Written Content Indicators of Problematic Approach Behavior toward Political Officials[†]

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Those charged with assessing and managing threatening communications must utilize risk factors that are behavioral, operational, and reasonably attainable during investigations. This project examined 326 written correspondence cases of an inappropriate, disruptive, or threatening nature that targeted political officials, with the specific goal of identifying written content indicators of problematic approach behavior. Results revealed that subjects who engaged in problematic approach activity toward their targets had more criminal history, past threat assessment activity, familiarity with firearms, past substance use, and indicators of serious mental illness. Approachers were more likely to engage in multiple contact methods, target dispersion, more overall contacts, and prior contact with their target. Numerous content themes were associated with future problematic approach, including longer handwritten correspondence, referencing specific events, making demands, mentioning stressors, focus on personal themes, feeling their rights were violated, and expressing an intention to approach. Harassing, insulting, and threatening language was not related to approach behavior. The implications of these findings are wide-ranging for the practice of threat assessment. Copyright © 2011 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Individuals who pose a threat toward political officials must be recognized and intervened with before they engage in problematic or violent approach behavior toward their target. However, this preventative endeavor is a challenging one. Security professionals must first determine when a subject has crossed the line from protected free speech and expression of political opinions into the domain of inappropriate and illegal communications that are threatening, harassing, and/or fear-inducing in nature; it is only once a subject engages in the latter that law enforcement officers initiate their threat assessment activities. Furthermore, there is no single profile indicating a person poses a threat; rather, a complex set of behavioral factors related to the subject, motivation, contact, context, target, and protective resources contribute to developing a

behavioral risk model predictive of problematic approach behavior (Borum, Fein, Vossekuil, & Berglund, 1999; Scalora et al., 2002, 2003b).

Risk assessments conducted in security environments should have an empirical foundation, especially if legal consequences may be involved (e.g., *Daubert v Merrell Dow Pharmaceuticals Inc*., 1993). In addition, research aiming to identify risk factors must utilize information that is available to law enforcement and protective security professionals during the course of an investigation; as such, these risk factors must be accessible through normal investigative sources. Social scientists are increasingly collaborating with law enforcement, intelligence, and defense agencies in conducting behaviorally based research on threatening and terroristic acts (e.g., Borum, Fein, Vossekuil, Gelles, & Shumate, 2004; Scalora et al., 2003a; Schoeneman-Morris, Scalora, Chang, Zimmerman, & Garner, 2007), and psychologists are increasingly being called upon to conduct operationally grounded, targeted violence risk assessments in these settings.

RESEARCH ON PROBLEMATIC APPROACH BEHAVIOR TOWARD POLITICAL OFFICIALS

A small body of research has focused on identifying indicators of problematic approach activity among subjects who engage in harassing or threatening correspondence toward political officials. This research has examined problematic approach behavior toward the United States Congress (Dietz, Matthews, Martell, Stewart, Hrouda, & Warren, 1991a; Scalora et al., 2002, 2003a; Schoeneman, Scalora, Chang, Zimmerman, & McGaffin, 2006; Schoeneman-Morris et al., 2007), toward the President of the United States and the U.S. Executive Branch (Fein & Vossekuil, 1999), toward federal judicial officials (Calhoun, 1998), and toward state-level government officials (Baumgartner, Scalora, & Plank, 2001).

Dietz and colleagues (1991a) first studied problematic approach behavior toward U.S. Congressional Members by comparing 43 subjects who attempted a face-to-face encounter with 43 subjects who did not. Subjects who identified themselves and were polite in their letters were more likely to approach. Subjects who used multiple methods of contact, specifically those who telephoned their target in addition to writing letters, were more likely to attempt a face-to-face encounter. Approach behavior was more likely when subjects assumed the role of a special constituent or cast their target in the role of benefactor, while approach was less likely when subjects viewed their target as an enemy. Communiqués that contained themes of love, marriage, or romance were more associated with approach activity, while an emphasis on political issues was found to be unrelated to approach behavior. Approach was more likely in subjects who expressed a desire for face-to-face contact, assistance, or recognition from their target. Interestingly, subjects who made threatening statements were less likely to engage in approach activity. This inverse relationship between threats and approach was not found in a similar study of targeted Hollywood celebrities (Dietz et al., 1991b).

In another major study, Calhoun (1998) examined more than 3,000 threatening contacts and assaults against federal judicial officials. He found that subjects who engaged in suspicious activity were more likely to make a violent approach as opposed to those who became known through telephone calls, writing, or an informant. However, this suspicious activity is itself an escalation involving proximity to the victim and a movement from talking to action (i.e., from ''howling'' to ''hunting'', as described by

Calhoun, 1998). Subjects who had attempted to hide their identity, had a known group affiliation, and had known accomplices were more likely to make a violent approach. Subjects motivated by an ideological cause unrelated to a specific legal case and those referencing themes personal to the victim were also more likely to engage in assaultive behavior. Methodologically, in this study, only communications of a threatening nature were examined, while the otherwise inappropriate communications were disregarded. In addition, threateners were combined with assaulters who made no previous threats.

In several large studies of problematic contacts toward Members of the U.S. Congress, Scalora and colleagues (2002, 2003a) examined more than 4,000 cases and found numerous factors that significantly differentiated approachers from non-approachers. Subjects who made contact with multiple targets (i.e., target dispersion), had prior contact with their target, and utilized multiple methods of contact (e.g., writing letters, telephoning, and e-mailing) were more likely to engage in problematic approach behavior. Those who approached were more likely to show evidence of serious mental illness, to have a criminal history, and to have come into contact with multiple law enforcement agencies. However, those who approached were less likely to be a direct constituent of their target. Approachers were more likely to express help-seeking themes but less likely to focus on topics related to domestic or foreign policy issues, to express threatening language, or to utilize language of an insulting, degrading, obscene, sexual, or racial nature.

Only two studies regarding targeted political figures have focused exclusively on subjects who engage in written and electronic contact behavior. Schoeneman and colleagues (2006) and Schoeneman-Morris and colleagues (2007) examined more than 400 cases involving inappropriate written contacts toward Members of the U.S. Congress with the initial goal of ascertaining correspondence group differences. Letter writers were more likely than e-mailers to show indicators of serious mental illness, to contact multiple targets, to use multiple methods of contact aside from writing (e.g., telephone calls), and to engage in problematic approach behavior toward their targets. E-mailers were more likely than letter writers to focus their correspondence on government concerns, to lack organization in their written composition, and to use obscene language. E-mailers tended to be younger with less criminal history, and to write shorter communiqués. In sum, e-mailers tended to focus on one governmental issue and one target, and appeared to spend less overall effort on their contact behaviors; letter writers presented as less rational (i.e., lacking in clarity of thought, reasoned judgment, or logical thinking) and more willing to put a lot of effort behind their contact behaviors. Letter writers also were found to engage in higher risk behaviors, or behaviors that have been shown in the research to be risk factors for problematic approach.

Among these subjects (Schoeneman et al., 2006; Schoeneman-Morris et al., 2007), risk factors for problematic approach behavior included indicators of serious mental illness, prior contact with their target, multiple methods of contact, and a greater number of total contacts. Approachers were more likely to emphasize personal themes (e.g., help-seeking, entitlement claims). Evidence of agitation and demands were risk factors for approach only in subjects who communicated exclusively by written letters. This research suggests that the risk factors for approach activity found in letter-writing and e-mailing subjects are consistent with the previous literature that has identified risk factors for all subjects without segregating cases by method of contact.

RATIONALE AND HYPOTHESES FOR THE CURRENT STUDY

While previous threat assessment research has begun to explicate risk factors for problematic approach behavior, it has only broadly shown that some linguistic features or thematic content areas can be useful indicators of targeted dangerousness. However, content-based characteristics would be extremely useful and readily available factors to use in assessing communicated threats. In the course of their investigative and protective duties, law enforcement and security personnel must utilize variables that are behaviorally based, operationally relevant, and readily attainable through investigative activity; more thorough and detailed examinations of communicated threats would provide these types of variables.

Given the increase in the amount of correspondence being sent to public officials, especially involving electronic and internet-based communications (Fitch & Goldschmidt, 2005), more research is needed on the nature of the written and electronic medium and on the associated content-based risk factors for approach. Subjects who approach their target rarely do so spontaneously, but rather engage in a series of behaviors leading up to the approach incident. In some cases, this series of actions includes telling others, as well as making public comments about their disgruntlement and plans to attack. The plethora of linguistic and thematic data offered by texts and correspondence suggests that a content analytic approach should be employed to determine if there are content-based risk factors that indicate a subject is preparing for, or about to engage in, problematic or violent approach.

The current study expected to identify a number of risk factors for problematic approach behavior that would be consistent with prior research findings. This study specifically asked the question: ''What are the subject-, contact-, and content-based risk factors for problematic approach in subjects who correspond with their targets through letters, e-mails, and/or blogs?'' In the area of identifying targeted violence risk factors, past research has found that problematic approach was more likely to occur in cases where the subject exerted more effort over time and in cases that focused more on personal themes (as opposed to governmental or policy-oriented themes). Past research has also found intense language (e.g., threats, insults, degradation) to be unrelated or inversely related to approach behavior.

Based on this past research, it was hypothesized that indicators of serious mental illness (i.e., psychotic/delusional symptoms), multiple methods of contact, contact with multiple targets, a greater number of contacts, assistance-seeking themes, and personal themes would be more likely to occur in problematic approach cases than in non-approach cases. Further, it was hypothesized that problematic approach cases would be less likely than non-approach cases to contain threatening, insulting, harassing, and obscene language. The aim of this research was to maintain operational relevance and to present information according to behavioral factors that can be observed from an investigative perspective. With this goal in mind, the findings in this article are not structured or discussed according to any theoretical orientation or model, but rather are presented in terms of operationally relevant and readily observable categories (e.g., subject characteristics, contact behavior, and language content).

METHOD

Data Source and Selection

This project examined subjects who came to the attention of the United States Capitol Police (USCP) because of their fixation on U.S. Congressional Members, staff, and the institution. Data for this study were drawn from the investigative case files of the Threat Assessment Section (TAS) at the USCP. The USCP protects U.S. Congressional Members, staff, and property located in the U.S. Capitol Building, adjacent office buildings, on Capitol Hill grounds, at Congressional district offices, at protectees' residences, and at any official public appearance. Occurrences of a threatening or suspicious nature that occur within the USCP's jurisdiction are reported to the TAS, who investigate, conduct targeted violence risk assessments, and make threat management decisions. The TAS conducts continued training with Congressional offices to aid their decision-making regarding the threshold at which to report inappropriate or concerning contact behaviors to the USCP.

The investigative case files of the TAS include demographics for each subject (e.g., gender, age), criminal histories, police reports, subject interviews, correspondence from the subject, victim statements, interviews with third parties (e.g., family members, co-workers), reports of any prior contact from the subject, and other law enforcement records. All cases are investigated, managed, and supervised by agents specially trained to engage in both investigative work and threat assessment. These investigative and assessment techniques have been developed to ensure that accurate information is collected and that this information covers the range necessary for accurate evaluation.

For the current research, cases involving subjects who sent inappropriate written letters, e-mails, or blogs were randomly selected from the investigative case files from 2002 through 2006. The population of total written contact cases during this time period was $N = 1,304$. The sample for this study included 326 written contact cases; of these, 49 cases engaged in approach behavior and 277 did not engage in approach behavior. Each case represented a unique subject who had engaged in inappropriate written contact toward Congressional protectees; some subjects sent only one correspondence while others sent multiple communiqués. Each subject's full investigative case file was utilized for data coding.

Inappropriate correspondence was defined as any contact behavior that was threatening, intimidating, disruptive, harassing (e.g., repeated or intrusive, despite feedback that their request cannot be met), or otherwise caused safety or security concerns to the target, their office staff, or their families. Written letters were defined as any written communication received via the U.S. Postal Service, through inter-agency mail, or delivered by hand. E-mails were defined as any computer-based communication sent electronically to the Congressional target's e-mail account. Internet postings were defined as any writing posted on the internet in a public viewing space that was not also sent electronically or via postal service to the target. Cases were included in the problematic approach group if the subject engaged in one or more reported and documented incidents in which they gained physical proximity to their target and engaged in threatening, harassing, intimidating, or disruptive behavior while in the physical presence of their target. On the other hand, cases were included in the non-approach group if the subject only corresponded from a distance and did not make any known attempt to gain physical proximity to their target.

Data Coding and Reliability

Numerous subject characteristics, contact variables, and content and language features were coded to examine their predictive utility related to problematic approach behavior. For each investigative case file, characteristics of the subject's demographics (e.g., gender, age, ethnicity) and criminal history (e.g., past harassment charges, past violence charges) were coded. Indicators of serious mental illness (e.g., delusions, paranoia, or other psychotic processes) were evaluated based on investigative and case file information, which included corroborative documentation and subject self-reports, as well as behavioral and/or content indicators of psychosis, as evaluated by specially trained detectives and operational psychologists. Contact behaviors (e.g., number of past contacts, types of past contacts, using multiple methods of contact, contacting multiple targets) and thematic content features of the subject's correspondence (e.g., making demands, mentioning stressors, help-seeking requests, focus on personal themes, feeling rights were violated, expressing intent to approach) also were examined. For a complete list of all variables coded in the current study, refer to Tables 1–7. These subject, contact, and content variables were drawn from the past literature based on their association with violence or problematic approach behavior. Further, all of these variables are behaviorally based, operationally relevant, and readily attainable through investigative activity.

The primary investigator, who has extensive training and experience in working with law enforcement and threat assessment case files, as well as with clinical and content analytic material, led the coding team comprised of the primary investigator plus three additional clinical psychology doctoral students. Before data coding began, the primary investigator trained the team through education about the study and variables, in-depth review of the coding manual including operational definitions, and case trainings in which all coders rated one subject at a time and then met to discuss and reconcile items. The team was trained on ten cases before each coder was permitted to independently complete any case files. Throughout the data coding process, weekly meetings were held for discussions of unique case presentations or specific variable questions.

Interrater reliability of coding was statistically evaluated using all ten training cases and a random sampling of 10% of the remaining cases. Continuous variables were examined using Pearson's correlation and categorical variables were assessed using Cohen's kappa, which corrects for chance-levels of agreement. For continuous variables, intercoder agreement ranged from 0.739 to 1.000, with a mean of 0.964. For categorical variables, intercoder agreement ranged from 0.702 to 1.000, with a mean of 0.851.

Data Analysis

Upon completion of data coding, all cases were entered into SPSS (SPSS Inc., 2006) by the primary investigator. Univariate analyses were used for data cleaning to investigate any data entry errors, values beyond the defined range of data coding options, missing values, skewness, kurtosis, and outliers. Two data entry errors in the form of out-of-range values were re-checked with the original case files and corrected. There were no missing values. Outliers were identified through comparisons of the mean and the 5% trimmed mean, examinations of the skewness and kurtosis values, and inspection of the

histogram and normal q–q plot for normality of distribution. Any identified outliers were transformed according to the Windsorizing process, which allowed the data points to be retained but rendered them less likely to disrupt subsequent statistics. Univariate analyses were conducted using chi-squares on qualitative or categorical variables and ANOVAs on quantitative or continuous variables. Multivariate analyses also were conducted to predict problematic approach behavior using a stepwise multiple regression model.

RESULTS

The current project examined a total sample of 326 written contact cases, of which 49 (15.0%) engaged in approach behavior and 277 (85.0%) did not engage in approach behavior. In previous similar studies of inappropriate contact with political officials, 22.5–32.9% of the sample made problematic approaches toward their targets (Baumgartner et al., 2001; Scalora et al., 2002, 2003a). Of the 326 total cases, there were 119 letter cases (36.5%), 155 e-mail cases (47.5%), and 52 internet cases (16.0%). The overall sample was 64.4% male, which is similar to previous studies that had a male majority in their samples ranging from 60.4 to 83.2% (Baumgartner et al., 2001; Scalora et al., 2002, 2003a). The average age of the overall sample was 47.42 years, which is slightly older than the average age range of 39.2–44.1 years found in the samples of previous studies (Baumgartner et al., 2001; Scalora et al., 2002, 2003a). The ethnicity of the overall sample was 57.1% Caucasian. See Table 1 for a more complete look at these descriptive statistics.

A number of subject characteristics were examined to delineate individual-level variables that should be taken into consideration when assessing risk for approach behavior. Approachers were significantly more likely than non-approachers to display indicators of serious mental illness [$\chi^2(1) = 34.081$, $p < 0.001$], including a range of specific delusions and symptoms. Approachers were significantly more likely than non-approachers to have a history of mental health hospitalization [$\chi^2(1) = 26.610$,

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for the approach, non-approach, and overall samples

Characteristic	Group		
	Approach ($n = 49$)	Non-approach ($n = 277$)	Overall ($n = 326$)
Age (years)			
Average	47.33	47.45	47.42
Range	19–71	16–84	16–84
Gender			
Male	85.7%	60.6%	64.4%
Female	12.2%	14.8%	14.4%
Unknown	2.0%	24.5%	21.2%
Ethnicity			
Caucasian	81.6%	52.7%	57.1%
African American	12.2%	5.8%	6.7%
Hispanic/Latino(a)	4.1%	1.8%	2.1%
Asian	0.0%	1.4%	1.2%
Middle Eastern	0.0%	1.1%	0.9%
Unknown	2.0%	37.2%	31.9%

Table 2. Chi-square analyses of subject variables across approach behavior groups

Subject characteristics	Group	
	Approach ($n = 49$)	Non-approach ($n = 277$)
Unknown subject***	1 (2.0%)	89 (32.1%)
Use of alias	2 (4.1%)	30 (10.8%)
Reported by third party	7 (14.3%)	43 (15.5%)
Criminal history pertaining to target***	19 (38.8%)	25 (9.0%)
History of threat assessment activity***	22 (44.9%)	36 (13.0%)
Prior federal law enforcement***	16 (32.7%)	12 (4.3%)
Violation of parole/probation	3 (6.1%)	17 (6.1%)
Military training	8 (16.3%)	25 (9.0%)
Possession of firearms***	10 (20.4%)	9 (3.2%)
Firearm training	5 (10.2%)	17 (6.1%)
Overall familiarity with guns***	18 (36.7%)	31 (11.2%)
Past substance use/abuse***	17 (34.7%)	32 (11.6%)
Serious mental illness indicators***	41 (83.7%)	107 (38.6%)
Persecutory/paranoid delusions***	30 (61.2%)	75 (27.1%)
Grandiose delusions***	23 (46.9%)	51 (18.4%)
Delusions of reference**	6 (12.2%)	9 (3.2%)
Delusions of malevolent forces*	8 (16.3%)	19 (6.9%)
Threat/control-override symptoms*	8 (16.3%)	21 (7.6%)
Past mental health hospitalization***	15 (30.6%)	18 (6.5%)
Use of psychotropic medications*	7 (14.3%)	14 (5.1%)
Physical agitation***	13 (26.5%)	6 (2.2%)

*$p \leq 0.05$, **$p \leq 0.01$, ***$p \leq 0.001$.

$p < 0.001$] and to have a history or current use of psychotropic medications [$\chi^2(1) = 5.887$, $p = 0.015$]. See Table 2 for a more detailed breakdown of mental illness indicators and related subject characteristics.

Approachers were significantly more likely than non-approachers to have a criminal history relating to their target [$\chi^2(1) = 31.563$, $p < 0.001$], a history of threat assessment activity with other law enforcement or protective agencies [$\chi^2(1) = 28.970$, $p < 0.001$], and prior federal law enforcement involvement [$\chi^2(1) = 42.534$, $p < 0.001$]. Approachers were significantly more likely than non-approachers to possess firearms [$\chi^2(1) = 22.335$, $p < 0.001$] and to have a history of substance use/abuse [$\chi^2(1) = 17.458$, $p < 0.001$]. Approachers had significantly greater criminal history as measured by number of past criminal charges [$F(1,324) = 39.579$, $p < 0.001$]. See Tables 2 and 3 for additional information regarding criminal history, specific categories of charges, and other subject characteristics.

Contact variables were examined to better understand some of the behaviors utilized by subjects who approach their targets. Approachers were significantly more likely than non-approachers to identify themselves by their legal name [$\chi^2(1) = 13.601$, $p < 0.001$] and to have made prior contact with their target [$\chi^2(1) = 9.201$, $p = 0.002$]. Approachers were also significantly more likely to use multiple methods of contact in addition to writing [$\chi^2(1) = 42.421$, $p < 0.001$] and to engage in target dispersion [$\chi^2(1) = 25.966$, $p < 0.001$] in which they fixated on more than one target. Approachers were significantly less likely than non-approachers to have typed their correspondence rather than using only handwriting or a mixture of both handwriting and typing [$\chi^2(2) = 27.295$, $p < 0.001$]. See Table 4 for a more detailed breakdown of related contact characteristics.

Table 3. ANOVA analyses of subject variables across approach behavior groups. Values are presented as mean (SD)

Subject characteristics	Group	
	Approach ($n = 49$)	Non-approach ($n = 277$)
Age (years)	47.33 (11.66)	47.45 (15.02)
Time in military (months)	0.00 (0.00)	0.39 (3.73)
Traffic charges	0.51 (1.14)	0.29 (1.64)
Drug/alcohol charges***	0.86 (1.96)	0.21 (0.76)
Threat/harassment charges***	1.33 (2.51)	0.25 (0.99)
Property charges***	1.33 (2.64)	0.38 (1.41)
Violent criminal charges***	1.82 (3.40)	0.36 (1.18)
Other criminal charges***	1.65 (2.73)	0.43 (1.38)
Total criminal charges***	7.49 (9.80)	1.92 (4.64)

*$p \leq 0.05$, **$p \leq 0.01$, ***$p \leq 0.001$.

Table 4. Chi-square analyses of contact variables across approach behavior groups

Contact variables	Group	
	Approach ($n = 49$)	Non-approach ($n = 277$)
Subject identifies self in contact***	47 (95.9%)	197 (71.1%)
Sent from jail, prison, or hospital	2 (4.1%)	15 (5.4%)
Prior contact with target**	17 (34.7%)	45 (16.2%)
Multiple methods of contact***	34 (69.4%)	64 (23.1%)
Target dispersion***	30 (61.2%)	69 (24.9%)
Typed written contact***	20 (40.8%)	207 (74.7%)
Letter correspondence case**	26 (53.1%)	93 (33.6%)
E-mail correspondence case***	12 (24.5%)	143 (51.6%)
Internet correspondence case	11 (22.4%)	41 (14.8%)

*$p \leq 0.05$, **$p \leq 0.01$, ***$p \leq 0.001$.

Significantly more days elapsed before approachers were reported to law enforcement than before non-approachers were reported [$F(1,317) = 10.118$, $p = 0.002$]. Approachers made significantly more phone contacts with their target [$F(1,324) = 40.979$, $p < 0.001$], public statements about their target [$F(1,324) = 10.405$, $p < 0.001$], and total contacts with their target [$F(1,324) = 24.280$, $p < 0.001$]

Table 5. ANOVA analyses of contact variables across approach behavior groups. Values are presented as mean (SD)

Contact variables	Group	
	Approach ($n = 49$)	Non-approach ($n = 277$)
Days elapsed before contact reported**	67.42 (152.18)	22.19 (73.09)
Telephone contacts***	1.78 (3.09)	0.20 (1.14)
Public statements***	0.20 (0.87)	0.02 (0.18)
Object left or delivered	0.10 (0.51)	0.07 (0.52)
Total pre-referral contacts	3.51 (10.01)	2.10 (11.32)
Total post-referral contacts***	14.45 (14.21)	3.86 (9.71)
Total overall contacts***	17.96 (18.41)	5.96 (15.20)
Average correspondence length***	4.99 (6.75)	2.34 (5.06)

*$p \leq 0.05$, **$p \leq 0.01$, ***$p \leq 0.001$.

than non-approachers. Lastly, approachers wrote significantly longer correspondence (in number of pages) than non-approachers [$F(1,324) = 10.292$, $p = 0.001$]. See Table 5 for additional information regarding related contact behaviors.

A wide range of content themes and language variables were analyzed to determine if there were features of a subject's written correspondence that tended to be associated with problematic approach behavior. A full depiction of the content and language variables can be seen in Table 6. Approachers were significantly more likely than non-approachers to mention a meaningful anniversary [$\chi^2(1) = 6.826$, $p = 0.009$], to reference major life stressors [$\chi^2(1) = 13.696$, $p < 0.001$], to express specific plans

Table 6. Chi-square analyses of content variables across approach behavior groups

Content and language characteristics	Group	
	Approach ($n = 49$)	Non-approach ($n = 277$)
All capitalized words*	29 (59.2%)	118 (42.6%)
Writing in margins***	20 (40.8%)	30 (10.8%)
Disorganization in writing***	19 (38.8%)	45 (16.2%)
Anniversary reference**	18 (36.7%)	55 (19.9%)
Major life stressors***	28 (57.1%)	83 (30.0%)
Specific plans expressed*	29 (59.2%)	116 (41.9%)
Demands made*	30 (61.2%)	119 (43.0%)
Mention of weapon	16 (32.7%)	85 (30.7%)
Antisocial or violent themes	22 (44.9%)	92 (33.2%)
Reference to ideological cause	7 (14.3%)	22 (7.9%)
Group identification	4 (8.2%)	21 (7.6%)
Help-seeking requests***	28 (57.1%)	57 (20.6%)
Entitlement claims***	13 (26.5%)	15 (5.4%)
Reference to financial difficulty***	16 (32.7%)	30 (10.8%)
Personal themes***	34 (69.4%)	72 (26.0%)
Help-offering statements	4 (8.2%)	20 (7.2%)
Love or sexual language	2 (4.1%)	24 (8.7%)
Religious content	15 (30.6%)	75 (27.1%)
Human rights issues**	9 (18.4%)	17 (6.1%)
Patriotism references***	8 (16.3%)	10 (3.6%)
Corrupt government claims	19 (38.8%)	95 (34.3%)
Military concerns**	17 (34.7%)	49 (17.7%)
Domestic policy issues***	29 (59.2%)	87 (31.4%)
Foreign policy issues	17 (34.7%)	77 (27.8%)
Government themes**	34 (69.4%)	135 (48.7%)
Racist language	8 (16.3%)	35 (12.6%)
Sexist language	1 (2.0%)	11 (4.0%)
Harassing, degrading, insulting	25 (51.0%)	150 (54.2%)
Obscene language	12 (24.5%)	70 (25.3%)
Angry language	10 (20.4%)	53 (19.1%)
Worked up about complaint	32 (65.3%)	207 (74.7%)
Threatening language	24 (49.0%)	166 (59.9%)
Target themes	32 (65.3%)	178 (64.3%)
Devaluation of target	11 (22.4%)	88 (31.8%)
Dehumanization of target*	2 (4.1%)	48 (17.3%)
Euphemistic labeling	3 (6.1%)	24 (8.7%)
Expressed intent to approach***	14 (28.6%)	31 (11.2%)
Reference to injustice or rights violated***	25 (51.0%)	64 (23.1%)
Perception of personal danger	7 (14.3%)	28 (10.1%)
Sense of urgency or imminence	7 (14.3%)	39 (14.1%)

*$p \leq 0.05$, **$p \leq 0.01$, ***$p \leq 0.001$.

relating to future contact $[\chi^2(1) = 5.050, \ p = 0.025]$, and to make demands $[\chi^2(1) = 5.597, \ p = 0.018]$. Approachers were significantly more likely than non-approachers to make help-seeking requests $[\chi^2(1) = 28.880, p < 0.001]$ and to reference personal themes $[\chi^2(1) = 35.731, \ p < 0.001]$. Approachers were also more likely to express claims of entitlement $[\chi^2(1) = 23.644, \ p < 0.001]$ and to make reference to enduring economic or financial difficulty $[\chi^2(1) = 16.360, \ p < 0.001]$.

Approachers were significantly more likely than non-approachers to address human rights issues $[\chi^2(1) = 8.485, \ p = 0.004]$, to speak of patriotism $[\chi^2(1) = 12.906, p < 0.001]$, and to express concern over military issues $[\chi^2(1) = 7.456, \ p = 0.006]$. Approachers were also significantly more likely than non-approachers to reference domestic policy issues $[\chi^2(1) = 14.014, \ p < 0.001]$ and to focus on government themes $[\chi^2(1) = 7.112, p = 0.008]$. Approachers were significantly more likely to express intent to engage in approach behavior $[\chi^2(1) = 10.570, \ p = 0.001]$ and to speak about having their rights violated or suffering an injustice $[\chi^2(1) = 16.348, \ p < 0.001]$. There were no significant differences between approachers and non-approachers in the presence or absence of language that was harassing, insulting, degrading, obscene, angry, or threatening.

A multiple regression model significantly differentiated between problematic approach and non-approach behavior with ten contributing predictors $[R^2 = 0.313, F(10,315) = 14.332, \ p < 0.001]$. Seven out of the ten predictors were significantly correlated with problematic approach behavior and can be seen in Table 7. The variables that were significantly correlated with problematic approach behavior included a history of threat/harassment criminal charges, a history of violent criminal charges, greater total number of contacts overall, multiple methods of contact, expressed intent to approach, personal themes, and government themes. Two variables were nearly significantly correlated: indicators of serious mental illness ($p = 0.058$) and letter correspondence type ($p = 0.061$). All nine of the significant or nearly significant predictors had a positive relationship with the criterion, indicating that each of these predictors was more likely to be present for approachers than non-approachers.

Table 7. Summary of multiple regression model predicting approach behavior

Predictor variable	Descriptive statistics		Multiple regression weights	
	Mean	SD	b	β
Threat/harassment charges	0.41	1.38	0.038	0.146**
Violent criminal charges	0.58	1.78	0.029	0.145**
Total number of contacts	7.76	16.27	0.002	0.102*
Multiple methods of contact[a]	0.30	0.46	0.139	0.178***
Letter correspondence type[a]	0.37	0.48	0.069	0.093
Personal themes[a]	0.33	0.47	0.110	0.144*
Government themes[a]	0.52	0.50	0.099	0.139**
Demands made[a]	0.46	0.50	−0.045	−0.063
Expressed intent to approach[a]	0.14	0.35	0.169	0.163***
Serious mental illness[a]	0.45	0.50	0.079	0.109

*$p \le 0.05$, **$p \le 0.01$, ***$p \le 0.001$.
[a]Coded as 1 = yes and 0 = no.

DISCUSSION

Demographics and Unknown Identity

Approachers and non-approachers were evaluated on several basic demographic variables, including age, gender, and ethnicity. Both approachers and non-approachers were equivalent on age. There were no significant gender or ethnicity differences between approachers and non-approachers when analyses were conducted only on known subjects. Compared with age or gender, the ethnicity of an individual is more likely to be absent or unknown in public records due to increased difficulty in identifying ethnicity, categorizing ethnicity, and/or a lack of reporting. Approachers were less likely to remain unknown because they tended to identify themselves in their correspondence and because there is more investigative response and protective activity generated when a subject engages in problematic approach behavior. Based on these findings, no understanding of approachers versus non-approachers can be arrived at through an examination of only the simple demographic characteristics.

Criminal History

Approachers had significantly more past criminal activity than non-approachers across all types of criminal charges, as well as a history of threat assessment activity (outside the USCP jurisdiction) with other law enforcement or protective agencies. These findings are consistent with past research in the risk assessment, stalking, and threat assessment fields, which has nearly universally identified a history of aggressive, violent, or criminal behavior to be predictive of future dangerousness (Borum, Swartz, & Swanson, 1996; Douglas & Webster, 1999; Harris & Rice, 1997; Lyon, Hart, & Webster, 2001; Melton, Petrila, Poythress, & Slobogin, 1997; Monahan, 1992, 2006; Monahan & Steadman, 1994; Quinsey, Harris, Rice, & Cormier, 1998), of violence toward private stalking victims (Brewster, 2000; Harmon, Rosner, & Owens, 1998; Morrison, 2001; Mullen, Pathé, Purcell, & Stuart, 1999; Rosenfeld, 2004; Rosenfeld & Harmon, 2002; Sheridan & Davies, 2001), and of problematic approach behavior (Baumgartner, 2003; Scalora et al., 2002, 2003a). The finding that approachers were more likely to have a history of threat assessment activity with other law enforcement agencies confirms the need for agencies at all levels to share information across jurisdictional boundaries on subjects known to make inappropriate contact or to engage in bizarre or harassing behavior toward various targets.

Approachers were more likely than non-approachers to have a history of substance use/abuse, to possess firearms, and to be familiar with guns. This trend is concerning for law enforcement as it suggests that the individuals most likely to show up in person and engage in problematic, disruptive, or violent action are also more likely to possess or be familiar with firearms, as well as to have current or past substance use difficulties which commonly impair inhibition, judgment, and reasoning. The current findings reaffirm the utility of using past criminal and offense-related activity as a risk factor for predicting problematic approach behavior. Further, these findings support the use of past or current substance abuse as a risk factor, which has been identified in the risk assessment literature as a predictor of future dangerousness and in the stalking literature as a predictor of violence toward private stalking victims, but has not yet been replicated in the public figure threat assessment literature.

Mental Illness

Indicators of serious mental illness were significantly more likely to occur in approachers than in non-approachers. These findings are consistent with earlier risk assessment and threat assessment research which has found serious mental illness, especially psychotic disorders, to be predictive of future dangerousness or problematic approach behavior (Baumgartner, 2003; Borum et al., 1996; Douglas & Webster, 1999; Harris & Rice, 1997; Lyon et al., 2001; Melton et al., 1997; Monahan, 1992, 2006; Monahan & Steadman, 1994; Quinsey et al., 1998; Scalora et al., 2002, 2003a).

In the current study, 83.7% of approachers and 38.6% of non-approachers showed indicators of serious mental illness. It remains unclear exactly why there appears to be an increased prevalence of serious mental illness in approachers. While a substantial portion of approachers demonstrate psychotic symptomatology, not all persons with serious mental illness should be assumed to engage in approach behavior. In the study by Scalora and colleagues (2003b), subjects with serious mental illness were equally as likely to engage in approach behavior as subjects without serious mental illness. Ultimately, it is not the mere presence of mental illness that increases the level of threat posed by an individual, but rather a particular subset of serious mental illness symptoms: specifically, threat/control-override symptoms and psychotic symptomatology that directly relates to the subject's grievance and targeting.

Contact Behaviors

Approachers were more likely to utilize multiple methods of contact outside of the written domain (e.g., telephone calls) and to engage in target dispersion (i.e., to identify or make contact with multiple targets). These findings are consistent with results throughout past research in the field of threat assessment toward public figures (Dietz et al., 1991a; Fein & Vossekuil, 1999; Scalora et al., 2002, 2003a; Schoeneman et al., 2006). In addition, approachers made a greater number of overall contacts with their target(s). These findings strengthen the notion that greater intensity of effort is a robust predictor of problematic approach behavior. These results further suggest that it is more challenging to predict future approach behavior based only on a single contact, or based only on the subject's initial contact with their target.

Approachers were significantly more likely to have made contact with their target prior to the index correspondence that instigated a report to law enforcement. Furthermore, a greater number of days elapsed before approachers' correspondence was reported to law enforcement than before non-approachers' correspondence was referred. Taken together, this implies that approachers are corresponding with their public figure targets long before staff are reporting them to law enforcement, despite the fact that the USCP regularly conducts detailed trainings with the offices of their protectees about what to report and when to report it. There could be dual reasons for this observed delay. Approachers may initially be engaging in more appropriate written contact that gradually becomes disruptive, and this insidious onset of disturbing content leads to a delay in reporting. On the other hand, approachers may correspond inappropriately all along, but the quality of the early content is somehow less disconcerting to staff.

Law enforcement and threat assessment professionals cannot evaluate and manage a disruptive individual if they are not made aware of the threat. Furthermore, the delay in reporting means that when these subjects eventually do come to the attention of law enforcement, security personnel are working to protect the target with much less preparation time. Thus, both law enforcement agencies and the people they are relying on to make reports of suspicious or inappropriate correspondence should engage in regular and repeated face-to-face trainings to examine criteria for reporting, to encourage an ongoing and open working relationship, and to probe for any recent activity that may not have been referred for threat assessment.

Thematic Content and Language Characteristics

Approachers were more likely to make reference to a meaningful anniversary, to express specific plans relating to future contact or approach, to make demands, and to write about major life stressors. These findings portray approachers as more likely to be explicit and specific about both past dates and future intended actions. Approachers appear to be experiencing more stress in their lives, or at least to be talking about it more readily. Stress is a risk factor for violence in many contexts, including future general dangerousness (Borum et al., 1996; Douglas & Webster, 1999; Harris & Rice, 1997; Lyon et al., 2001; Melton et al., 1997; Monahan, 1992, 2006; Monahan & Steadman, 1994; Quinsey et al., 1998) and targeted problematic approach behavior (Borum et al., 1999; Fein & Vossekuil, 1998; Fein, Vossekuil, & Holder, 1995).

Current analyses revealed that approachers were significantly more likely than non-approachers to focus on personal themes and to make help-seeking requests. This is consistent with a number of past studies on targeted violence toward public figures (Baumgartner et al., 2001; Scalora et al., 2002, 2003a; Schoeneman et al., 2006). Elaborating on the personal themes, approachers were also more likely to express entitlement claims (e.g., social security benefits) and to talk about enduring economic or financial difficulty. As such, it appears that a range of personal themes may serve as risk factors for problematic approach behavior, including both real problems that spark a rational quest for assistance and delusional problems that lead to an irrational pursuit for help from the target.

Approachers also were more likely than non-approachers to focus on government themes. This finding was unexpected given that a majority of the past threat assessment literature utilizing samples of subjects targeting political officials has found a focus on government or political themes to be unrelated to approach behavior (e.g., Baumgartner et al., 2001; Dietz et al., 1991a; Scalora et al., 2002, 2003a). It is possible that the current sample, which included substantial amounts of electronic correspondence not available in previous studies, included more governmental themes than past corresponders, thus swinging the utility of political themes toward the approachers and away from the non-approachers. It is also possible that the current sample intertwined the two grievance areas, for example by claiming that government policies were at fault for the subject's personal issues and complaints. It should be emphasized that a substantial portion of both groups (the approachers and the non-approachers) addressed governmental themes, suggesting that these issues are of concern to a wide range of individuals.

Disruptive Language

The current study found no significant differences between approachers and non-approachers across an array of disruptive and aggressive language characteristics, including language that was threatening, harassing, degrading, insulting, obscene, angry, racist, sexist, or sexualized. This is consistent with past threat assessment research, which has found no relationship between aggressive language and approach behavior (e.g., Baumgartner et al., 2001; Scalora et al., 2002, 2003a). It is worth noting that a little more than 50% of the entire sample used threatening or harassing language. As such, aggressive language cannot be relied upon as an indicator of future approach behavior. This type of aggressive language often causes the most concern among targets, sometimes leading to an overreliance on overtly threatening or aggressive statements in which staff less frequently report correspondence that is merely inappropriate but not overtly hostile. However, as can be seen from the current findings and the body of threat assessment literature, approachers are equally as likely to use or not to use threatening language, and threatening language is equally as likely to be used by subjects who approach as by those who do not.

Multivariate versus Univariate Analyses

Multivariate analysis offered a more robust examination of the characteristics predictive of problematic approach behavior. The multivariate analyses confirmed many of the relationships observed through the independent univariate analyses, but highlighted the variables that offered the greatest distinguishing power when considered in combination. The overall purpose of the multiple regression was to arrive at a model that provided the greatest amount of predictive utility while utilizing the most stream-lined grouping of predictor variables.

Though it is interesting to determine which variables are the most powerful predictors, the independent univariate analyses identifying individual variables related to problematic approach are potentially the most valuable for protective security activity because they identify the greatest number of related contact behaviors that can be examined by law enforcement. In other words, law enforcement must be able to consider and examine the widest possible range of behavioral characteristics in the course of their investigative and protective duties. In the field of threat assessment, when working with limited or continuously unfolding information, it is more useful to have a broad range of potentially relevant and concerning behaviors to look for rather than to have a concise model containing only a handful of predictor variables. It is for this operational reason that all univariate results were independently analyzed and presented.

Study Limitations and Future Directions

All of the data for the current project were drawn from law enforcement case files. This ensures that the variables are operationally relevant but also provides some study limitations. A subject only exists in the USCP's case files if they have been reported. As such, the results of the current study only represent the body of subjects that passed the

threshold for reporting in the eyes of each political official and staff member. It is possible that there are other subjects who should be coming to the attention of law enforcement for disruptive contact behavior or for problematic approach behavior that have not been reported. Further, the information contained in the case files is based on the observations and analysis of trained law enforcement personnel and government staff. As such, this information cannot be verified or tested for reliability.

In the current project, psychotic symptomatology (e.g., delusional beliefs) was measured in part based on behavioral and linguistic indicators of serious mental illness in combination with other sources. Subjects were not always formally diagnosed by a mental health professional. It is recognized that there may be some concern within the mental health field about not utilizing a standardized measure, clinical judgment via formal clinical interview, or mental health records to make determinations of psychotic symptomatology and mental illness status. However, the information available in the USCP's case files frequently contained corroborative reports regarding the subject's mental health difficulties, and/or the subject's communications contained self-reported information regarding their mental illness. More importantly, judgments regarding the presence of psychotic and delusional symptomatology were based on the facts available to protective security personnel at the time of the case, further maintaining the operational applicability of the research findings.

Additional research is needed about the interrelationship of serious mental illness and problematic approach behavior, including if psychotic symptoms were active during approach and if delusions were directly related to the approach. Further, the current research does not answer, nor could it answer, underlying causes of subject behavior. It would benefit the field of threat assessment to gain a deeper understanding of the interrelationship between cognition, symptomatology, contact behavior, and lack of contact behavior in subjects with serious mental illness and subjects without psychopathology. This future research would likely require a longitudinal approach in which the subject is interviewed periodically, both during times of heightened contact behavior and during times of non-contact, with a specific set of questions aimed to gather a specific set of information.

The current study did not evaluate contact behavior according to a longitudinal, time-ordered, sequence-of-event methodology. Future research examining contact behavior and risk factors across time, with an emphasis on the sequence and windows surrounding specific types of contact and problematic approach behavior, would greatly benefit law enforcement in understanding both triggering and mitigating factors. This is especially relevant given that past literature has considered approach behavior to occur after a series of preparatory actions and that violence occurs after an incremental work-up over time (Borum et al., 1999; Fein & Vossekuil, 1998; Fein et al., 1995; Staub, 2002; Waller, 2002).

The current project examined threats posed toward political officials, specifically Members of the United States Congress; thus, the results can be generalized to all Congressional Senators and Representatives. Additional research is required to determine if the presently identified risk factors for problematic approach behavior hold true for other types of political officials (e.g., executive and judicial branch officials, state and local level officials) and for other types of targeted individuals (e.g., workplace employees, medical professionals, celebrities, private citizens). Future research should examine the use of content analysis in threat assessment and elaborate upon the content and language characteristics presently identified. Finally, research is needed to foster a

more comprehensive understanding of the motivations, planning and preparation, and overall behavioral patterns, of subjects who engage in inappropriate contact and problematic approach behavior toward targeted individuals.

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