Confrontation and loss of control: Masculinity and men's fear in public space

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Abstract

Existing research typically examines fear in public space from women's perspectives. To date, environment–behavior researchers have largely overlooked men's fear in public space, and the role of masculinity in shaping men's perceptions of fear and safety. This paper investigates the intersections of traditional, dominant masculinity—or masculinism—and men's fear in public space, based on interviews with 82 undergraduate men students. Masculinism features qualities such as control, competition, aggression, and physical strength. We argue that, for many men, public spaces and situations that challenge this masculinist identity may generate fear. Similarly, spaces and situations that promote feelings of safety do so, in part, by bolstering this identity. We employ the lens of masculinity to explore men's feelings of fear of the unknown, heightened awareness and safety, fear of confrontation, and safety in numbers. Conclusions examine implications for the development of masculinity and recommendations for future research.

1. Introduction

Fear in public space has prompted considerable scholarly research in recent years. Such research often highlights women's experiences of fear (cf. Gordon & Riger, 1989; Valentine, 1990, 1992; Pain, 1991; Bowman, 1993; Gardner, 1994, 1995; Koskela, 1997; Day, 1999a, b; Mehta & Bondi, 1999). Older women, Hispanic and black women, and lower income women are identified as especially fearful (Gordon & Riger, 1989). Researchers' emphasis on women's fear makes good sense, since women report higher levels of fear in public space, compared with men (US Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2000). Furthermore, fear of crime and harassment significantly and negatively impacts women. Though women face considerable risk of violence (including sexual assault and domestic violence) in the "private" spaces of home, women's fear often emphasizes public spaces, and especially the outdoors (Day, 2001). Fear restricts women's freedom and enjoyment in public space and limits their opportunities and convenience (Deegan, 1987; Gordon & Riger, 1989; Day, 1997).

The concept of "fear" in public space is intimately intertwined with our ideas of what it is to be a woman in the contemporary USA. Fear shapes many women's gender identities by prompting women to adopt restrictive social norms to preserve personal safety. At the same time, traditional female gender identities may reinforce women's fear in public space by emphasizing women's vulnerability and dependence, and by supporting the idea of public spaces as dangerous for women (Gardner, 1989; Bowman, 1993; Day, 1994).

To date, environment–behavior research on fear in public space has largely ignored men and male gender identities. What is identified as fear inducing—crime, stranger assault, rape—are typically those situations and settings that impact women specifically or those that affect both women and men. Men's fear—or lack of it—is accepted as "normal" and remains unmarked by gender (Goodey, 1997), while women's fear is problematized. Men in the USA do not report high levels of fear in public space. In 2000, only 23% of American men reported that they felt afraid to walk alone in their neighborhood at night, compared to 52% of American women (US Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2000). And yet, American men are more likely than women to be victims of crimes in public space (Baumer, 1978; DuBow, McCabe, & Kaplan, 1979; Harris & Miller, 2000). The

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disjuncture between women's higher fear and men's higher victimization in public space is known as the "fear paradox" (Koskela, 1997). As Koskela rightly notes, this situation is only paradoxical if one assumes that fear follows directly from actual crime and not, as we and many others argue, from more complex relationships between factors such as crime, reactions to crime and violence, crime reporting, myths about violence and crime, and the construction of male and female gender identities. Thus, the fact that many men in the USA describe themselves as fearless in public space surely derives (at least in part) from how masculinity is constructed.

This paper attempts to expand our understanding of fear in public space by considering how masculinism shapes men's feelings of fear and safety in public space, based on findings from interviews with 82 men college students in Irvine, California. By "public space," we refer to a loose category of everyday, publicly accessible places (after Franck & Paxson, 1989; Koskela, 1997). These spaces are both publicly and privately owned. Our intention is to begin to unpack the ways in which men's construction of gender shapes their perceptions and experiences of public space. We argue that, for many men, public spaces and situations that challenge a masculinist identity may generate fear. Similarly, spaces and situations that promote feelings of safety may do so, in part, by bolstering masculinist identity.

2. Background on masculinity

Masculinity, like femininity, is socially constructed (Messner, 1998). The meanings of masculine identities are prescribed by time, place, race/ethnicity and sexuality (Carrigan, Connell, & Lee, 1985; Morgan, 1992; Espiritu, 1998; Marable, 1998; Thompson, 1998; Zinn, 1998). Traditional, dominant masculinity—or "masculinism"—is one of a range of male gender identities. Masculinism refers to a particular masculine identity that supports patriarchy: in sum, an "ideology that privileges males and certain masculine values, meanings and culture over females and feminine values, meanings and culture" (Sanders, 1996, p. 11). Masculinism is also theorized as "hegemonic" masculinity (Connell, 1995; Goodey, 1997; Kimmel & Messner, 1998; Laberge & Albert, 1999). Key attributes associated with masculinism include control, competition, aggression, and physical strength, among others. Later sections of this paper examine masculinism in relation to men's fears in public space.

Masculinist identity is most readily available to the most privileged group of men—straight, white, middle-class, able-bodied and young. Men who share only some or none of these characteristics—gay or transgendered men, men of color and those who are biracial or multicultural—reap less privilege from masculinist identities. Varied masculinities shape men's experience of fear in public space in different ways. For example, several authors address the intersection of black masculinity and fear of hate crimes and of police brutality (cf. Kelley, 1988; Feagin, 1991; hooks, 1995). Likewise, authors discuss the intersections of queer identities with men's perceptions of danger and fear in public space, such as through fear of "gay bashing" and fear among transgender and transsexual individuals of not "passing" (cf. Adler & Brenner, 1992; Namaste, 1996).[1]

Privilege adheres to those groups in society who experience the least resistance in managing surrounding social, political, and economic contexts (Hill, 2001), because these contexts are constructed around the group's values, norms, and behaviors. The specificity of these contexts—that they are not "neutral"—becomes obscured, allowing the adeptness of a privileged group to be inaccurately attributed to the group's perceived physical, mental, or emotional competence. Masculinism is the most privileged of masculine identities, though not all men who are young, straight, white and so on experience privilege similarly or in all circumstances. Men may not consistently "practice" masculinity from the vantage point of masculinism, yet men frequently reap benefits from the hierarchical system of masculinities, relative to the overall subordination of women (Goodey, 1997). At the same time, masculinism oppresses men by ensuring that men adopt its trappings or endure challenges to their "manliness."

Though it shapes men's behaviors and perceptions, masculinity—and especially masculinism—is often characterized by invisibility. Masculine perspectives and behavior frequently remain unmarked (see also Frankenberg (1993) on the invisibility of whiteness). The most privileged men (straight, white, and so on) are often unconscious of themselves as explicitly gendered. They may view individuals in terms of biological sex, and yet be unaware of how the social meanings attached to sex shape their own experiences (Kimmel & Messner, 1998).

Critical theorists have usefully conceptualized masculine and feminine gender identities as "performance," which involves

> reiterating or repeating the norms by which one is constituted: it is not a radical fabrication of a

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[1] Given the nature of the interviews in the present study (i.e. brief and conducted by a stranger), it was not possible to explore fear and sexual identity directly, except in the few interviews where respondents raised the topic of sexual identity themselves. One interview question asked men how they felt their sexual and/or racial identities might impact their feelings of fear or safety in public space. Most men elected not to discuss sexual identity in responding to this question. In addition, the limited number of black men students at UCI and in this sample limited the direct exploration of black racial identity in this study.