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The Impact of Criminalization of Stalking on Italian Students: Adherence to Stalking Myths

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Abstract

Although behaviors that we today identify as stalking have occurred throughout history, the recognition and systematic investigation of stalking are quite recent. Italy's antistalking law is fairly new, and factors such as cultural myths, stereotypical beliefs, and definitional ambiguities continue to cause problems in the interpretation and recognition of stalking among the general public. This study examined perceptions and attitudes of 2 groups of Italian criminology students at 2 different times, before and after the implementation of Italy's 2009 antistalking law. The Stalking Attitudes Questionnaire (McKeon, Ogl-off, & Mullen, 2009) was administered to samples in 2007 and 2010. Results revealed significant changes in some beliefs and attitudes between the pre- and post-assessments. Interpretation suggests that the combination of Italian antistalking legislation and increased attention to research seem to have decreased students' adherence to stalking myths.

Keywords: criminology, harassment, Italian students, perception, stalking, violence

Although stalking behaviors have occurred throughout history, only recently has stalking been explicitly recognized as criminal conduct (Meloy, 1999). Specifically, behaviors involving intrusive and repeated harassment toward victims have long been documented, but until fairly recently the phenomenon has not been systematically investigated (Luberto, 2005). Described in past centuries in literature and psychiatry, stalking has achieved recognition as a social problem and a topic of scientific interest in the last 20 years, at last obtaining the social visibility to result in a legal definition (De Fazio, Merafina, & Sgarbi, 2009; Spitzberg & Cupach, 2014). Stalking as a form of harassing conduct has gradually attracted the attention of many legal, criminological, psychological, and psychiatric experts who have attempted to outline a comprehensive definition and, above all, develop ways to limit its pervasive and devastating effects (Mullen, Pathé, & Purcell, 2003; Thompson, Dennison, & Stewart, 2013).

Some authors have wondered what factors have caused stalking to emerge as a social problem in recent decades after having lingered unnoticed in the public subconscious for centuries (Mullen, Pathé, & Purcell, 2001). Stalking might always have been recognized informally as a problematic interpersonal relationship type, but antistalking legislation has quickly diffused across national and international jurisdictions. For example, Cross (2000) studied the spread of antistalking legislation in the 1990s in the United States, and found the punitiveness and protectiveness of such laws were predicted based on proximity to neighboring states and countries adopting such laws, as well as the cultural and political factors of each state, including levels of patriarchy and feminist lobbying pressures. Other scholars attribute antistalking legislation to the effects of media cultivation and construction of social and legal conceptions of stalking as a crime (Keenahan & Barlow, 1997; Lawson-Cruttenden, 1996; Schultz, Moore, & Spitzberg, 2014; Spitzberg & Cadiz, 2002). Consequently, antistalking legislation has recently become a matter of scholarly interest (Kapley & Cooke, 2007; Reece, 2011; Sheridan & Davies, 2001b; Smartt, 2001).

From a historical point of view, stalking aroused public interest in the 1980s through a series of sensational events to which the media gave wide-ranging coverage (Spitzberg & Cadiz, 2002). Dramatic cases of harassment that often led to explicit threats, assaults, violence, and even murder of celebrities attracted the interest of the general population (Gemini, Galeazzi, & Curci, 2003; Lowney & Best, 1995). Through this news coverage, the public became aware of the nature of stalking behaviors and the enormous consequences on victims' private lives.

The situation is similar in Italy, where the public's knowledge and awareness of stalking have increased in recent years (ISTAT, 2007; Muratore & Sabbadini, 2005). This new interest was further sparked in 2009 due to the criminalization of stalking with the introduction of a new article in the Penal Code (612bis: *atti persecutori*) to punish persecutory conduct (De Fazio, 2009, 2011). Today, stalking remains an all

too common experience (Balloni, Bisi, & Sette, 2012) and appears to be a worldwide phenomenon. However, beliefs and attitudes about stalking differ according to geographical, social, and cultural contexts (De Fazio & Galeazzi, 2004; Kamphuis et al., 2005), types of commonsense justice (Dennison & Thomson, 2002; Finkel, 1995), and legal contexts (Jagessar & Sheridan, 2004).

Considering the difficulties in defining and recognizing the phenomenon of stalking, investigation into the factors influencing individuals' perceptions of stalking becomes important with respect to law enforcement and victim safety (Dennison & Thomson, 2002; Finnegan & Fritz, 2012; Sheridan, Davies, & Boon, 2001). One factor that has been studied extensively in a related arena is rape myths. Rape myths are beliefs and attitudes people hold toward the crime of rape that reflect common, but biased and unfounded, cultural conceptions (Burt, 1980; Sinclair, 2012). Rape myths are based on a distorted perception of the crime, where rape is recognized only if perpetrated by strangers (Burt, 1980; Sinclair, 2012; Weller, Hope, & Sheridan, 2013) and the victim is blamed as deserving it, as opposed to blaming the offender for perpetrating the crime. Research suggests that there might be adherence to myths about stalking, as there are to myths about rape. Both rape and stalking are highly gendered, and are intertwined in the public consciousness with consensual types of romantic relationships (Reece, 2011).

Based on existing studies, some relevant factors regarding the perception of stalking have emerged, including the previous relationship between stalker and victim (Scott, Lloyd, & Gavin, 2010; Scott & Sheridan, 2011; Sheridan & Davies, 2001b; Weller et al., 2013), gender (Dennison & Thomson, 2002; Phillips, Quirk, Rosenfeld, & O'Connor, 2004; Scott & Sheridan, 2011; Sheridan, Gillett, Davies, Blaauw, & Patel, 2003; Sinclair, 2012), persistence (Dennison, 2007; Dennison & Thomson, 2002; Scott & Sheridan, 2011), and presence of threats and level of fear or distress (Dennison & Thomson, 2002; Hills & Taplin, 1998; Phillips et al., 2004; Scott, Rajakaruna, & Sheridan, 2014; Sheridan et al., 2003). In contrast, respondents' personal experiences of stalking do not appear to influence their sensitivity, attitudes, or evaluation of harassment behaviors (De Fazio & Galeazzi, 2004; Phillips et al., 2004).

Previous research by the Modena Group on Stalking (2005) regarding perceptions and experiences of stalking among police officers and general practitioners (health care providers) showed that perceptions of stalking vary considerably across professions and nations. If professionals perpetuate confusion and discrepancies in their understanding of the crime of stalking, it follows that the general public is also likely to be misinformed. As such, the passage of legislation could play a significant role in sensitizing public consciousness to stalking. Therefore, the authors of this study investigated the adherence of Italian students of law and criminology to stalking myths. In particular, a significant societal event was used as a point of reference with respect to the perception and evaluation of the stalking phenomenon: criminalization of persecu-

tory acts in 2009. This legal recognition might have influenced the general attitude of the Italian population with respect to stalking. For this reason, two different samples, consisting of students surveyed before and after 2009, were involved in this study.

Method

Sample

Criminology students attending Italian universities who agreed to take part in the study were given a 34-item questionnaire to measure how much they adhered to stalking myths. The samples were comprised of students enrolled in criminology classes in 2007 and 2010. One hundred ten third-year undergraduate students and master's-level students were surveyed in 2007, and 80 first-year undergraduate students, postgraduate students, and master's-level students were surveyed in 2010. The data indicate that in 2007, the average age of respondents was 32 years,¹ and 61.8% of students were single, 27.5% married, 7.8% cohabiting, and 2.9% divorced or separated. In 2010, the average age of respondents was 27 years, and 80.8% were single, 11.0% married, 6.8% cohabiting, and 1.4% divorced or separated. The category of "currently in relationship" was inadvertently left out of the marital status variable, likely causing students in a relationship to report themselves as legally "single." Students were then asked to report their relationship status. In 2007, 29.2% were not in a relationship, 4.7% were in a relationship for less than 3 months, and 66.0% were in a relationship for more than 3 months. In 2010, 38.5% were not in a relationship, 6.4% were in a relationship for less than 3 months, and 55.1% were in a relationship for more than 3 months. Because there was no category for "married" in the relationship status variable, married couples likely reported themselves as "in a relationship for more than 3 months." Therefore, the proportion of the sample in a nonmarried, non-cohabiting relationship cannot be known. Demographic information about each sample can be found in Table 1.

Instrument

In addition to general demographic questions, students were asked to provide information about their prior knowledge of stalking, including (a) if they had ever heard the word *stalking*; (b) if they had ever heard the term *persistent harassment*, which has been used interchangeably with stalking in law and research; (c) if they knew any victims of stalking; and (d) if they knew of any specific projects (bills or laws) regarding persistent unwanted attention. The frequencies of responses are reported in Table 2.

1. Data were only collected for year of birth; therefore, age was approximated by subtracting year of birth from the year data were collected.

Table 1. Demographic Information

Variable and year	Variable categories	Frequency (%)	Year total	Sample total
Sex				
2007	Male	26 (23.9%)	109	187
	Female	83 (76.1%)		
2010	Male	21 (26.9%)	78	
	Female	57 (73.1%)		
Qualification				
2007	Undergraduate	18 (16.7%)	108	185
	Master	90 (83.3%)		
2010	Undergraduate	53 (68.8%)	77	
	Master	24 (31.2%)		
Have you ever been in a relationship that lasted more than 3 months?				
2007	No	10 (9.3%)	107	186
	Yes	97 (90.7%)		
2010	No	13 (16.5%)	79	
	Yes	66 (83.5%)		
Who ended your last relationship?				
2007	Me	46 (51.1%)	90	152
	My partner	17 (18.9%)		
	The end was mutual	27 (30.0%)		
2010	Me	29 (46.8%)	62	
	My partner	14 (22.6%)		
	The end was mutual	19 (30.6%)		

Next, the Stalking Attitudes Questionnaire (SAQ; McKeon, Ogloff, & Mullen, 2009)² was administered. The purpose of the 34-item questionnaire was to assess participants' adherence to stalking myths (Copson & Marshall, 2002), defined as "a stereotyped, unjustified belief about stalking or stalking victims" (B. McKeon, personal communication, June 2012). In 2011 and 2012, the SAQ was revised by McKeon following a trial administration to stalkers based on feedback from clinicians and a review of current literature.

The original SAQ consisted of 34 items, each presenting an attitude regarding stalking, and was scored using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*absolutely untrue*) to 7 (*absolutely true*). It included general statements of belief (e.g., "Any person could be

2. The SAQ was developed as part of the doctoral dissertation of Dr. Bronwyn McKeon (2009). It was one aspect of a larger project examining community and police perceptions of stalking. It was based on literature at the time describing different types of stalkers and stalking behaviors (e.g., Mullen, Pathè, & Purcell, 2000). Concepts used in Burt's (1980) Rape Myth Scale were also translated to be appropriate to stalking. Additionally, some items were hypothesized to be attitudes held by stalkers.

Table 2. Prior Knowledge About “Stalking”

Variable and year	Answer	Frequency (%)	Year total	Sample total
Have you ever heard the word stalking?				
2007	No	16 (14.5%)	110	
	Yes	94 (85.5%)		
2010	No	2 (2.5%)	80	190
	Yes	78 (97.5%)		
Have you ever heard of persistent harassment?				
2007	No	2 (1.8%)	109	
	Yes	107 (97.3%)		
2010	No	1 (1.3%)	80	189
	Yes	79 (98.8%)		
Do you know any stalking victims?				
2007	No	40 (37.4%)	107	
	Yes	67 (62.6%)		
2010	No	54 (68.4%)	79	186
	Yes	25 (31.6%)		
Have you read/do you know of any specific project (bills or laws) on the problem of persistent and unwanted attention?				
2007	No	81 (75.7%)	107	
	Yes	26 (24.3%)		
2010	No	0 (0.0%)	77	184
	Yes	77 (100.0%)		

stalked”) and loaded statements related to underlying attitudes (e.g., “It’s not ‘stalking’ if you are trying to get your wife back”). All items were added together to give a total score, referred to as the Stalking Attitudes Score. Lower scores indicate disagreement with stalking myths; higher scores indicate agreement with stalking myths.

Because Italy only recently criminalized stalking in 2009, a paragraph was added after the demographic questions and questions about exposure to stalking to inform students about the legal definition of stalking used in other countries. The full SAQ is reproduced in Appendix A.

Procedure

Before it was administered to the student samples, the SAQ was first translated into Italian by researchers whose first language was Italian. The questionnaire was given to two separate groups of Italian criminology students, once in 2007 and once in 2010. The questionnaire was administered in the middle of the semester so students already had knowledge of criminology and stalking when taking the survey. Many students had also taken the criminal law exam. Because data were gathered at two points, the subsequent data analysis paid careful attention to the changes across time that

possibly occurred due to the criminalization of stalking in Italy in 2009. A principal component analysis was conducted to isolate factors and compare them to a previous factor structure identified in the SAQ (Kamphuis et al., 2005). Independent-sample *t* tests were used to compare individual questionnaire items and factors at Time 1 (2007) and Time 2 (2010).

Results

Results were obtained through statistical analyses performed using IBM SPSS Statistics 20 for Windows. Where large series of significance tests were performed, a Bonferroni correction is performed (Curtin & Schulz, 1998) and noted alongside the traditional significance levels. With relatively modest sample sizes, however, it is often important to attend to the effect sizes in a more descriptive sense than to place too much emphasis on the significance tests (Levine, 2011; Levine, Weber, Park, & Hullett, 2008).

Changes in Adherence to Stalking Myths

Given that the samples were independently collected at two separate times from the same population, there was no matching of Time 1 respondents to Time 2 respondents, and there was a relatively low probability of redundant participants across the two samples. Therefore, an independent-sample *t* test was conducted to compare each item in the SAQ (McKeon et al., 2009) at Time 1 and Time 2 (see Table 3). A significant difference occurred on Items 18 and 27 between 2007 and 2010. In each significant change, students were more likely to agree with the misconceptions about stalking in 2007 than in 2010.

To gain a more in-depth understanding of what variables might be influencing the decreased acceptance to stalking myths, the data were split by sex to see which sex, if either, was responsible for the change in attitudes from Time 1 to Time 2. When separating by sex across time, the individual items were again subjected to independent-sample *t* tests. Women were significantly more likely to agree with Items 5 and 27 in 2007 than in 2010. Women therefore accounted for the majority of significant changes across individual items between 2007 and 2010 (see Table 4).

Reliability of Previous Factor Structure

The factor structure identified by Kamphuis et al. (2005), who conducted a principal component analysis of McKeon et al.'s (2009) SAQ, included eight factors. The authors explained the first three factors accounted for 35% of the common variance as stalking is a nuisance ($\alpha = .74$), blaming the victim ($\alpha = .78$), and stalking is flattery ($\alpha = .80$). Reliability analyses were run on the combined data from this study for the

Table 3. Independent Sample *t* Tests Comparing Means of Individual Items by Year

Item	Statement	N	df	M			Significance	η^{2a}
				2007	2010	<i>t</i>		
5	It is not "stalking" if you are trying to get your wife back.	190	188	4.47	3.51	3.28	$p < .01$	.05
12	Staying in contact with someone shouldn't really be seen as a crime, if you are actually in love.	187	185	4.08	3.44	2.04	$p < .05$	.02
16	"Stalkers" are a nuisance but they are not criminals.	189	187	2.31	1.67	2.22	$p < .01$	.03
17	If you were really in love with somebody, you wouldn't take no for an answer.	190	185.21	1.98	1.55	2.09	$p < .05$	.02
18	What one person may see at "stalking," another may see as "romantic."	190	188	3.60	2.53	4.35	$p < .001^b$	.09
20	"Stalking" is just an extreme form of courtship.	190	174.08	1.88	1.31	3.49	$p < .01$	.06
22	Some women actually want to be "stalked" they see it as a compliment.	190	185.31	2.47	1.88	2.81	$p < .01$	.04
25	Certain types of women are more likely to be "stalked."	189	187	4.07	3.16	3.17	$p < .01$	.05
27	A woman may be more likely to be "stalked" if she cannot clearly say "no."	190	188	4.06	2.79	4.57	$p < .001^b$	.10
30	Even if they were annoyed, most women would be at least a little flattered by "stalking."	190	188	2.23	1.68	2.89	$p < .01$	.04
34	"Stalkers" only continue because they get some sort of encouragement.	190	187.90	1.70	1.40	2.02	$p < .05$	.02

a. Cohen provides the general guideline for interpretation that effect sizes of .01 are small, .06 are medium, and .14 or greater are large.

b. Significant after Bonferroni correction at $p < .05$.

same factors. Cronbach's alphas were .71 for stalking is a nuisance, .58 for blaming the victim, and .71 for stalking is flattery. Although stalking is a nuisance and stalking is flattery had reliable Cronbach's alphas, blaming the victim's Cronbach's alpha was not sufficient to support the three-factor structure. Although Kamphuis et al.'s factor structure has been used elsewhere (i.e., Dunlap, 2010) without cross-validation, it does not appear to be a viable factor structure for this sample.

New Factor Structure

Given the unreliable Cronbach's alpha coefficients for Kamphuis et al.'s (2005) three-factor structure, the 34 items were subjected to principal component analysis using the data from this study (Table 5). Principal component analyses using oblique rotation yielded a satisfactory Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin coefficient ($KMO = .75$). The analysis

Table 4. Independent Sample *t* Tests Comparing Means of Individual Items in 2007 and 2010 by Sex

Item	Statement	N	df	M			Significance	η^{2a}
				2007	2010	<i>t</i>		
Men								
18	What one person may see as "stalking," another may see as "romantic."	47	45	4.00	2.62	2.62	$p < .05$	.13
Women								
5	It is not "stalking" if you are trying to get your wife back.	140	135.17	4.53	3.16	4.12	$p < .001^b$	.11
12	Staying in contact with someone shouldn't really be seen as a crime if you are actually in love.	137	135	4.10	3.29	2.22	$p < .05$	.04
16	"Stalkers" are a nuisance but they are not criminals.	139	135.17	2.24	1.54	3.48	$p < .01$	.08
17	If you were really in love with somebody, you wouldn't take no for an answer.	140	137.59	1.87	1.32	2.73	$p < .01$	.05
18	What one person may see at "stalking" another may see as "romantic."	140	138	3.51	2.53	3.46	$p < .01$	.08
20	"Stalking" is just an extreme form of courtship.	140	125.60	1.76	1.25	3.06	$p < .01$	.06
22	Some women actually want to be "stalked"; they see it as a compliment.	140	136.50	2.41	1.74	2.89	$p < .01$	.06
25	Certain types of women are more likely to be "stalked."	140	138	4.06	3.09	2.98	$p < .01$	.06
27	A woman may be more likely to be "stalked" if she cannot clearly say "no."	140	138	4.12	2.70	4.44	$p < .001^b$	.12
30	Even if they were annoyed, most women would be at least a little flattered by "stalking."	140	138	2.08	1.60	2.47	$p < .05$	.04

a. Cohen provides the general guideline for interpretation that effect sizes of .01 are small, .06 are medium, and .14 or greater are large.

b. Significant after Bonferroni correction at $p < .05$.

revealed 11 factors with eigenvalues > 1.0 accounting for 66.55% of the common variance. Based on the scree plot, extraction and oblique rotation began at four components. The cross-loadings were excessive and reliabilities unacceptable for the four- and three-factor solutions. A reliable two-factor structure accounted for a modest 25.02% of the common variance.

The first component loaded 12 items referring to the belief that stalkers are, at most, a nuisance; that stalking is flattering; and that only stranger stalking should be considered criminal. These items seem to tap into a belief that stalking is typically a form of courtship rather than criminal activity, so the factor was thus labeled stalking

Table 5. Principal Component Analysis of Stalking Attitudes

Item	Statement	Stalking is only courtship	Courtship pursuit is normal
16	"Stalkers" are a nuisance but they are not criminals.	.68 ^a	
30	Even if they were annoyed, most women would be at least a little flattered by "stalking."	.65 ^a	
32	Stranger "stalking" is the only "real" stalking.	.62 ^a	
21	If there is no actual violence, it shouldn't be a crime.	.60 ^a	
20	"Stalking" is just an extreme form of courtship.	.57 ^a	
26	"Stalking" should be dealt with in civil, not, criminal law.	.53 ^a	
31	If someone continues to say nice things and give nice gifts, then "stalking" is far more acceptable.	.53 ^a	
34	"Stalkers" only continue because they get some sort of encouragement.	.53 ^a	
22	Some women actually want to be "stalked"; they see it as a compliment.	.49 ^a	
17	If you were really in love with somebody, you wouldn't take no for an answer.	.47 ^a	
25	Certain types of women are more likely to be "stalked."	.45 ^a	
27	A woman may be more likely to be "stalked" if she cannot clearly say "no."	.45 ^a	
24	Repeatedly following someone, making phone calls, and leaving gifts doesn't actually hurt anyone.	.44	
23	Victims of "stalking" are often women wanting revenge on their ex-boyfriends.	.42	.36
14	"Stalking" is a type of violence.	-.41	
18	What one person may see as "stalking," another may see as "romantic."	.34	
1	A man should be allowed to pursue a woman to a certain extent, if it is part of romance.		.66 ^a
12	Staying in contact with someone shouldn't really be seen as a crime, if you are actually in love.		.57 ^a
10	Women find it flattering to be persistently pursued.		.55 ^a
4	It's normal for a woman to say no to a date at first because she doesn't want to seem too eager.		.54 ^a
7	Saying no to a "stalker" will just provoke him.		.50 ^a
28	If a woman gives any encouragement, the man has a right to continue his pursuit.		.47 ^a
11	It's not really "stalking" if you know the person and they know you.		.43 ^a
5	It's not "stalking" if you are trying to get your wife back.		.41 ^a
19	Women often say one thing but mean another.		.40 ^a
8	A certain amount of repeated phoning and following is okay, even if a woman has said no.		.38 ^a
29	Those who are upset by "stalking" are likely more sensitive than others.		.35 ^a
3	If a man and woman have been in a romantic relationship, the man has more right to pursue her than if they have never met.		.32
2	If a woman says no, even once, a man should leave her alone.		-.31

Factor loadings < .30 omitted.

a. Item included in final subscale.

is only courtship ($\alpha = .80$). The second component loaded 11 items reflecting the belief that pursuit and ongoing contacts should be viewed as normal aspects of courtship. This factor was labeled courtship pursuit is normal ($\alpha = .71$).

The two factors were correlated .306, which is not surprising given that the second loaded item on Factor 1 was "Even if they were annoyed, most women would be at least a little flattered by stalking" and the third item on Factor 2 was "Women find it flattering to be persistently pursued." Furthermore, the fact that only 25% of the common variance was represented in this solution suggests that much of the variance in this measure is unique to single or couplet items.

Sex, Time, and Other Variables

Summated scales were created for each factor. Results from two independent-sample *t* tests revealed that participants were more likely to agree that stalking is only courtship in 2007 ($M = 2.27$) than in 2010 ($M = 1.78$), $t(184) = 4.36$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .10$. When considering combined data from 2007 and 2010, men ($M = 3.49$) were more likely than women ($M = 3.00$) to believe that courtship pursuit is normal, $t(176) = 3.21$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .06$. A secondary analysis that split the file by time revealed that a significant difference only existed in 2010, when men ($M = 3.55$) were more likely than women ($M = 2.83$) to agree that courtship pursuit is normal, $t(71) = 2.87$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .10$.

Married students ($M = 2.30$) were more likely than divorced students ($M = 1.44$) to agree that stalking is only courtship, $t(37) = 2.04$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .10$. Students who had previously heard the word *stalking* ($M = 2.03$) were less likely to agree with stalking is only courtship than students who had never heard the word ($M = 2.44$), $t(184) = 2.12$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .02$. These results need to be interpreted very cautiously given the relatively small and unequal group sample sizes being compared. Specifically, only 4 of the 190 participants were divorced and only 18 of the 190 participants had never heard the word *stalking*.

Discussion

The analysis presented here provides provocative insight into the changes in attitudes that occurred after the criminalization of stalking in Italy on February 23, 2009. Notably, the impact of Italian antistalking legislation and the increasing attention paid by researchers to stalking in Italy (De Fazio, 2011) correlated with students' diminished adherence to stalking myths. Interestingly, it was women who primarily accounted for this attitude change between 2007 and 2010.

Reliability analysis of Kamphuis et al.'s (2005) factor structure was not viable for the sample of this study. A new principal component analysis suggested a two-factor structure highlighting the beliefs that stalking is only courtship and courtship pursuit is normal. The first factor significantly changed between 2007 and 2010; the second factor changed as well, but this change was insignificant. In general, men were more likely than women to believe that courtship pursuit is normal, and this significant difference remained when considering data from only 2010. Marriage and lack of exposure to the word *stalking* might also be associated with greater adherence to stalking myths.

Implications

This research suggests the potential significant impact the criminalization of stalking might have on people's attitudes, implying that stalking legislation could positively influence, or perhaps reflect, social perceptions of stalking victims, motives, and courtship. Some of the SAQ items showed a statistically significant decrease in mean, indicating a decrease in adherence to stalking myths between 2007 and 2010. Stalking legislation, and the media coverage surrounding it, might therefore provide an important practical tool for individuals concerned with stalking in countries that lack legislation.

This study also has implications for the measurement of attitudes toward stalking. Stalking is a relatively elusive phenomenon that presents challenges to academic inquiry. Studying people's perceptions of stalking adds to our understanding of the crime as ambiguous and difficult to define.

Limitations and Future Research

One limitation of this study might be the differences in age and education level of the populations at Time 1 and Time 2. In 2007, 83.3% of the participants were master's-level students; in 2010, only 31.2% of the participants were master's-level students. The change in sample can be attributed to the reorganization of university departments between 2007 and 2010. Considering that master's-level students can be assumed to be more educated than undergraduate students, it might be expected that a decrease in age and education would result in an increase in adherence to stalking myths. However, the opposite is illustrated in this study, where a decrease in the sample's average age and education correlates with a decrease in adherence to stalking myths. Future research could consider the differences between groups in terms of their adherence to stalking myths, including differences across age, education level, political affiliation, and other social and psychological variables.

Another limitation of this study was the lack of data collected on participants' knowledge of stalking and exposure to media about stalking. We might speculate

that Italy's criminalization of stalking and subsequent media attention caused the student samples to adhere less to stalking myths in 2010 than in 2007; however, without more extensive data, the causation of this change in attitudes cannot be firmly established. Although this study demonstrated that women accounted for most of the attitude change between the samples, future research should closely examine the social climate of Italy between 2007 and 2010 to identify other cultural, communicative, and political factors surrounding the criminalization of stalking.

In conclusion, this study confirmed the influence of factors such as respondents' sex, victim-offender relationship, and the knowledge of the word stalking in identifying and recognizing harassing and intrusive behaviors. Therefore, the criminalization of stalking in Italy might have played a role in the public's perception and interpretation of stalking.

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Appendix A

Stalking Attitude Questionnaire (SAQ)

		Scale						
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7
		(absolutely untrue)			(absolutely true)			
Item	Statement							
1	A man should be allowed to pursue a woman to a certain extent, if it is part of romance.							
2	If a woman says no, even once, a man should leave her alone.							
3	If a man and woman have been in a romantic relationship, the man has more right to pursue her than if they have never met.							
4	It's normal for a woman to say no to a date at first because she doesn't want to seem too eager.							
5	It's not "stalking" if you are trying to get your wife back.							
6	A woman who dates a lot would be more likely to be "stalked."							
7	Saying no to a "stalker" will just provoke him.							
8	A certain amount of repeated phoning and following is okay, even if a woman has said no.							
9	The concept of "stalking" is just a fad.							
10	Women find it flattering to be persistently pursued.							
11	It's not really "stalking" if you know the person and they know you.							
12	Staying in contact with someone shouldn't really be seen as a crime, if you are actually in love.							
13	If a woman just ignored the man, he would eventually go away.							
14	"Stalking" is a type of violence.							
15	"If at first you don't succeed, try, try and try again." Attitudes like this make "stalking" acceptable.							
16	"Stalkers" are a nuisance but they are not criminals.							
17	If you were really in love with somebody, you wouldn't take no for an answer.							
18	What one person may see as "stalking," another may see as "romantic."							
19	Women often say one thing but mean another.							
20	"Stalking" is just an extreme form of courtship.							
21	If there is no actual violence, it shouldn't be a crime.							
22	Some women actually want to be "stalked"; they see it as a compliment.							
23	Victims of "stalking" are often women wanting revenge on their ex-boyfriends.							
24	Repeatedly following someone, making phone calls, and leaving gifts doesn't actually hurt anyone.							
25	Certain types of women are more likely to be "stalked."							
26	"Stalking" should be dealt with in civil, not, criminal law.							
27	A woman may be more likely to be "stalked" if she cannot clearly say "No."							
28	If a woman gives any encouragement, the man has a right to continue his pursuit.							
29	Those who are upset by "stalking" are likely more sensitive than others.							
30	Even if they were annoyed, most women would be at least a little flattered by "stalking."							
31	If someone continues to say nice things and give nice gifts, then "stalking" is far more acceptable.							
32	Stranger "stalking" is the only "real" stalking.							
33	Any person could be "stalked."							
34	"Stalkers" only continue because they get some sort of encouragement.							

From McKeon et al. (unpublished).