of stalking experiences to both formal (e.g., law enforcement, counselor/therapist) and informal (e.g., friend, family member) support systems, as well as individual and relational characteristics that may influence a victim's decision to disclose (Jordan et al., 2007). When using a very conservative stalking definition including more severe types of behavior, 35% to 42% of female college stalking victims reported victimization to the police (Bjerregaard, 2002; Westrup et al., 1999), although college women rarely report victimization to the police compared to the general population (Dutton & Winestead, 2011; Jordan et al., 2007; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). When using more liberal unwanted pursuit definitions, far fewer college women report their experiences to formal support systems such as the police, and may only do so when all other attempts to stop victimization have failed (Dutton & Winestead, 2011; Spitzberg, 2002). Previous research suggests that the bulk of female college stalking victims choosing to disclose their experiences select informal rather than formal support systems, who are most frequently friends (Buhi et al., 2009; Jordan et al., 2007; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). However it remains unknown if and which individual factors (e.g., self-esteem, gender ideologies, and social

support) relate to college stalking victims' help-seeking decisions to formal and informal supports.

The ecological framework theory provides a theoretical explanation of help-seeking for victims of IPV based on victims' unique characteristics. According to the ecological framework theory, two internal conditions must exist for female IPV victims to decide to seek help and disclose their experiences; first, they recognize their situation as undesirable, and second, they must see their problem as unlikely to stop without the help of external sources (Liang, Goodman, Tummala-Narra, & Weintraub, 2005). In addition, severity of victimization predicts a greater likelihood of help-seeking behavior (Liang et al., 2005), and women with more frequent victimization tend to use more coping strategies to manage their pursuit (Nguyen, Spitzberg, & Carmen, 2012). Women who view their victimization as a result of their own actions (e.g. self-blame), are less likely to seek help from outside sources, and are more apt to try to deal with their problems on their own (Liang et al., 2005).

In line with the ecological framework theory's help-seeking model, victims of IPV must first recognize and define their undesirable victimization in their own mind (Liang et al., 2005). Jordan et al. (2007) found that, although college women stalked by an intimate partner tend to acknowledge their stalking victimization as undesirable, they are unlikely to label their victimization as stalking. Further, college women are far less likely to report victimization to the police than non-college women. This disinclination to seek help from law enforcement is especially enhanced when college women do not label their experiences as stalking (Jordan et al., 2007). However, even in terms of informal support seeking, victims still must acknowledge their situations as undesirable before confiding in others, regardless of whether they consider their experiences stalking (Jordan et al., 2007; Westrup et al., 1999).

The ecological framework theory suggests female victims of IPV choose various forms of help seeking in part based on their own personal coping style (Liang et al., 2005). Spitzberg and Cupach (2001) have identified five typical coping strategies for attempting to end stalking victimization: moving toward (i.e. working with or negotiating with the pursuer), moving against (enlisting outside help networks to punish the pursuer), moving away (behaving cautiously by distancing one's self from the pursuer), moving inward (denying or diminishing the experiences), and moving outward (disclosing experiences to a third party). For many victims, moving away strategies are considered necessary initial coping mechanisms to cease victimization, and often are effective at permanently stopping unwanted pursuit behaviors (Cupach & Spitzberg, 2004; Cupach & Spitzberg, 2008; Nguyen et al., 2012). Although moving against coping may be very direct and effective at stopping victimization, some experts advise against this coping strategy as it increases the possibility of further interaction with the pursuer through formalized measures (e.g., police) and could even suggest to the pursuer that he or she is a significant part of the victim's life (Nguyen et al., 2012; Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007). Moving outward coping strategies, especially seeking social support, can be effective in providing social and psychological buffers following victimization, but are not necessarily substantially effective at stopping pursuit (Nguyen et al., 2012; Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007). Whereas moving inward coping strategies may be helpful in helping victims manage their stress, they are unlikely to be effective in stopping the unwanted pursuit behavior, and may even augment their victimization because victims may make themselves easily accessible and locatable for their pursuers (Nguyen et al., 2012; Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007). Similarly, moving toward coping strategies are highly ineffective at stopping the pursuit because pursuers may infer that the victim's negotiating behavior means they desire a relationship (Nguyen et al., 2012; Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007).

Although college women tend to report more direct coping strategies, particularly moving away coping, as most effective at stopping the pursuit (Nguyen et al., 2012), the majority of college women minimize or ignore the problem (moving inward) and rarely take direct actions against their pursuer (moving against) (Fisher, Cullen, & Turner, 1999).

In addition to studying the ways in which women cope with experiences of stalking, some research has focused on the correlates of women's disclosure and coping processes. Specifically, women who view their friends as supportive may be more likely to view themselves as comfortable with others and worthy of help, and thus engage in more active coping (Liang et al., 2005). Further, Nurius, Macy, Nwabuzor, & Holt (2011) have shown how IPV victims who appraise themselves as highly socially supported and have high self-esteems are more likely to seek legal services, disclose victimization experiences, and engage in other forms of self-protective action than IPV victims who are less supported. This might also suggest that women with greater levels of self-esteem would be more likely to using more direct and assertive coping strategies, such as moving outward and moving against.

Additionally, IPV victims' coping processes cannot be examined without considering interactions between the victim and their micro and macro-system interactions including women's internalization of societal gendered norms and attitudes. (Alaggia, Regehr, & Jenney, 2011). Women with higher adherence to hypergender ideologies, such as viewing women as passive and subordinate to men, may minimize their victimization and engage in fewer help-seeking behaviors. Thus, it may be that women with more traditional gender role ideologies may be more likely to use less direct coping strategies and rely more on moving toward or moving inward coping strategies

## **The Current Study**

To date, research has identified high rates of stalking victimization among college women living on college campuses. These women are most likely to disclose their experiences to friends and cope by ignoring or minimizing the problem, although they consider more direct actions as more effective in stopping the unwanted pursuit. However, correlates of college women's coping and help-seeking behaviors remain largely unknown. The current study purports to address gaps in the literature by analyzing the various ways in which personal, relational, and unwanted pursuit characteristics influence and predict female college stalking victims' disclosure and coping strategies. Based on previous research, we have developed five research hypotheses:

H1: Most college women reporting unwanted pursuit victimization will disclose their experiences to at least one informal support.

H2: Higher scores on hypergender ideologies will predict more indirect forms of coping (i.e., moving inward and moving toward); higher scores on perceived social support and self-esteem will predict more direct forms of coping (i.e., moving away, moving against, and moving outward).

H3: Direct coping responses (i.e., moving away, moving against, and moving outward) will be perceived as more effective at stopping victimization than non-direct coping responses (i.e., moving inward coping & moving toward coping).

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Participants were 305 college women who reported a history of stalking victimization during the past three years. These participants were obtained from a larger screening sample of 610 women. Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 24 ( $M = 19.19$ ,  $SD = 1.65$ ), and most were in

their first (47.5%) or second year (27.2%) of college. The majority of participants identified as Caucasian (88.6%), followed by Latino or Hispanic (3.0%), Asian or Pacific Islander (2.7%), two or more races (2.2%), African American (1.5%), American Indian, Alaska Native, or other race (0.7%). Approximately 34%, 38%, and 26% of participants stated their parents'/guardians' yearly income was less than \$50,000, between \$51,000 and \$100,000, and greater than \$100,000, respectively. Most participants identified as heterosexual or straight (94.1%).

## Measures

**Stalking and unwanted pursuit experiences.** In order to assess participants' experiences with stalking and unwanted pursuit behaviors, participants completed the short form of the Obsessional Relational Intrusion (ORI) scale (Spitzberg, Marshall, & Cupach, 2001). Participants reported how many times they had experienced a series of stalking and unwanted pursuit behaviors from 0 (*Never*) to 4 (*Over 5 times*). The 28-item ORI measures unwanted pursuit experiences over eight subcategories: hyper-intimacy (e.g., "leaving unwanted messages of affection like romantically-oriented notes, cards, letters, voicemails, email, messages with friends etc."); surveillance (e.g., "following you around at school, home, gym, etc."); proxy pursuit (e.g., "intruding upon your friends, family, or coworkers, etc."); interactional contact (e.g., "intruding uninvited into your interactions, etc."); harassment and intimidation (e.g., "spreading false rumors, etc."); invasion (e.g., "invading your personal space, etc."); coercion/threat (e.g., "leaving unwanted threatening messages, etc."); and aggression/violence (e.g., "sexually coercing you, etc."). The ORI was used as a screening instrument to identify women who had experienced stalking victimization within the past three years. Responses to the ORI were summed across all forms of subscales in order to capture the frequency with which women reported stalking victimization.

**Disclosure and pursuit characteristics.** Modeled after similar previous research (Edwards, Dardis, Sylaska, & Gidycz, 2013; Ullman, Filipas, Townsend, & Starzynski, 2007), a number of questions were added to assess characteristics and details of the stalking experience. Question assessed if participants disclosed their experiences of stalking (and for those who disclosed, who they told), the extent to which they blamed themselves (“How responsible are you for what happened?”), as well as their pursuer (“How responsible is your pursuer for what happened?”) for the stalking experience, and the degree to which they were upset (“How upsetting was the experience(s) for you?”) and scared (“How frightened were you by this experience(s)?”) by the experience. For questions assessing attribution of blame and the extent to which participants were upset and scared, response options ranged from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very much*). Women were also asked if they labeled the experience as stalking (“Do you consider this experience to be stalking?”) where “no” was coded 1 and “yes” was coded 2.

**Coping.** To examine participants’ various means of coping with experiences of stalking and unwanted pursuit behaviors, the Stalking Coping Measure (SCM) was administered (Spitzberg, 2012). The SCM consists of 40 items featuring six victim coping strategies followed by behavioral examples of each strategy. Participants indicated the number of times they engaged in each of the coping strategies in response to the unwanted behavior from 0 (*never*) to 6 (*25 times or more*). The coping strategies measured were: moving inward (e.g., “ignore the problem [e.g., wait, assume the problem will go away on its own, etc.]”); moving outward (e.g., “engage social support [e.g., seeking or obtaining emotional and/or instrumental support from friends, family counselor, etc.]”); moving against (e.g., “use protective responses to current behavior [e.g., as calling the police, seeking restraining orders, etc.]”); moving away (e.g., “behave cautiously [e.g., making plans of action and escape or becoming more aware of your

environment, etc.]”); and moving toward (e.g., “bargain with the pursuer [e.g., offering compromises, promises, or other rewards to get pursuer to alter behavior, etc.]”). Higher scores on each of the subscales indicate higher levels of that specific type of coping behavior. Internal consistencies for the subscale in the current study were good: moving inward (0.84), moving outward (0.74), moving against (0.84), moving away (0.89), and moving toward (0.80).

In addition to measuring the frequency with which individuals used each of the coping strategies above, we asked participants how effective they perceived the strategies to be in deterring the pursuit, ranging from 0 (*not at all effective in stopping the unwanted pursuit*) to 4 (*extremely effective in stopping the unwanted pursuit*).

**Self-esteem.** The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSE; Rosenberg, 1965) was used to assess participants’ self-esteem. The RSE consists of 10 statements, which participants answered in relation to how they perceive themselves (e.g. “I feel I am a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others”; “All in all, I am inclined to feel like a failure” [reverse coded]) on a four-point scale, ranging from *strongly disagree* (0) to *strongly agree* (3). Half of the items were reverse coded and then scores on each item were summed to create an overall score for self-esteem. Higher scores on the RSE indicate higher self-esteem. The RSE has demonstrated good validity and reliability, and has been shown to correlate with other well-established self-esteem measures (Ciarrochi & Bilich, 2006). Cronbach’s alpha in the current study was 0.90.

**Perceived level of social support.** The Interpersonal Support Evaluation List (ISEL; Cohen & Hoberman, 1983) was used to assess participants’ perceived level of social support. This scale is comprised of 48 statements instructing participants to choose if the statement is *probably false* (0) or *probably true* (1) in relation to themselves. The ISEL is divided into four subscales measuring perceived levels of tangible aid (e.g., “I know someone who would loan me \$50 to go

away for the weekend”); belonging and support (e.g., “There are people at school or in town who I regularly run with, exercise with, or play sports with”); appraisal (e.g., “I know someone who I see or talk to often with whom I would feel perfectly comfortable talking about any problems I might have adjusting to college life”); and self-esteem support (e.g., “I will have a better future than most other people will”). Half of the items were reverse coded; scores were summed to create a total score, and higher scores on the ISEL indicated higher levels of perceived social support. The ISEL has demonstrated validity and reliability in across diverse samples (Payne, Butler, Wyatt, Dubbert, & Mosely, 2012). Cronbach’s alpha in the current study was 0.92.

**Hypergender ideology.** Participants’ views on traditional gender stereotypes, referred to as hypergender ideology, were assessed using the Hypergender Ideology Scale (HGIS; Hamburger, Hogben, McGowen, & Dawson, 1996). This scale consists of 19 statements outlining traditional gender role ideology and stereotypes (e.g., “A real man can get any woman to have sex with him”; “Women instinctively try to manipulate men”). Participants indicated their level of agreement with each statement on a six-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*). Four items were reverse coded, and responses were averaged to form a composite score. Higher scores on the HGIS indicate higher adherence to traditional gender role beliefs. Reliability and validity for the HGIS have been supported in previous research assessing hypergender ideologies of college men and women (Hamburger et al., 1996). Cronbach’s alpha in the current study was 0.87.

## **Procedure**

Participants were recruited from (a) the psychology subject pool at a medium-sized, public New England university ( $n = 236$ ; 77.4%), (b) online advertisements through Facebook and Craigslist that targeted college women across the United States ( $n = 28$ ; 9.2%), (c) flyers

posted around the local New England campus community ( $n = 27$ ; 8.9%), and (d) word of mouth/snowball sampling ( $n = 14$ ; 4.6%). For participants recruited through the psychology subject pool, the study was advertised under the title “Relationship and Social Experiences”.

Inclusion criteria for all participants required that participants be female, currently enrolled at a college or university, and between 18 and 24 years old. After electronically providing informed consent, participants were directed to the online survey questions. Following survey completion, all participants received debriefing information regarding the study procedures and referral information to campus and national support centers. All research was conducted in compliance with the university’s Institutional Review Board.

## Results

### Descriptive Statistics

Approximately forty percent ( $n = 148$ ) women reported they were pursued by some form of romantic partner (i.e., casual or first date, current romantic partner, or ex-romantic partner). Additionally, 43.20% ( $n = 133$ ) of women reported being pursued by someone who they know or who is presumably close to them (i.e., acquaintance, coworker, employer/supervisor, or non-romantic friend). The remaining 15.4% ( $n = 24$ ) of participants were pursued by a stranger, family member, college staff member, or someone else. Ninety-six percent of our sample was pursued by a man, and the average number of stalking or unwanted pursuit experiences for these women within the past year was approximately 18 separate incidents. Finally, over 70% of our sample reported that their victimization lasted from several weeks to over a year.

**Aim 1: How do college women cope with experiences of unwanted pursuit? What are their rates of disclosure?**

Eighty-five percent ( $n = 259$ ) of women disclosed their experiences of unwanted pursuit to at least one individual. Whereas all women who disclosed told an informal support (e.g., friend, parent, romantic partner other than pursuer), 8.9% of women who disclosed also disclosed to a formal support (e.g., law enforcement, campus sexual advocate). See Table 1 for specific rates of disclosure to different sources. The most frequent disclosure targets for victims' female friends ( $n = 223$ , 76.4%), male friends ( $n = 103$ , 33.8%), roommates ( $n = 85$ , 27.9%), sisters ( $n = 57$ , 18.7%), and romantic partner (other than pursuer) ( $n = 57$ , 18.7%).

In terms of coping mechanisms (see Table 2 for descriptive statistics), moving inward ( $M = 2.18$ ,  $SD = 3.14$ ) and moving away ( $M = 2.15$ ,  $SD = 3.20$ ) were the most commonly utilized, followed by moving toward ( $M = 1.10$ ,  $SD = 2.29$ ), moving outward ( $M = 0.96$ ;  $SD = 2.13$ ), and moving against ( $M = 0.37$ ,  $SD = 1.35$ ).

**Aim 2: What are the correlates of coping processes associated with unwanted pursuit experiences?**

A series of bivariate correlations (see Table 3) were computed to determine the correlations among coping variables and individual characteristics, including stalking victimization frequency, self and pursuer blame, degree of upset and fear, acknowledgement of the pursuit as stalking, and levels of self-esteem, hypergender ideology, and social support. Results showed that all types of coping were positively related to one another. Moreover, moving inward coping was significantly and positively related to frequency of victimization, self-blame, pursuer blame, degree of upset, degree of fear, labeling one's experience as stalking, and hypergender ideology, and negatively related to social support. Moving outward coping was significantly and positively related to frequency of victimization, self-blame, degree of upset, degree of fear, labeling one's experience as stalking, hypergender ideology, and negatively

related to social support. Moving against coping was significantly and positively related to frequency of victimization, self-blame, degree of upset, degree of fear, labeling one's experience as stalking, self-esteem, and hypergender ideology, and negatively related to social support.

Moving away coping was significantly and positively related to frequency of victimization, self-blame, pursuer blame, degree of upset, degree of fear, and labeling one's experience as stalking, and negatively related to social support. Moving toward coping was significantly and positively related to frequency of victimization, self-blame, pursuer blame, degree of upset, degree of fear, labeling one's experience as stalking, and hypergender ideology, and negatively related to social support.

Next, five simultaneous linear regressions were conducted to determine the most salient predictors of the different types of coping. All five regressions were statistically significant (see Table 5). In the model for moving inward coping,  $F(8, 286) = 16.67, p < .001, R^2 = 31.8\%$ , victimization frequency, self-blame, degree of upset, and labeling the experience as stalking all uniquely predicted moving inward coping. The model for moving away coping,  $F(7, 286) = 24.05, p < .001, R^2 = 37.1\%$ , was predicted by victimization frequency, pursuer-blame, and labeling the experience as stalking. The model for moving toward coping,  $F(8, 285) = 17.20, p < .001, R^2 = 32.6\%$ , was predicted by victimization frequency, self-blame, purser blame, and hypergender ideologies. The model for moving outward coping,  $F(7, 287) = 15.89, p < .001, R^2 = 27.9\%$ , was predicted by victimization frequency, labeling the experience as stalking, and hypergender ideology. Finally, the model for moving against coping,  $F(8, 286) = 20.93, p < .001, R^2 = 36.9\%$ , was predicted by stalking victimization and hypergender ideologies.

### Discussion

The purpose of this study was to identify the various ways in which personal, relational, and unwanted pursuit characteristics influence and predict female college stalking victims' coping strategies. The first aim of the study was to identify disclosure rates and examine how college women cope with experiences of unwanted pursuit. We found the vast majority of participants (85%) disclosed their experiences to at least one other person following unwanted pursuit victimization. Also, in line with previous research, the vast majority of these women disclosed to informal support systems, most frequently female friends, and only a small percentage chose to disclose to formal supports such as law enforcement and legal counsel (Buhi et al., 2009; Jordan et al., 2007; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). These trends of disclosure to female informal support systems closely resemble findings from previous studies, suggesting college women tend to reach out to other women for help more often than other forms of external support systems (Buhi et al., 2009; Jordan et al., 2007; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000).

The study also examined the most common coping strategies used by college women following unwanted pursuit experiences. Corresponding with findings from previous researchers (Fisher et al., 1999), we found most participants employed moving inward coping strategies, such as ignoring the problem or assuming it will go away on its own. This is likely related to the nature of victimization for the majority of our sample, where over 83% of participants were pursued by either an ex or current romantic partner or by a nonromantic friend. Because the majority of women in our sample were either currently in or previously in a relationship with their pursuer, it is possible women would not choose to directly move away from or against their pursuer when victimized if they intend to maintain a relationship with that peer or ex/current romantic partner. Thus, victims' readiness-to-leave a relationship may be an important mediating

factor influencing coping strategies. Also, the utilization of moving inward coping by our sample of college women may further be connected to the idea that many college women do not consider their experiences serious forms of victimization, which is consistent with IPV research demonstrating widespread normalization and minimization of IPV for college women (Edwards, Murphy, Tansill, Myrick, Probst, Corsa, & Gidycz, 2012).

Moving away coping strategies were the second most frequent coping strategy, and included coping responses such as behaving cautiously around the pursuer or ignoring the pursuit behavior. Distancing oneself by moving away from the pursuer is another common coping response seen in previous research with college women (Fisher et al., 1999). We found that pursuer blame significantly predicted moving away coping, which could underscore the relevance of greater readiness-to-leave and subsequent moving away coping. That is, the more a woman has determined she is ready to end a relationship with her pursuer and blames them for her victimization, the more likely she will be to employ this more direct coping strategy. This is consistent with the findings in the broader IPV literature suggesting that a higher degree of blame in IPV cases has been shown to be related to a greater readiness-to-leave an abusive relationship (Rhatigan, Street, & Axsom, 2006).

Although avoiding thinking about the stalking experience or directly acting against the pursuer were the most common strategies (i.e., moving inward and away coping) used by victims, participants rated direct forms of coping (i.e., moving away and outward coping) as more effective in deterring the stalking behavior, as hypothesized. The tendency for more direct coping strategies to be more effective than non-direct strategies has been well-established in previous studies (Dutton & Winestead, 2011). The findings suggest that programming could aim to help women overcome barriers to responding assertively to stalking experiences. These

programs would presumably be effective for victims, as our results demonstrate that college women do acknowledge these more direct coping strategies as most effective in deterring victimization.

Moreover, results suggested that all types of coping strategies were related significantly to each other, indicating college women experiencing unwanted pursuit are likely to make use of multiple coping strategies rather than one in particular. Additionally, frequency of stalking victimization was related to all coping types, suggesting the more frequently a woman is victimized, the more types of coping strategies she will use in pursuit of stopping victimization (Nguyen et al., 2012).

The factors predicting the most common coping strategy, moving inward coping, included frequency of stalking victimization, degree of self-blame, degree of upset regarding victimization, and labeling the experience as stalking. According to the ecological framework model, degree of self-blame may be connected to this inward coping strategy because the higher a victim's self-blame the more reluctant they may be to seek help from others (Liang et al., 2005). Additionally, self-blame also predicted another non-direct coping strategy, moving toward, which also may be explained by victims' reluctance to engage others in help-seeking when they blame themselves for their victimization.

As previously discussed, pursuer blame predicted direct, moving away coping. However, pursuer blame also predicted moving toward coping, which was unexpected. Again, this finding may relate to women's readiness to end the relationship with their pursuer. For example, some women wish to maintain a relationship with their pursuer, so even when they do blame their pursuer for the victimization, they may cope by moving toward the pursuer as a form of relationship maintenance. On the other hand, some women may have a greater readiness to leave

the relationship and perpetrator blame might prompt them to use less moving towards and more moving away and against coping strategies. Thus, it is possible that the relationship between pursuer blame and coping strategies is moderated by other variables, including women's readiness to end the relationship with their pursuer. This assumption would be consistent with general readiness to leave an abusive relationship literature, which has found women's coping strategies to be related to the leaving process in relationships characterized by IPV (Rhatigan et al., 2006).

Two other consistent predictors of coping were labeling the victimization as stalking and hypergender ideologies. Labeling the victimization as stalking significantly predicted moving inward coping, moving away coping, and moving outward coping. As a part of the ecological framework theory, Liang et al. (2005) suggest that before engaging in help-seeking coping behaviors, victims of IPV must first acknowledge (i.e., label) their experiences as both undesirable and unlikely to stop without engaging the help of others. In our sample, women who did label their experiences as stalking, presumably acknowledging the pursuit as undesirable, were likely to engage in direct help-seeking behaviors such as moving away coping and moving outward coping in line with Liang et al. (2005)'s theory. The somewhat converse finding that women who labeled their experiences as stalking also engaged in indirect moving inward coping such as ignoring the behaviors, may be due to differences in readiness to leave stages for various women, as previously discussed. For example, a woman who desires to remain with her partner despite unwanted pursuit victimization, may label her experiences as stalking, but minimize the problem in her mind (moving inward coping) as a form of relationship maintenance.

As hypothesized, hypergender ideologies were predictive of moving toward coping. This finding is likely due to the idea that when faced with unwanted pursuit victimization, women

with more traditional gender role beliefs, viewing themselves as passive subordinates to men, would not engage in direct coping strategies to deter victimization, and would be more likely to stay with their pursuer than women with less adherence to traditional gender roles (Flynn, 1990). However, we also found hypergender ideologies were related to the direct coping strategies of moving outward and moving against coping. Although this finding is counterintuitive, previous research suggests that women with more traditional gender role ideologies are at increased risk to experience more chronic and severe victimization (Calhoun, Mouilso, & Edwards, 2012; Rhatigan et al. 2006); this is also supported by the significant and positive correlation between victimization frequency and hypergender ideologies detected in our study. Research also suggests that as the chronicity and severity of victimization increases, women are more likely to use more direct forms of help (Waldrop & Resick, 2004). Thus, it could be that women with higher levels of hypergender ideologies are at increased risk to experience more severe and chronic stalking victimization, which in turn leads them to seek more direct and active forms of coping. Future research should continue to investigate the influence of hypergender ideologies on coping following victimization, as well as stay/leave decisions in general for women.

Although at the bivariate level self-esteem was significantly related to a number of coping variables (e.g., moving against coping, victimization frequency, and self-blame), self-esteem did not emerge as a significant predictor of coping strategies in any of the regressions. While this finding is counter to our hypothesis that self-esteem would be a predictor of more active and direct forms of coping, our data suggests that other factors, such as hypergender ideologies, attribution of blame, victimization frequency, and labeling are more salient predictors. Similarly, social support did not emerge as a significant predictor in the regression analyses as expected, although bivariately it was significant for all variables apart from self and

pursuer blame. While we expected higher levels of social-support to be related to more proactive coping strategies (i.e., moving outward, moving away, and moving against), low perceived social support was unrelated to moving against coping and moving away coping. It is possible that self-esteem and social support are more distal variables that influence proximal variables such as attributions of blame. For example women who have high self-esteem may more likely to blame their pursuer, which in turn may predict more direct forms of coping.

### **Limitations, Future Research, and Implications**

Whereas the current study aids in our understanding of the many correlates of help-seeking and coping strategies employed by college women after victimization, the study has several limitations. The sample of participants is highly homogenous in that they are mostly white, middle-class females from a single college campus in the northeastern United States. This homogeneity limits our ability to generalize findings to other demographics of college women across the nation. Also, this study was cross-sectional in nature. If the study had been longitudinal, we would have a more accurate understanding of how women cope with experiences of unwanted pursuit over time and subsequent psychosocial recovery for victims. Specifically, prospective designs would allow researchers to disentangle the role of coping strategies influencing and being influenced by victimization experiences, perceptions of responsibility (both the victims' own and the perpetrators'), as well as individual and interpersonal factors.

Future research should address the shortcomings of the present study by sampling a more diverse group of women over time. Future research should also seek to identify additional personal variables (e.g., readiness to leave the pursuer) related to coping strategies. Additionally, examining subsequent psychosocial responses and their relation to coping strategies may allow

researchers to understand how coping strategies influence recovery more comprehensively. Finally, given research on stalking is still in the early stages of development, utilization of qualitative methodologies would be especially promising in better understanding the connections between victimization, coping strategies, and psychosocial recovery through women's lived experiences.

Findings from this study provide many implications for stalking risk reduction and recovery programs. Programming should focus on helping women overcome barriers to responding more assertively to IPV victimization, especially in light of our and others' (Fisher et al., 1999) finding that college women rate direct coping strategies as more effective, but tend to employ more non-direct strategies. Additionally, because college women are particularly likely to disclose their experiences to informal supports such as female friends, programming on college campuses should attempt to provide women in general with effective methods and strategies to support victims of IPV. Finally, because reporting to formal support systems such as campus sexual assault services and the police was infrequent, college campuses should increase services accessibly to women and explore alternative options to formal reporting and criminal justice procedures.

In conclusion, although previous studies have begun to untangle disclosure and help-seeking patterns for stalking victims, the current study extends this previous work by offering an examination of a variety of correlates which predict female college stalking victims' coping strategies. Specifically, we found that the majority of college women either move toward or away from their pursuer following victimization. Their coping decision is presumably due to the relationship between the victim and her pursuer, as well as her individual readiness to leave the relationship with her pursuer. We also found blame attribution was an important variable, where

more self and pursuer blame were related to a variety of different coping mechanisms. The findings from the current study add to the growing body of literature holding stalking victimization for female college students is a serious and pervasive IPV issue that deserves continued attention and research.

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Table 1

*Rates of victims' specific disclosure targets*

Person Disclosed to	<i>N</i>	Percentage
Female Friend(s)	233	76.4%
Male Friend(s)	103	33.8%
Mother	96	31.5%
Roommate	85	27.9%
Romantic partner (other than pursuer)	57	18.7%
Sister(s)	57	18.7%
Father	47	15.4%
Brother(s)	26	8.5%
Other Family Member	17	5.6%
Counselor/Therapist	14	4.6%
Residence Hall Staff	7	2.3%
Law Enforcement Officer	5	1.6%
Other	3	1.0%
Faculty or Staff	2	0.7%
Guardian	2	0.7%
Campus Sexual Assault Advocate	1	0.3%
Priest, Minister, etc.	1	0.3%
Medical Doctor (e.g., Physician, Gynecologist, etc.)	0	0.0%

*Note.* Numbers represent individuals who answered affirmatively to disclosing to the specific individual

Table 2

*Descriptive Statistics for Coping Strategies*

Coping Subscale	Range	Mean	SD
Moving Inward	0-22.50	2.18	3.14
Moving Away	0-18.25	2.15	3.20
Moving Toward	0-15.14	1.10	2.29
Moving Outward	0-17.60	0.96	2.13
Moving Against	0-15.63	0.37	1.35

Table 3

*Correlation Matrix Among Variables of Interest*

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
1. Moving Inward	---	.41**	.36**	.59**	.68**	.51**	.20**	.12*	.38**	.35**	.30**	.07	.12*	-.19**
2. Moving Outward		---	.62**	.47**	.48**	.52**	.13*	.10	.30**	.30**	.30**	.07	.30**	-.16**
3. Moving Against			---	.41**	.44**	.57**	.20**	-.04	.23**	.24**	.20**	.14*	.42**	-.23**
4. Moving Away				---	.59**	.51**	.15*	.20**	.30**	.37**	.44**	.08	.09	-.24**
5. Moving Toward					---	.51**	.22**	.16**	.34**	.34**	.23**	.05	.27**	-.21**
6. Victimization Frequency						---	.23**	.07	.45**	.49**	.37**	.16**	.38**	-.28**
7. Self-Blame							---	-.04	.04	.00	-.04	.14*	.28**	-.06
8. Pursuer Blame								---	.31**	.25**	.16**	.07	-.19**	-.03
9. Degree of Upset									---	.78**	.29**	.09	.05	-.15**
10. Degree of Fear										---	.37**	.11	.07	-.15**
11. Label Stalking											---	.09	.01	-.24**
12. Self-Esteem												---	.22**	-.52**
13. Hypergender Ideology													---	-.19**
14. Social Support														---

\*p<.05. \*\*p<.01. \*\*\*p<.001.

Table 4

*Descriptive Statistics for the Effectiveness of Coping Strategies Employed*

	Range	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Moving Away	1.00-5.00	3.35	1.09
Moving Outward	1.00-5.00	3.04	1.19
Moving Against	1.00-5.00	2.68	1.26
Moving Toward	1.00-5.00	2.63	1.27
Moving Inward	1.00-5.00	2.40	1.21

Table 5

*Regression Analyses Predicting Coping*

	Moving Inward		Moving Outward		Moving Against		Moving Away		Moving Toward	
	<i>B</i>	S.E. <i>B</i>	<i>B</i>	S.E. <i>B</i>	<i>B</i>	S.E. <i>B</i>	<i>B</i>	S.E. <i>B</i>	<i>B</i>	S.E. <i>B</i>
Victimization Frequency	.39***	.01	.36***	.01	.47***	.01	.36**	.01	.37***	.01
Self-Blame	.13*	.17	.01	.12	.04	.07	.09	.16	.11*	.12
Perpetrator Blame	.03	.16	--	--	--	--	.13*	.16	.12*	.12
Upset	.18*	.19	.12	.13	-.00	.08	-.09	.19	.08	.14
Fear	-.04	.19	-.04	.13	-.02	.08	.13	.19	.05	.14
Label Stalking	.11*	.44	.15**	.30	.02	.18	.26***	.43	.03	.32
Self-Esteem	--	--	--	--	-.03	.01	--	--	--	--
Hypergender Ideology	-.07	.23	.15**	.18	.23***	.11	--	--	.11*	.20
Social Support	-.04	.02	.03	.01	-.08	.01	-.07	.02	-.06	.01

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$

# STALKING AMONG COLLEGE WOMEN