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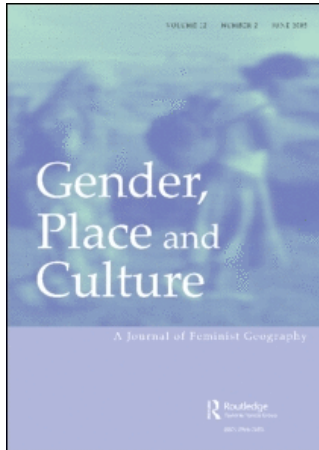
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## Gender, Perceptions of Safety and Strategic Responses among Ohio University Students

SARAH STARKWEATHER

**ABSTRACT** *Research on perceptions of safety in public spaces must seek a balance between paying careful attention to the effects of gender, while challenging simplistic notions of a dichotomy of fearful women and fearless men. In a study of perceptions of safety among undergraduate students at the Ohio State University, this principle was addressed by decentering fear as the object of study and focusing instead on the various strategies that women and men use to manage their perceptions of safety—including avoidance of certain situations (for example, being in specific places, or going outside after dark), precautionary measures, and assertions of confidence. Questionnaire responses and follow-up interviews indicated that most students usually felt safe on campus; however, women were more likely than men to have felt unsafe. Students used a wide range of strategies to make themselves feel safer, from staying home after dark to formulating plans for self-defense to telling themselves they had nothing to fear. While a focus on strategic responses illuminated areas of overlap in men's and women's experiences, gender differences were also striking. Men are unlikely to rely on avoidance strategies, while some women view self-imposed restrictions on activity as normal and necessary. Furthermore, many men are unwilling or unable to relate to questions about fear and safety, explicitly or implicitly reinscribing fear as a 'women's issue'.*

**KEY WORDS:** Gender; safety; fear; public space; campus

### Introduction

This article is an attempt to think through a well-worn, familiar question that lies at the core of much feminist geographic work: how can we foster a useful and responsible discussion of gender differences by negotiating a position somewhere between rejection and reification? This is a question that cannot be answered definitively; instead, we must keep returning to it, picking at it, cycling back, trying to approach it from new directions. Above all, we must continually work through its implications for our research. In designing a study of gender and perceptions of safety among undergraduate students at The Ohio State University,

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I worried about how to responsibly and sensitively conduct research on the gendered dimensions of fear. I sought a conceptual framework that would pose an inherent challenge to the simplistic idea of a dichotomy of fearful women and fearless men, while remaining sensitive to the effects of gender.

By decentering fear as the object of study, and focusing instead on the various strategies that individuals (both women and men) use to manage their perceptions of safety, I attempted to build these principles into my research project. I constructed a typology of these strategies that includes a wide range of behavior, from the avoidance of fearful situations, to precautionary measures, to assertions of confidence. This approach rejects the notion that fear is a 'women's issue', while still allowing for a gender-sensitive analysis. Indeed, my findings suggest that although there is overlap between the types of strategies used by women and by men to manage perceptions of safety, women are more likely to enact strategies that restrict their access to public space.

### *Gendered perceptions of safety in public spaces*

Past research identifies numerous factors that shape individuals' perceptions of safety in European and North American public or quasi-public spaces. The design of the built environment can have a profound effect. For example, Jack Nasar and his colleagues have identified the importance of micro-level site characteristics that create places of concealment, determine openness of prospect, and affect the likelihood of escape (Fisher & Nasar, 1992; Nasar & Fisher, 1992, 1993; Nasar & Jones, 1997). Signs of 'disorder' in the landscape, such as litter or graffiti, have also been shown to make people feel less safe (Alvi *et al.*, 2001; Box *et al.*, 1988). The behavior of other people can also be a significant determinant: numerous studies have suggested that social incivilities such as catcalls or other harassment can make people feel less confident in public space (Day, 1999; Gardner, 1994, 1995; Macmillan *et al.*, 2000; Stanko, 1996a). Ironically, well-intentioned communications in the form of warnings from loved ones, law enforcement officials, and others can have the same effect (Stanko, 1996b; Valentine, 1989, 1992). Furthermore, a wide range of personal characteristics including age, physical (dis)ability, social class, income level, race, and past victimization appear to be correlated with perceptions of safety (Austin *et al.*, 2002; Box *et al.*, 1988; Pain, 2001; Smith, 1987). However, gender is portrayed in the literature as the single most important determinant of perceptions of safety. The primacy of gender is sometimes made explicit, as in Rachel Pain's (1997, p. 417) claim that 'amongst all the factors which have been noted to increase fear of crime,... being female has the largest effect' (see also Alvi *et al.*, 2001). It is also communicated implicitly—for example, in the preponderance of research on perceptions of safety that focuses on women alone.

Proceeding from decades' worth of observations that women are more likely to report feelings of fear in public space,<sup>1</sup> many researchers examine the reasons for and material consequences of women's fear in particular. Women's fear is often explained in terms of gender role socialization: girls and women are encouraged to view public spaces and strange men with suspicion by their parents' warnings, movies and television programs, sensationalist news reports, and safety advice from public agencies (Haskell & Randall, 1998/1999; Pain, 1991; Stanko, 1996b; Valentine, 1989, 1992). Women's fear has also been traced back to the fear of rape: some have argued that the fear of sexual assault is ever-present, 'shadowing'

women's fear of all other types of personal crime (Ferraro, 1995, 1996; Gordon & Riger, 1989). Whatever the reasons for women's fear, scholars have pointed out that fear can have a significant negative impact on women's quality of life because it restricts their spatial freedom (Day, 1994; Haskell & Randall, 1998/1999; Keane, 1998; Pain, 1991; Valentine, 1989). Wekerle and Whitzman (1995, p. 3) describe potential consequences for women's social lives, education, and employment:

[Women] stay home at night; they don't take night courses, they don't go to the grocery store; they don't visit friends or socialize. Many women will not take jobs that keep them out at night. As a response to fear of crime a large number of women isolate themselves in their own homes.

Such restrictions reinforce gender disparity in access to opportunities and the 'situational disadvantage' that characterizes women's relationship to public space (Gardner, 1994, 1995).

### *Strategies for making women (feel) safe*

Therefore, research and activism focusing on women's safety and women's fear offers valuable insight into women's lives, while highlighting a significant social problem: the exclusion of women from spaces deemed unsafe and, therefore, their exclusion from full participation in urban life. Ideas about how to address this problem have emphasized two broad types of strategy: the collective and the individual-focused. At the community level, the effects of women's fear can be mitigated through the adoption of a woman-centered approach to planning in which women are consulted about their responses to urban environments (for example, through the use of safety audits) and their needs form the explicit basis for innovations in design and policy (Andrew, 2000; City of Toronto Planning and Development Department & Wekerle, 1992; Pickering, 1995; Trench & Jones, 1995; Trench *et al.*, 1992; Wekerle & Whitzman, 1995; Whitzman, 1992).

Meanwhile, at the individual level, many women adopt strategies that allow them to feel safer in a given situation. It is this individualized type of strategizing that I focus on in this article. *Avoidance strategies* involve staying away from places or situations that make one feel unsafe—for example, never going downtown after dark. *Precautionary strategies* are used to compensate when one does venture into a space or situation that makes one feel unsafe. Some common precautions are traveling with one or more companions, carrying a weapon or a cell phone, and learning self-defense moves (Haskell & Randall, 1998/1999; Riger & Gordon, 1981; McDaniel, 1993). Work on avoidance and precautionary strategies is strongly associated with the tradition of studying women's fear, inasmuch as it has tended to emphasize the limitations, sacrifices, and adjustments that women accept in order to make themselves feel more safe.

Despite the importance of research that thinks through ways of making women feel safer in public spaces, a focus on women's fear may inadvertently affirm a simplified view of the relationship between gender and perceptions of safety. It runs the risk of defining fear in public space as a 'woman's problem', thereby shoring up an erroneous gendered dichotomy in which fearful women are posited in opposition to fearless men. Such a perspective has undesirable implications for both women and men, since for both restrictive gender roles are reinforced and the range of acceptable responses to potential threats are severely limited: female fear is normalized and even encouraged (for example, through exhortations to be

hyper-cautious), while the possibility of male fear is discounted and its expression devalued, even made an object of scorn.

Essentialist notions of the relationship between gender and perceptions of safety have been undermined by researchers who have effectively broken down the dichotomy of fearful women/fearless men. For example, Hille Koskela (1997) has recounted ways that women can be brave and 'bold' in public space. Arguing that 'it is not an inborn quality of women to be fearful' (p. 311), she discussed how her female respondents made themselves feel safe by reasoning that there was nothing to be afraid of; by taking possession of public space and feeling at home in it; and by trusting in their ability to deal with difficult situations. Addressing the other side of the coin, Day *et al.*, (2003) explore the contours of men's fear in public space and relate it to challenges to masculinity. Such work clearly demonstrates the value of a nuanced approach to examinations of the relationship between gender and perceptions of safety. More importantly, it highlights the question of how we might conceptualize this relationship in a way that rejects essentialism, while at the same time acknowledging the importance of gender in influencing perceptions of safety.

#### *Managing perceptions of safety: a continuum of strategies*

The question of how to conduct research on gendered perceptions of safety in a way that would continue to challenge the fearful women/fearless men dichotomy while paying careful attention to the real effects of gender loomed large as I began to sketch the outlines of a research project that would examine the experiences of undergraduate students at the Ohio State University. Although excellent precedents of such research certainly existed (most notably the work by Koskela and Day *et al.* discussed in the previous section), I remained slightly dissatisfied with their approaches. Their focus on the experiences of *either men or women* seemed to hark back to the problematic dichotomy they were attempting to unsettle. Even as I read these strong challenges to the idea that fear is a 'women's problem', old assumptions were ever-present, determining the very shape of the argument against them.

My research was structured by two principles that I hoped would allow me to go a little further in troubling the relationship between gender and perceptions of safety. First, I would ask exactly the same questions of both men and women—drawing out the influences of gender, but without presupposing differences between men and women. Second, and more significantly, I would conceptualize both 'fearful' behavior (such as staying home after dark) and 'fearless' behavior (such as walking down a dark alley alone) throughout the course of my research as outcomes of the same process: the choice of a strategy for managing one's perceptions of safety. Focusing on the full range of ways that individuals can make themselves feel safe encourages a more inclusive analysis because it does not depend upon distinguishing between those who are afraid and those who are not.

Thus my object of research became, rather than fear or lack of it, the *strategies* that individuals adopt in order to manage their perceptions of safety. In this category I included all responses to the (intentionally broad) question 'What do you do to make yourself feel safer?'—including descriptions of avoidance strategies, precautionary strategies, and boldness strategies. On the surface, boldness may seem to have little in common with strategies of avoidance and precaution. However, I am inclined to interpret each of the three as different

methods of managing perceptions of safety (or, put another way, of avoiding fear). My hope was that conceptualizing this continuum of strategies would allow me to work at breaking down the distinction between those who are afraid and those who are not. Attending to a broad spectrum of strategies allows me to consider the full range of women's and men's experience vis-à-vis perceptions of safety in public space, without passing over those whose behavior does not seem to fit gendered norms or having to classify them as 'exceptions to the rule'.

### **Setting and Methods**

The majority of the literature on women's safety and perceptions of safety in the developed world is focused, implicitly or explicitly, on the urban experience (although see, for example, Panelli *et al.*, 2004). This reflects the concentration of population—and many key background issues in studies of perceptions of safety, such as crime, presence of strangers, and complexity of social interaction—in urban centers. Many scholars have further narrowed their scope to the urban university campus environment (e.g. Day, 1994, 1995, 1999; Kelly & DeKeseredy, 1994; Mehta & Bondi, 1999; Nasar & Jones, 1997; Osborne, 1995). There is an increased awareness of crime and fear of crime as a serious problem in college and university communities, which challenges the portrayal of universities as 'bastions of safety' (Klodawsky & Lundy, 1994, p. 134) which are not subject to the problems of society at large (Ibid.; Currie, 1994, p. 25). In the United States, the federal government mandates attention to safety on campus through the Campus Security Act, which was passed in 1990 in response to the highly publicized rape and murder of a female student at Lehigh University. This legislation, which is also called the Clery Act, requires most post-secondary institutions to notify the campus community of incidents of crime, and to publish and distribute annual crime statistics (Office of Postsecondary Education, 2003; Security on Campus, 2003). This requirement has contributed to the status of student safety as a key policy issue for university administrators, while increasing the data available for researchers.

The research setting for my study was the Columbus campus of the Ohio State University. Columbus had a metropolitan population of over 1.5 million people in 2000, the third largest urban agglomeration in the state after Cleveland and Cincinnati (US Census Bureau, 2001). The Ohio State campus is in an urban setting, located about two and a half miles from the city's central business district and adjacent to its busiest street. I focused on the undergraduate student body, which accounts for almost 75% of the students on campus (36,049 out of 48,477 in autumn of 2001). The undergraduate population at Ohio State's Columbus campus is 49.5% female and mainly white (only 16.1% of undergraduates are non-international people of color). Over three-quarters of all students (including undergraduate, graduate and professional) are from Ohio, about 13% are from elsewhere in the United States or its territories, and about 9% are from other countries (Office of the University Registrar, 2001).

I collected data between October 2001 and May 2002, in two stages. First, I distributed self-administered three-page questionnaires filled out by students in 11 randomly selected undergraduate General Education Curriculum (GEC) classes. All undergraduate students at Ohio State are required to take a certain number of GEC classes from each of several categories in order to graduate, and enrollment in these courses is typically diverse in terms of chosen major and class

year. As shown in Table 1, the resulting sample was reasonably representative of the available demographic data about the student body (one key disparity was that freshmen and sophomores were over-represented and seniors under-represented).

Of 426 questionnaires distributed, 417 were completed and returned. This high response rate (98%) was likely due to two main factors: first, I was allowed access to students during class time, which created a captive audience of sorts; second, I asked students to fill out the questionnaires right away, and collected them about 15 minutes after their distribution. In the second stage, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 24 people (14 women and 10 men, all white, ranging in age from 18 to 38) who, after having participated in the questionnaire component, indicated their willingness to be interviewed.<sup>2</sup> Interviews lasted from 30 to 90 minutes. Both questionnaires and interviews asked questions about how safe students felt on campus, what specific factors made them feel safe or unsafe, whether safety concerns limited their activities, and what strategies they used to make themselves feel safe.

### Students on Perceptions of Safety

Two closed questions on the questionnaire assessed respondent's perceptions of safety on campus: 'In general, do you think the Ohio State campus is safe?' and 'Do you ever feel unsafe on campus?' Table 2 summarizes the responses. These are two different aspects of an individual's perception of safety, and a person's response to one does not necessarily predict their response to the other. For example, of the 166 people (39.8%) who reported that they had never personally felt unsafe on campus, only 31 described campus as 'very safe' in general. Almost three-quarters of the students who completed a questionnaire said that, in general, the Ohio State campus was 'somewhat safe' or 'very safe', while only 2% said it

**Table 1.** Selected characteristics of sample compared to total undergraduate population (%)

	Sample	Population
<i>Year of study:</i>		
Freshman	36.5	22.4
Sophomore	27.8	21.9
Junior	20.1	21.6
Senior	15.6	30.0
<i>Place of residence:</i>		
On campus	42.4	unknown
Off campus, in U-district	34.8	unknown
Outside U-district	22.8	unknown
<i>Gender:</i>		
Female	47.7	49.5
Male	50.1	50.5
<i>Race/ethnicity:</i>		
White	78.2	78.7
Asian/Pacific Islander	7.7	5.5
Black/African American	4.1	8.1
Hispanic	1.0	2.1
Other	5.3	5.2
No answer	3.8	0.0

**Table 2.** Responses to two questions about perceptions of safety on campus

In general, do you think campus is safe?			Do you ever feel unsafe on campus?		
Response:	%	N	Response:	%	N
Yes, very safe	9.6	40	No, never	39.8	166
Yes, somewhat safe	64.3	268	Yes, rarely	47.0	196
No, somewhat unsafe	18.7	78	Yes, often	7.2	30
No, very unsafe	1.9	8	Yes, always	0.5	2
Unsure	5.5	23	Unsure	5.5	23
Total	100.0	417	Total	100.0	417

was 'very unsafe'. With respect to their personal experience, almost 40% said they never felt unsafe while 47% said they rarely did.

Given these results, which indicate that most respondents felt safe most of the time, is it worth our while to delve further into questions about these students' perceptions of safety? My answer was and remains 'Yes', for three reasons. First, the fact that over half of respondents admitted that they had, at some point, felt unsafe on campus indicates that perceptions of safety should not be overlooked as determinants of campus experience. Second, while only one in five questionnaire respondents said that feeling unsafe had restricted their on-campus activities, I believe this to be an underestimate. Some negative responses to the question 'Has feeling unsafe ever prevented you from going somewhere you wanted to go or doing something you wanted to do?' were ambiguous. For example, one respondent wrote, 'No, unless I would be by myself' (21-year-old white female). This sort of response illustrates the extent to which avoidance strategies should not be taken for granted, but rather be viewed as strategic. Third, because my focus was on individuals' strategies for managing their own perceptions of safety—rather than on figuring out who was afraid—I wanted to know more about those who said they *were not* afraid as well as those who said they were.

### Gender and perceptions of safety

What do the results of this study tell us about gender and perceptions of safety? The women who participated were by no means universally fearful; indeed, many reported that they *did* feel safe on the Ohio State campus. Approximately equal percentages of women and men thought that campus was generally safe (72.3% and 75.2%, respectively), and roughly the same proportion of women as men said that they never or rarely felt unsafe themselves (85.9% versus 87.6%). However,

**Table 3.** Gender differences in perceptions of safety on campus

In general, do you think campus is safe?			Do you ever feel unsafe on campus?		
Response:	Men %	Women %	Response:	Men %	Women %
Yes, very safe	14.4	4.0	No, never	53.6	24.6
Yes, somewhat safe	60.8	68.3	Yes, rarely	34.0	61.3
No, somewhat unsafe	18.2	19.1	Yes, often	4.3	10.6
No, very unsafe	0.5	3.5	Yes, always	1.0	0.0
Unsure	6.2	5.0	Unsure	7.2	3.5

some gender differences become apparent when looking at the extreme categories in Table 3: only 4% of women described campus as generally 'very safe' compared to 14.4% of men, while less than half as many women as men reported that they never personally felt unsafe (24.6% and 53.6%, respectively).

Thus there is evidence that, while gender is by no means a perfect predictor of perceptions of safety, women students in aggregate felt less safe on the Ohio State campus. Many students, both women and men, portrayed this relationship as causative rather than simply correlative, by explicitly identifying gender as a reason for feeling safe or unsafe:

Being a young girl in the city or on campus makes me feel more likely to be a victim of a crime. (21-year-old white female)

[I feel safe because] I am a male and I do not look like a target. (22-year-old white male)

The perception that women are more common 'targets' of crime is a myth: actually, men are more likely to be victims of crime (Ferraro, 1995; Stanko, 1992). However, this misperception appears to be common among the students who participated in this research, and exerts a strong influence on their perceptions of safety on campus. In an interview, Katie<sup>3</sup> (20-year-old white female) elaborated on the idea that women—especially women on their own—are more likely targets because they are, and are perceived to be, weaker:

'Cause I'm a girl, people who would be out there to rob somebody would probably target people like females 'cause they look smaller and weaker and stuff like that. So that's obviously something I think about... am I just with my roommate, or am I with my boyfriend? I would look more intimidating if I had him next to me instead of her—he would be stronger than her, would be able to beat off an attacker quicker and stuff like that.

The assumption that men have greater physical strength than women was commonly used to explain why women were perceived to be more likely targets of interpersonal crime. However, in some cases assertions of biological differences clearly served as convenient shorthand for learned gender roles. For example, despite describing himself as 'pretty small', Andrew (18-year-old white male) went on to explain that women were justified in feeling less safe than men because 'they're not very strong, so it's easier to take advantage of them' (interview). He saw himself as a relatively weak individual, compared to 'the average male', yet simply being a man made him feel safer. Some women also expressed confidence in their physical ability; however, such confidence in women was typically related to having acquired self-defense skills or being in particularly good physical condition. For example, one questionnaire respondent said she felt safe on campus because she has 'taken good self defense courses' (20-year-old white female). She had to earn the right to feel confidence in her physical abilities.

### Strategies for Managing Perceptions of Safety

As discussed above, I approached the concept of strategic management of perceptions of safety by including avoidance and precautionary strategies in a typology with Koskela's (1997) notion of boldness, and viewing each as positions across a continuum rather than as radically different responses. In this way,

I attempted to emphasize that each is simply an option that one can choose to deploy as a means of managing perceptions of safety. However, while these three types of strategies are not entirely inconsistent, neither are they equivalent. They differ greatly in terms of the limitations that are imposed on everyday activities. Each type of strategy can make people feel safer, but this result is accomplished in different ways.

#### *Avoidance strategies*

Avoidance strategies involve people isolating themselves from places or situations that they perceive to be unsafe. Therefore, when people engage in avoidance strategies they are by definition accepting some degree of limitation on their access to space. In this study, the most common avoidance strategy among questionnaire respondents was to avoid going out alone, especially after dark. Of those who answered the question 'If you ever feel unsafe, what makes you feel that way?', 56.5% mentioned being alone and/or being outside at night, making comments such as 'I won't go to the library after dark, actually I don't go *anywhere* after dark' (35-year-old white female). Some people also avoid certain campus spaces: for example, many participants expressed reluctance to walk through Mirror Lake Hollow, a part of campus that is generally perceived to be unsafe because it is wooded and not visible from the street. Thus there are two main types of avoidance strategies, temporal and spatial. These two types are often merged, by people who avoid certain places at certain times: 'Well, some places I never go at *night*. So, anything during the day I feel safe, but I'd never go through the alleys at night, I wouldn't consider that' (interview with Julie, 21-year-old white female). Temporal avoidance strategies were more likely to be absolute than spatial avoidance strategies: virtually every respondent who said they avoided certain places qualified their statement by saying that they only did so at night. In general, avoidance strategies were more often adopted by women than by men: of the 67 respondents who volunteered that they used avoidance to feel safer, only 3 were men.

#### *Precautionary strategies*

Those who adopt precautionary strategies do venture into potentially threatening spaces, but attempt to somehow compensate for a perceived lack of safety. Precautionary strategies can allow students to have significantly greater access to campus spaces than avoidance strategies; therefore, for many people precautionary strategies are seen as a preferable alternative to avoidance strategies. For example, when interview participant Tanya (19-year-old white female) wants to go out at night she first attempts to find someone to go with her; only if that fails does she adopt the avoidance strategy of staying home. The types of precautions that can be adopted vary widely, from increasing awareness of one's surroundings, to carrying weapons, to traveling with others. Unlike avoidance strategies, precautionary strategies were commonly reported by both women and men. Several male interviewees who scoffed at the idea of staying home due to safety concerns freely admitted to taking certain precautions in traversing public space. Thus avoidance is often interpreted as weakness, while precautions are seen as a sign of competence.

Being aware of one's surroundings can make people feel safer for several reasons. First, as Andrew and Diana indicate in the quotes below, heightened

awareness makes people feel more capable of perceiving threats and responding to them. It can also give a sense of control over a situation—a sense of being active, rather than a passive target.

I think maybe more than anything what makes me feel safe is the fact that I'm not walking around looking at the ground, I'm actually looking out for where people are and possible places where people could be hiding should they want to jump me. (interview with Andrew, 18-year-old white male)

Well, I tend to like be very conscious of everything—like, be really ready. Like if someone touched my shoulder I think I would just take off running. (interview with Diana, 22-year-old white female)

In pamphlets distributed to all registered students, the campus police emphasize the importance of being aware of what's going on around you and making eye contact with those you pass, warning that 'anyone walking alone with a timid appearance and a preoccupied mind may be a target for a rapist' (Ohio State University Police Department, n.d.).<sup>4</sup>

Another precautionary strategy, closely related to increased awareness, is plan-making. The majority of interviewees reported that they had thought through what they would do in response to being apprehended or attacked:

*Sarah:* So you've got a plan, then, of what you would do?

*Nancy* (38-year-old white female): Oh, yeah. My hand's always on the control [of my motorized wheelchair] and I'm always looking around, you know. This chair can back up or go forward pretty quickly, so I could pretty much take someone by surprise.

In formulating her plan, Nancy foresaw a way of using her wheelchair—a symbol of her physical disability—to her advantage, although she expressed doubts about her ability to defend herself. Tracey's plan involved using keys as a defensive tool. Hard, sharp, and readily available, keys are often suggested by self-defense instructors, family members, and other sources as potential weapons for women who are attacked.

*Tracey* (20-year-old white female): When I'm walking I always carry my keys in my hand, like between my fingers, or at least in my hand. You can poke their eye, or their whatever, to get them away and then you can run.

*Sarah:* So you have a plan of what you'd do...

*Tracey:* Oh, yeah... *oh*, yeah.

Each voicing an emphatic 'Oh, yeah', Nancy and Tracey are representative of the large proportion of women interviewed for whom such plan-making is commonplace. Most had clearly spent a lot of time playing 'What if?' While fewer of the men I spoke with claimed to have engaged in this practice, some do make plans:

Not in every given moment, but like I said when I get into a situation—for example, a place that's not extremely well lit or any other situation where I do feel more threatened than at other times, then I do kind of look for a... maybe escape routes or places where it would be easy to run or whatnot, just to make some kind of plan should something happen. (interview with Patrick, 19-year-old white male)

For some people, plans involved the use of mace or pepper spray—or, more rarely, weapons (either actual or, as in the case of Tracey's keys, improvised). Almost all of the 15 people who reported carrying such items were women.<sup>5</sup> In these cases, the objects were typically seen as compensation for women's perceived physical disadvantage. For example, Julie believed that if she were attacked the mace she carried would be her biggest advantage: her plan was to 'just spray the mace and run' (interview, 21-year-old white female).

### *Boldness strategies*

While precautionary strategies allow access to spaces that might otherwise be avoided, they are not entirely liberating. Because they are predicated on the assumption that certain places or situations are dangerous, precautionary strategies may serve as a constant reminder of a perceived threat. In contrast, boldness strategies as described by Koskela (1997) entail the presumption of safety: people acting boldly do not limit their activities in response to perceptions of safety, because they feel that they *are* safe. Past research that considers only avoidance and precautionary strategies neglects the possibility that individuals may deal with fear by rejecting or overcoming it.

One of the boldness strategies identified by Koskela was reasoning, which involves people 'convincing themselves that they should not be afraid but should keep their courage' (1997, p. 305). Several of the students I interviewed reported using this strategy when they found themselves starting to feel apprehensive. For example, reasoning that 'even though I feel that way, nothing's going to happen' allowed Diana (interview) to control her reaction to feeling unsafe. Reasoning can even eliminate fear entirely, as Michelle suggested when recounting an experience of momentary fear: 'Yeah, I was like, "Why are you so scared? There's nothing out here. There's... oh, look, there's a tree!" That sort of thing, and I just laughed at myself and kept walking' (interview with Michelle, 22-year-old white female). The image of a woman laughing at danger is rarely, if ever, encountered in the literature on fear of crime. However, for people like Michelle it can be an important strategy for managing perceptions of safety.

Another type of boldness was some students' confidence in their ability to take care of themselves. For Diana, this confidence was the result of her successful handling of previous threatening situations. She had learned to rely on the 'good sense' that had served her well in the past:

If I've ever been in a situation I seem to have gotten out OK so... I take myself out of situations that I think are going to harm me. So I feel like I know... you know, I feel like I have a good sense about things like that.  
(interview with Diana, 22-year-old white female)

Because she believed that she could easily recognize and defuse a threat, she was not on a constant lookout for dangers. Others, like Russ, were confident despite never having been tested:

Oh, yeah, I know what to do if someone asks for my wallet ... they're welcome to it. I've played a bit of hockey, I have a pretty decent idea of

how to defend myself. I don't normally do it, I'm not a violent kind of guy, but ... (interview with Russ, 19-year-old white male)

Russ was sure that he would be able to successfully apply his knowledge ('I know what to do...') and his skills (the physicality of an athlete) in a threatening situation.

### A 'Women's Issue'?

A focus on the strategies that individuals use to make themselves feel safer may make it easier to see the similarities between men's and women's attempts to manage their perceptions of safety. However, while respondents of both genders reported reliance on precautionary strategies and spoke of confidence as a useful tool, almost all of the respondents who reported reliance on avoidance strategies were women. Even more troubling than this, perhaps, was the absence of expressions of frustration or feelings of exclusion in response to this. In fact, avoidance was often portrayed by women as a normal, rational and even necessary part of life. When I asked three female interviewees whether they felt like they ever 'miss out on anything' as a result of employing avoidance strategies, they all dismissed the idea that limitations on their activities should be a point of concern:

*Janice* (25-year-old white female): I don't personally feel like I miss out on anything.... I think it's pretty easy once you get into the habit of just making sure that you're going to be safe: trying to find somebody to go out with you, or be home when you get home, just watch out for you.

*Jennifer* (20-year-old white female): It's just something you kind of learn—you just accept it.... I mean, you can work around it.

*Tracey* (20-year-old white female): I do [miss out on some things] but it's not a big deal usually.... [I]t's just a natural reaction.

For these women, dealing with limitations imposed by perceptions of safety is 'easy', just something to 'accept', and 'no big deal'. The socialization of women includes pressure to live by the maxim 'better safe than sorry', thereby casting avoidance strategies as positive choices for women.

Meanwhile, many male respondents shrugged off the idea that issues related to safety and fear had anything to do with them. When asked 'What makes you feel safe?' 56.9% of men who filled out a questionnaire did not bother to answer (compared to 22.6% of women), while another 20% simply provided responses like 'Just because' or 'I don't know'. Some even employed a stereotypical male bravado:

I'm 19, I'm invincible, nothing is going to happen to me. (19-year-old white male)

[I'm] a badass. (19-year-old black male)

One interpretation of such assertions is that these men's experiences vis-à-vis safety concerns are categorically different from those of women who, as this study and others indicate (e.g. Gardner, 1995; Stanko, 1996b; Valentine, 1992), are rarely able to avoid thinking about it altogether. Do such responses bring us back again to a highly gendered bimodal distribution—not between fearful women and fearless men, perhaps, but between women who are obliged to think strategically

about safety and men who are not? Or is it appropriate to view women's and men's boldness as different in prevalence and extent, but not as different in kind?

## Conclusion

In the early stages of this project, I anticipated that a focus on a broad spectrum of individual-level strategies for managing perceptions of safety might, in some small way, discourage my respondents (and myself) from re-inscribing assumptions about the gendered nature of fear in public space. While it is difficult to measure the extent to which it did so, there was some evidence that an emphasis on strategic responses facilitated a convergence in ways of talking about men's and women's perceptions of safety. For example, as discussed above, some men and women made similar observations about their use of precautionary strategies (particularly heightened awareness and plan-making) and about using boldness as a way of overcoming fear in situations that might make some feel uncomfortable. Common discursive elements, such as the value of vigilance and the possibility of relying on one's reason and experience to overcome fear, create a useful space from which to trouble oversimplified notions of the relationship between gender and fear. At the same time, there were very apparent gender differences which remind us that resistance to the characterization of fear in public spaces as a 'women's problem' must not blind us to the cases where fear does cause problems for women.

I believe that sustained attention to individuals' strategic management of perceptions of safety can enhance our understanding of the relationship between gender and fear. This conceptual framework allows us to examine a wide range of behaviors under the same rubric, and avoids the categorization of individuals as either fearful or unafraid. The study described here, while having some application to urban life more generally, is somewhat limited in its generalizability due to the relative homogeneity (in terms of age, race, and educational attainment, at least) of the population of interest, and its findings must be viewed as specific to the North American urban campus context. Perhaps future research that adopts a similar approach will replicate, expand upon, or counter the present findings. However, any work that attempts to make strategies for the management of perceptions of safety the object of study—rather than fear itself—should attend to the problem of what should be termed 'strategic'. What is the difference between *unconscious* boldness and boldness as *strategy*, how might we differentiate between them, and what is the significance of this difference for understanding the gender dimensions of fear in public spaces?

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## Notes

1. The results of the annual General Social Survey between 1973 and 2002 show that in the United States, women are consistently more likely than men to report feeling afraid to walk alone at night in their own neighborhood. In 1973, 59% of women were afraid to do so, compared to 20% of men. In 2002 these figures were 47% and 19%, respectively (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2003.)

2. As this group was neither randomly selected nor vetted for representativeness, interviewees' responses should be viewed as useful signposts rather than easily generalizable results.
3. All interviewees are identified by pseudonyms.
4. This is a good example of safety advice that is directed toward women, thus reinforcing the notion that safety in public space is primarily a 'women's problem'. By raising the specter of the stranger rapist, the author of the pamphlet suggests that it is 'any woman' (rather than the gender-neutral 'anyone') who is endangered if she does not pay attention to her surroundings.
5. The only exceptions were several men whose comments hinted of swagger rather than concern for personal safety—for example, a man who said he keeps a 'set of brass knuckles in [his] pocket' (21-year-old white male).

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## ABSTRACT TRANSLATION

**Género, percepciones de la seguridad y las respuestas estratégicas entre universitarios en Ohio**

**RESUMEN** Investigaciones sobre las percepciones de seguridad en los espacios públicos deben buscar un equilibrio entre poner mucha atención a los efectos de género mientras que cuestione las ideas simplistas de una dicotomía de mujeres temerosas y hombres intrépidos. En un estudio sobre las percepciones de seguridad de universitarios en la universidad de Ohio, este aspecto se examinó a través de descentrando el miedo como el objeto del estudio, y en su lugar enfoca en las distintas estrategias que utilicen mujeres y hombres para manejar sus percepciones de seguridad – incluyendo evitar ciertas situaciones (por ejemplo, estar en lugares específicos o estar afuera después del anochecer), tomar medidas preventivas, y hacer asertos de confianza. Las respuestas de los cuestionarios y entrevistas complementarias indicaron que la mayoría de los universitarios sintieron seguros en el campus. Sin embargo, fue más probable que sientan las mujeres menos seguras que los hombres. Los universitarios utilizaron una gran variedad de estrategias para que sientan más seguros, desde quedarse en casa hasta formar planes de autodefensa y diciéndose a sí mismos que no haya nada de temer. Mientras el enfoque en respuestas estratégicas iluminó que algunas experiencias de mujeres y hombres coincidieron, las diferencias entre los géneros también llamó la atención. Es poco probable que dependan los hombres en estrategias de evitar, mientras las mujeres consideran que las restricciones de sus actividades sean normal y necesario. Además, muchos de los hombres no quieren o no puedan relacionar con cuestiones de miedo o seguridad, y como resultado reinscriben explícitamente o implícitamente el miedo como “un asunto femenino”.

**PALABRAS CLAVES:** Género; miedo; espacio público; el campus