Explaining the Fear of Crime Among College Women, in their own Words

Carly M. Hilinski
Grand Valley State University

Kindsey E. Pentecost Neeson
Grand Valley State University

Heather Andrews
Grand Valley State University

Abstract

Women have consistently been shown to have higher levels of fear of crime than men, despite their lower victimization risks for all crimes except rape and sexual assault. A number of different explanations have been offered to explain why women are so fearful. The current research sought to examine support for the shadow of sexual assault hypothesis among college women using responses to open-ended survey items asking college women to explain their fear of crime. The results suggest great variety in the explanations of why women are fearful. Although some support for the shadow of sexual assault hypothesis was found, many other explanations for women's fear emerged as well.

Key Words: fear of crime, shadow of sexual assault hypothesis, college women

INTRODUCTION

During the past 50 years, fear of crime has emerged as a popular topic of academic study. Researchers have examined how various factors impact fear of crime and have tried to determine who is most fearful, why they are fearful, and what can be done to educate the public about their actual victimization risk, which is often much lower than their fear of crime (see Hale, 1996 for a thorough review of fear of crime research). The body of research that has emerged from this line of inquiry has indicated that there are certain groups in society, including women, the elderly, individuals of low socioeconomic status, minorities, and urbanites that have greater levels of fear of crime than other groups in society (Hale, 1996). Across fear of crime research, women have received a great deal of attention from researchers attempting to unravel why certain groups in society are more fearful of crime. Women are particularly interesting because they often report levels of fear of crime that are two to three times higher than men’s, despite the fact that they have a lower victimization risk than men for almost all nonssexual crimes (Reid & Konrad, 2004).

There are numerous explanations for this paradox. These explanations are based on women’s physical vulnerability and inability to physically prevent an attack and the difficulties in recovering from an attack (Baumer, 1978; Hindelang, Gottfredson, & Garofalo, 1978; Keane, 1995; Parker & Ray, 1990), the underreporting of certain crimes that are typically committed against women, such as rape, sexual assault, and intimate partner violence (Skogan, 1987), women’s role in a feminist society as a “helpless victim” (Goodey, 1997; Hollander, 2001), and lastly, the idea that women are so fearful of rape and sexual assault that they become more fearful of other crimes (Ferraro, 1995, 1996). This last explanation is the framework for the current research, and the argument centers around the idea that because any type of victimization (i.e., larceny, robbery, robbery, assault) could potentially result in rape or sexual assault, women are more fearful of all crimes, despite their lower victimization rates (Ferraro, 1995, 1996).

This explanation, coined the shadow of sexual assault hypothesis by Ferraro (1995), has been tested and supported among women in the general population in the United States as well as college women. These studies have consistently reported quantitative results that have supported this explanation and indicated that fear of rape and sexual assault was a consistent significant predictor of fear of other crimes, including larceny, burglary, robbery, and both simple and aggravated assault. What these studies have not reported, however, is any type of qualitative analysis examining the shadow of sexual assault hypothesis. The current research attempts to fill this gap through content analysis of college student responses to an open-ended survey item asking them about their perceptions of their fear of rape and sexual assault and the impact that this fear has on their fear of other crimes. The article proceeds with a review of the literature, focusing specifically on fear of crime and gender, explanations for women’s heightened levels of fear, and the shadow of sexual assault hypothesis. The methods for data collection also are discussed, and are followed by results from the data analysis that includes verbatim narratives taken directly from the student responses. The article concludes with a discussion of the findings along with some cautious policy implications and directions for future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Fear of Crime and Gender

One of most salient individual characteristics impacting fear of crime is gender (Ferraro, 1995; Reid & Konrad, 2004). Women consistently have been found to have higher levels of fear of crime across contextual settings and operational definitions (Sacco, 1990) and the vast majority of research that has examined fear of specific types of victimizations has found that there are significant gender effects for all types of victimization as well as for overall measures of fear of crime (e.g., Bankston & Thompson, 1989; Ferraro & LaGrange, 1992;
Women’s reported levels of fear of crime have been found to be two to three times higher than the level of fear of crime reported by men, despite the fact that men have a higher risk of victimization for almost all nonsexual violent crimes, including robbery and aggravated assault (Reid & Konrad, 2004). There are only two crimes for which women have higher victimization rates than men: rape and sexual assault.

Several explanations for women’s heightened fear of crime have been offered. One explanation is that women’s higher levels of fear stem from their inherent vulnerability, meaning that they might be less able to defend themselves in the event of an attack and they might not have the financial resources to replace any property lost as a result of the attack (Baumer, 1978; Hindelang et al., 1978; Tulloch & Jennett, 2001). Smith, Torstensson, and Johansson (2001) have argued that this alleged vulnerability has both an objective and a subjective interpretation. Objectively, women generally tend to be less able to defend themselves due to lack of self-defense training and their physical size. At the subjective level, women might be more at-risk than men because of subtle or blatant reminders of their vulnerability and their “lower” status in a patriarchal society through verbal and visual harassment.

Another explanation for women’s higher levels of reported fear of crime is rooted in a feminist framework. Feminist criminologists have explored the ways in which the gender gap in fear of crime might “reflect women’s location in a gendered world” (Stanko, 1995, p.46). This line of feminist thought argues that gender plays a role in all aspects of our daily lives including how we act as workers, parents, and even criminals (Steffensmeier & Allan, 1996). Thus, gender might also structure how an individual’s behavior as a crime victim plays out (Hollander, 2001). By subscribing to these assumptions, women might have increased levels of fear because they believe that if they are ever in a situation where they are being victimized that they are going to be a helpless victim with no mechanisms for self-defense.

A final explanation for women’s elevated levels of fear of crime, and the explanation that is the crux of the present research, emerges from the belief that any personal victimization against a woman has the potential to escalate into rape or sexual assault (Ferraro, 1996; Warr, 1984). Research has shown that women’s rape and sexual assault rates are ten times higher than men’s, and as a result of this elevated risk of victimization, they are more likely to be fearful of rape or sexual assault (Ferraro, 1995, 1996). Several studies have concluded that women in various age groups fear rape more than any other crime, including murder (Ferraro, 1996; Hickman & Muehlenhard, 1997; Warr, 1984).

The Shadow of Sexual Assault Hypothesis

Warr (1984) argued that there are perceptually contemporaneous offenses that people might associate with other victimizations (e.g., burglary of one’s home while present could lead to assault or murder). Ferraro (1995, 1996) expanded Warr’s (1984) idea of perceptually contemporaneous offenses to what he labeled the “shadow of sexual assault hypothesis.” He argued that, for women, rape is a perceptually contemporaneous offense to most offenses (Ferraro, 1995, 1996). Ultimately, Ferraro (1995, 1996) argued that women’s fear of rape and sexual assault is one of the most salient factors influencing their fear of other crimes.

Several studies have found support for this argument across different populations, including women in the general population and college women. Ferraro (1996) first tested his hypothesis among women in the general population in the United States. He found that women were more afraid than men of all crimes and that fear of rape and sexual assault had a positive relationship with fear of other crimes (including robbery, burglary, and larceny/theft), indicating that as women’s fear of rape and sexual assault increased, their fear of other crimes also increased.

Several other researchers also have tested Ferraro’s hypothesis, but among college women. Examining fear of crime, and particularly the role that fear of rape and sexual assault plays in impacting fear of other crimes, is particularly relevant among college women due to their increased risk of being the victim of rape and sexual assault. Research has indicated that college-aged women (i.e., those 18–25) have the highest rates of rape and sexual assault victimization. Further, the National College Women Sexual Victimization (NCWSV) study found that the rate of completed rapes on college campuses is about 36 attempted or completed rapes per 1,000 students. For a college or university with 10,000 students, this meant that over 350 rapes per academic year could potentially occur on that campus. Across the other types of sexual victimization measured in the NCWSV study, the rates of victimization ranged from 9.5 (for threat of rape) to 66.4 per 1,000 (for attempted sexual contact without force) (Fisher, Cullen, & Turner, 2000). Taken together, these results suggest that rape, both attempted and completed, and sexual assault are prevalent on the college campus.

Fisher and Sloan (2003) were the first replicate Ferraro’s research among college women. They found support for his argument, and in particular, found that the positive relationship between fear of rape and sexual assault was strongest when considering crimes that involved face-to-face contact between the victim and the offender, such as robbery and assault. Wilcox, Jordan, and Pritchard (2006) also examined the shadow hypothesis among college women, although they differentiated between fear of crime committed by a stranger and fear of crime committed by an acquaintance. Their findings indicated further support for Ferraro’s (1995, 1996) argument as well as Fisher and Sloan’s (2003) research. They found that fear of both stranger and acquaintance perpetrated rapes were associated with fear of other crimes; however, the only two crimes that they examined were stalking and physical assault. Thus, they were not able to examine the impact of fear of rape and sexual assault on a wider spectrum of crime types. Despite this limitation, their research does support the argument that fear of rape and sexual assault increases women’s fear of other crimes.

Further support for the shadow hypothesis also was found by Hilinski (2009). In her study of college women, she found that women were more fearful of theft, robbery, burglary, and simple and aggravated assault than men; further, when the correlates of fear were examined, the results indicated that a greater fear of rape and sexual assault corresponded with a greater fear of other crimes. Hilinski further expanded on previous research by examining the shadow of sexual assault hypothesis across victim and offender relationship (i.e., did the relationship between the victim and the offender mitigate the relationship between fear of rape and sexual assault and fear of other crimes). She found that, even when the offender was an acquaintance, there was still a significant, positive relationship between women’s fear of rape and sexual assault and their fear of other crimes.
Although there have been several quantitative studies examining the shadow of sexual assault hypothesis, no research to date has explored the shadow of sexual assault hypothesis through qualitative data. The current research attempts to fill this gap by conducting content analysis of women’s responses to open-ended survey items asking them about the relationship between their fear of rape and sexual assault and their fear of other crimes. It is important to analyze this hypothesis using qualitative data because it allows for a more in-depth understanding about the unique characteristics of this relationship and how college women perceive this relationship.

METHODS

The goal of the current research was to examine the shadow of sexual assault hypothesis in college women’s own words. To do this, data gathered from open-ended survey items were analyzed. The data were gathered through an Internet survey administered to college students enrolled at a medium-sized public university in the northeast United States (hereafter referred to as State University) during fall 2006 and spring 2007. A total of 3,500 randomly selected male and female students were invited, via e-mail, to complete the survey; of these students, a total of 375 completed the survey, which focused on fear of crime among college women. The data analyzed here, however, were gathered from responses to two open-ended items that were specifically directed towards women only. These two items asked women to describe their fear of rape and sexual assault in relation to their fear of other crimes, included theft, robbery, simple assault, and aggravated assault. Respondents were given an unlimited amount of space to answer the questions, so they were able to fully articulate their thoughts with no limitations on the number of words or characters they could enter.

Ultimately, 123 women responded to these items. Responses to these items were coded using an open coding strategy. The initial codes included themes from the shadow of sexual assault hypothesis, however, any emergent themes were also coded, and these codes were applied iteratively to the data. This coding process is discussed in more detail below; further, the most recurring themes are presented and illustrated with verbatim narratives drawn directly from the responses.

FINDINGS

The goal of the current research was to examine the shadow of sexual assault hypothesis through the words of college women. The data analyzed were provided by 123 college women in response to the question “If you are a woman, please explain whether you think that your fear of rape or sexual assault makes you more afraid of other crimes, such as theft, robbery, or assault.” The original focus of the research was the shadow of sexual assault hypothesis; thus, this open-ended item was intended to garner responses from women about their agreement or disagreement with this idea. However, upon analysis of the data, it became very clear that there were many different explanations for women’s fear that emerged from the women’s responses to this question, not just agreement or disagreement with the shadow of sexual assault hypothesis. Thus, the initial coding incorporated themes from the shadow of sexual assault hypothesis, including responses that supported and refuted the idea that a woman’s fear of rape and sexual assault makes her more fearful of other crimes. Additionally, preliminary analyses also revealed emergent codes, supporting other explanations for women’s fear, derived from the student responses that were then iteratively reapplied to the data.

The women who responded to the open-ended items ranged in age from 18 to 49 years (the mean age was 21.9 years) and the vast majority were Caucasian. Most of these women lived off-campus, with roommates, were employed, were less likely to participate in extracurricular activities but were more likely to participate in other activities and entertainment functions, including attending parties and frequenting bars.

The Shadow of Sexual Assault Hypothesis

Overall, the majority of the women who responded to this question identified some level of support for the idea that their fear of rape or sexual assault impacts their fear of other crimes. One of the most frequent responses from women was that their fear of rape or sexual assault made them more afraid of other crimes. They reported that if they were being raped or sexually assaulted, they believed that there was a good chance of their attacker committing other crimes. For example:

• Fear of sexual assault absolutely increases my fear of other crimes because it makes me view every crime as a personal, invasive act, whether the crimes actually are or not.
• Yes it makes me more afraid because if someone were to sexually assault me I would think they would also not be afraid to also steal from me.
• Because if someone is going to rape or sexually assault me, there wouldn’t be anything holding them back from theft, robbery, or assault. Sexual attacks seem more serious and frightening than other kinds of crime.
• Fear of rape or assault makes me more afraid of other crimes because either way, someone is taking advantage of me, especially if I’m weaker.
• Fear of theft/robbery/assault definitely make me more fearful of sexual assault because if those “less personal” crimes happen in the first place, the chances that the criminal behavior escalates into an unplanned (on part of the criminal) sexual assault increases simply because I am a woman who has now been placed in the vulnerable position of victim.
• If you’re more apprehensive about one crime occurring, then you are naturally more apprehensive about other crimes.

Some responses, however, did not support the assertion that fear of rape and sexual assault is related to fear of other crimes. Some women strongly disagreed with this relationship, often on the grounds that the crimes were completely unrelated or were motivated by different needs (i.e., theft and robbery are motivated by a financial need, while assault might be motivated by anger or a need for power). For example:

1. The full text of these items reads:
If you are a woman, please explain whether you think that your fear of rape or sexual assault makes you more afraid of other crimes, such as theft, robbery, or assault.
If you are a woman, please explain whether you think your fear of theft, robbery, and assault makes you more afraid of rape or sexual assault.

2. These narratives are verbatim transcriptions that include both spelling and grammatical errors present in the student responses.
Victimization and Fear

In addition to the responses that indicated support or nonsupport for the shadow of sexual assault hypothesis, there were other emergent themes discovered in the data that provide some further explanation of women’s fear of crime. One theme that emerged, not surprisingly, was that prior victimization also played a role in the construction of women’s fear. Women who had been victimized once were often more fearful because they had firsthand knowledge of physical, emotional, and psychological damage that resulted from the victimization experience, and were aware that the crime could happen again.

- Yes, because the experience itself left me personally jittery more about life in general for a while.
- Having been recently sexually assaulted I’m afraid of everything. I don’t leave my room and frequently miss class because I’m afraid to go out.
- Having been recently sexually assaulted I’m always afraid it will happen again.

Conversely, some women stated that their prior victimization experiences had prepared them for the possible victimization for any crime, and are because of this, they are less afraid.

- No, I do not think my fear of rape makes me more afraid of other crimes.
- I do not think rape or sexual assault makes me more afraid of other crimes because those are crimes that may be committed for different reasons. People steal or rob others for money and they don’t commit assault because they want money. They do it because they are mad or upset or drinking.
- If those types of crimes are occurring it is usually monetarily based...rape is a crime of power and personal violation.

Women’s Vulnerability and Fear

Another theory that has been offered to explain why women are so much more fearful of crime than men is based on the typical size differences between men and women, and the inability of a woman to defend herself against a, presumably larger, man. This argument, rooted in a feminist framework, underlies the patriarchal society that we live in. In all aspects of society, feminist scholars argue that women are viewed to be of a lesser status than men. This status difference is evident in the roles women play as victims—women are unable to defend themselves against bigger, stronger men who are trying to hurt them. For example, women stated:

- Just knowing that the men are going to be a lot bigger than the women that they would try to rob and what not.
- No, it doesn’t make me more afraid. Same as the first question. Just being a woman makes you more afraid of things.
- Most men are bigger than me so there is no way I could defend myself against a man who is attacking me. This makes me afraid of crime because men commit the most crimes.
- I have a tiny stature and lack of strength. I think it would be easier for a guy to try either one of those crimes (rape and sexual assault) on someone like me. I am fearful of walking alone at night sometimes.

Interestingly, however, some women stated that they were not fearful of crime because they were prepared to defend themselves if they should ever be victimized and took precautions to protect themselves.

- I don’t think it makes me more afraid because I feel I know how to handle myself in a situation like that.
- For some people it may but for me personally not it doesn’t. Fear is the main reason most assaults and crimes happen. A criminal is much more likely to target an insecure individual who is likely to fear them than some one who carries themself with confidence and shows no fear.

Women identified the significant impact rape and sexual assault would have on your life as one of the reasons they are so fearful of being victimized.

- I think that rape is a step above a robbery or assault so I think that a general fear of theft, robbery, assault can be recovered or replaced (i.e., a purse, backpack, or other belongings). When a woman is raped, however, she loses something that is difficult, and in some cases, impossible to recover. Women indentified the significant impact rape and sexual assault would have on your life as one of the reasons they are so fearful of being victimized.

- I think that crimes such as robbery, theft could lead to something worse. Having any of the previously named crimes happen to you is tramatric enough but rape or sexual assault takes it to an entirely different level. To be robbed, you can replace material things like your purse, and everything in it. But no one including yourself can take something like sexual assault back.

I think that rape is a step above a robbery or assault so I think that a general fear of theft, robbery, assault would lead to a greater fear of rape. Just the personal nature of rape and how much I would imagine it impacts your life, I would consider it a more frightening type of assault. I don’t think that the two are necessarily related but I suppose a fear of assault may impact a fear of rape or sexual assault.
• I think I am more afraid to be raped than robbed because I take the precautions to prevent being robbed such as leaving my stuff laying around. If it was a personal attack whether robbery or assault I think I would be fearful but I think you can get over robbery.
• I am more afraid of someone taking away my most prized possession, which would be my sense of self and safety, than any of my material things. Being assaulted means that my wounds will heal in time, but being raped, my wounds would never heal from that.
• You can replace the items in your purse, but if someone rapes you that is something you never get over.

Finally, some women stated that they were afraid of crime in general simply because they were a woman or had been taught to be fearful.

- I don’t think either crime makes me more afraid of the other, I’m just afraid in general of both because im a woman.
- Just being a woman makes you more afraid of things.
- My parents always told me to protect myself and be afraid of being hurt by someone, so I am more afraid because of what they taught me.
- Because I’m a woman, I always think that something bad could happen to me.

In looking across the responses, it became evident that the shadow of sexual assault hypothesis, while somewhat supported, was certainly not the only explanation for college women’s fear of crime. The responses indicate that college women vary greatly on what makes them fearful or why they are fearful. The responses further indicate that it is not correct to assume that all college women are fearful of crime, as some specifically stated that they were not fearful for various reasons. These findings are discussed in more detail below; also included are directions for future research and cautious policy implications based on the findings.

**DISCUSSION**

Although the original intent of this analysis was to determine if the shadow of sexual assault hypothesis was supported when college women were given the opportunity to explain their fear of crime, it is evident that a multitude of explanations detail why women are fearful. There was some support for the shadow hypothesis, but there were also some students who strongly disagreed with the assertion that fear of rape and sexual assault impacts a woman’s fear of other crimes. Further, in support of many other theories that have attempted to explain why women are fearful of crime, a number of other explanations were offered, including women’s vulnerability and inability to fight off an attacker, the role that previous victimization plays in their current fear, difficulties in recovering anything that is lost or damaged due to rape or sexual assault, and general fear because they are a woman.

There is no shortage of studies indicating that women have higher levels of fear of crime than men (see Bankston & Thompson, 1989; Ferraro, 1995; Ferraro & LaGrange, 1992; Reid & Konrad, 2004; Sacco, 1990; Warr, 1984); what is not entirely clear, however, is why women are more fearful than men, even though they have much lower victimization rates than men for all crimes except rape and sexual assault. A number of different explanations have been offered to explain this paradox and many of these explanations emerged as responses to the open-ended items analyzed in the current research.

**The Shadow of Sexual Assault Hypothesis**

The results indicated that there was some support for the shadow of sexual assault hypothesis. Many women responded that they agreed that, to an extent, their fear of rape and sexual assault increased their fear of other crimes, specifically theft, robbery, and assault. Many women specifically made the connections that Ferraro (1995, 1996) presented in his work: that any crime could result in sexual assault and that if someone was committing a “less personal” crime such as theft, there would be little to prevent their actions from escalating into a personal offense such as rape or sexual assault. This supports Ferraro’s (1995, 1996), Fisher and Sloan’s (2003), Hilinski’s (2009), and Wilcox et al.’s (2006) quantitative research examining the shadow of sexual assault hypothesis. These results provide an additional layer of support to the shadow of sexual assault hypothesis that was not present before; now, in addition to quantitative findings supporting this argument, women, in their own words, have affirmed this idea.

However, with every level of agreement comes disagreement. There were a small number of women who responded that they did not think that their fear of rape and sexual assault was related to their fear of other crimes. Many of these responses were worded quite strongly to suggest that because the motivation for these crimes was so different (e.g., several women wrote that the motivation for theft or robbery was financial need, but the motivation for rape or sexual assault is power). Because the women perceived the motivations for these crimes to be so different, they did not consider them to be on the same level. One explanation for this disagreement could be because women perceive theft or robbery to be a more common offense than rape or sexual assault. If they have an “it won’t happen to me” mentality, it would stand to reason that they would not perceive these crimes to be similar in terms of fear or motivation. Further, many women grossly underestimate their risk for rape or sexual assault, further reaffirming the argument that they do not fully recognize the potential risk they face, based on their age and their everyday activities (Hughes, Marshall, & Sherrill, 2003).

**Prior Victimization and Fear**

Another explanation for women’s fear of crime that emerged from the responses was the result of a prior victimization. Several women wrote that they were afraid of all crimes, including theft, assault, burglary, and rape/sexual assault because they had been victimized in the past. This explanation is not surprising; it would follow that if you are victimized once, the experience would likely be related to increased levels of fear of all crime in the future. Once an individual is victimized, the “it won’t happen to me” mentality is shattered and they are fully aware that they are at risk of victimization. Experiencing one type of victimization likely causes a heightened awareness of any type of victimization, resulting in increased levels of fear of all crimes and altering daily activities. For example, one woman wrote that she does not leave her dorm room and frequently misses class because she is afraid to go out in public after being sexually assaulted. These findings are supported by prior research that has concluded that prior victimization is a strong predictor of perceived risk and fear (Fisher, Sloan, & Wilkins, 1995; LaGrange, Ferraro, & Supancic, 1992; Ollenburger, 1981; Smith & Hill, 1991; Taylor & Hale, 1986).

However, once again, there was some disagreement with the idea that prior victimization results in an increase in fear among college women. Some women wrote that because...
they had been the victim of rape or sexual assault in the past, they felt prepared to defend themselves and took precautions so that they would not be in vulnerable situations. As such, they felt that they were not fearful of crime because they felt that they would never again allow themselves to be victimized. This is an interesting outlook, as it goes against research that has suggested the prior victimization is one of the most significant predictors of future victimization (e.g., Daigle, Fisher, & Cullen, 2008; Ellingworth, Hope, Osborn, Trickett, & Pease, 1997; Farrell, Phillips, & Pease, 1995; Hope, Bryan, Trickett, & Osborn, 2001; Lauritsen & Davis-Quinet, 1995). In fact, Daigle et al. (2008) found that a small proportion of college women experience a large proportion of violent and sexual victimization. However, these findings are in line with a body of research that suggests that prior victimization is a poor predictor of fear of crime or is not related to fear of crime at all (Garofalo, 1979; Hill, Howell, & Driver, 1985; Hindelang et al., 1978). With respect to the role prior victimization plays in fear of crime, the results presented here are in line with the results of many of the quantitative studies examining this relationship. That is, they are mixed and do not provide any clear conclusions on the existence or direction of the relationship between prior victimization and fear of crime.

Feminist-Based Explanations of Fear of Crime

There have also been feminist-based explanations for women’s fear of crime. These explanations center on the idea that women are inherently more vulnerable than men (both physically and emotionally), and as such, would not be able to physically defend themselves if they were being attacked and would not be able to recover emotionally and psychologically if they were attacked (Baumer, 1978; Hindelang, et al., 1978; Tulloch & Jennett, 2001). Further, feminist based explanations assert that as we live in a patriarchal society, men and women take on different gendered rolls in their everyday lives (Stanko, 1992; Steffensmeier & Allan, 1996). These gendered roles extend from everyday activities to how individuals act as both criminals and victims (Hollander, 2001). Following this line of thought, men are portrayed as the victimizers and women are portrayed as helpless victims, unable to defend themselves. These explanations were reflected in the responses analyzed here. Many women noted that fear arises out of the knowledge that men are bigger and stronger than women, so they are able to overcome the physically to victimize them. They also identified the difficulties in recovering from crime, particularly rape and sexual assault, as a source of fear. Many felt that it is easy to replace your purse or other belongings, but would be nearly impossible to fully recover from rape or sexual assault. These responses affirm the argument that in a patriarchal society, men hold so much power over women that their lives will never be the same if they are the victim of rape or sexual assault.

Like the other explanations, however, some women felt that they were not afraid of crime because they were able to defend themselves. These women felt that because they were not insecure, were prepared so that they would not be in vulnerable situations. This feeling of security was often an individual’s perceived risk of being victimized, that describe the sources of women’s fear, and it is inappropriate to try to isolate one particular cause. Future research should continue to explore the complexities of fear of crime. To this end, Warr (2000) argued that policies aimed towards reducing women’s fear of crime should focus on addressing the root causes of the fear, which is often an individual’s perceived risk of being victimized. In many cases, particularly among women, perceived risk is actually much higher than actual risk. Thus, Warr has argued that if women are provided with accurate information about their actual risk of victimization, their fear of being victimized might be more in line with their actual risk of victimization and they will not be so consumed with fear.

Although Warr (2000) has made salient suggestions for addressing women’s fear of crime, the results presented here suggest that there is not one simple explanation for why women are afraid of crime. Rather, the explanations seem to vary, and some women even identify reasons why they are afraid of crime that are similar to reasons identified by women who are not fearful of crime. Future research should continue to explore the complex phenomenon of into the feminist explanations of fear of crime, which argue that a woman’s role as a victim in a gendered, patriarchal society is to be helpless and unable to defend herself. Women are often taught this from a young age, so their fear of crime in general follows them throughout their lives. It would follow that if women are taught that they are inherently vulnerable and will be unable to defend themselves if they are ever attacked, they were, at one point, fearful of being victimized. This fear might have been the impetus for them to learn how to defend themselves and what precautions to take to reduce their risk of victimization.

Overall, the results presented here seem to generate more questions than they answer. Although the original intent of the research was to examine the shadow of sexual assault hypothesis, it is evident from the findings that this explanation is one of many that articulate why women are more fearful of crime than men. Perhaps there is not one single explanation that can fully explain women’s fear; it might be that it is a combination of different explanations that describe the sources of women’s fear, and it is inappropriate to try to isolate one particular cause. Future research should continue to explore these explanations, using both quantitative and qualitative research methods. The ability for women to provide answers to open-ended questions in their own words provided a rich source of data that quantitative analysis would not necessarily have been able to capture.

Although the current research has expanded our knowledge of fear of crime, particularly among college women, by asking them to describe this fear in their own words, it is not without its limitations. The sample size is small; however, because these responses were analyzed using qualitative analytical techniques, this is less of a problem than if quantitative analyses were used. Inherent to qualitative research is also a lack of generalizability. There may be certain characteristics of the women who responded to the open-ended items that differ from those of the general population of State University and the college women population in general. These results can be viewed as a starting point for further qualitative exploration of women’s fear.

Cautious policy implications can also be generated from these findings. Most policy implications that have been generated out of fear of crime research have focused on addressing risk of victimization, including self-defense training and other precautionary behaviors to reduce their risk of victimization. These implications, while valid and relevant, have arguably not addressed fear of crime. These suggestions might reduce a woman’s risk of being victimized, but it is unclear whether reducing victimization risk results in a reduction in fear of crime. To this end, Warr (2000) argued that policies aimed towards reducing women’s fear of crime should focus on addressing the root causes of the fear, which is often an individual’s perceived risk of being victimized. In many cases, particularly among women, perceived risk is actually much higher than actual risk. Thus, Warr has argued that if women are provided with accurate information about their actual risk of victimization, their fear of being victimized might be more in line with their actual risk of victimization and they will not be so consumed with fear.
fear of crime, particularly among women; once it becomes clearer why women are fearful of crime, these root causes can be addressed, as suggested by Warr, to mitigate women’s fear and provide them with accurate information about their risk of victimization.

REFERENCES


**BIOPGRAPHICAL SKETCHES**

Carly M. Hilinski is an assistant professor in the School of Criminal Justice at Grand Valley State University. Her research interests include fear of crime, victimization, particularly crimes against women, and corrections.