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## Managing Rapeability: Women's Perceptions and Negotiations of the Fear of Sexual Assault

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Managing Rapeability:  
Women's Perceptions and Negotiations of the Fear of Sexual Assault

By

Jessica Friton

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

In

Sociology

Minnesota State University, Mankato

Mankato, Minnesota

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Managing Rapeability:  
Women's Perceptions and Negotiations of the Fear of Sexual Assault

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This thesis has been examined and approved by the following members of the student's committee.

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Vicki Hunter

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## ABSTRACT

For women, the fear of sexual assault and harassment is pervasive. This study examines women's perceptions and negotiations of such fear while emphasizing the gendered social structures within which such fears are learned and experienced. Open ended interviews were conducted with 13 women enrolled in a self-defense undergraduate class. The interviews were transcribed and qualitatively analyzed. Findings provide rich descriptions of women's fears of victimization, how they learn such fears, and how they cognitively and behaviorally managed fear in their everyday lives. The author argues that learning and managing fear of sexual assault and harassment is part of gender socialization for women within a cultural context that assumes male privilege and male dominance.

## INTRODUCTION

This research is an examination of women's perceptions and negotiations of their fear of sexual victimization. This research is about those lives significantly impacted by *the fear of sexual victimization* – women. Research shows that humans interactionally reinforce social inequalities. Gender inequalities are the focus of this research. Specifically, the focus is how the social construction of gender includes the social construction of women's fear of sexual victimization. Traditional scripts of femininity and masculinity uphold and reinforce inequalities, such as femininity as vulnerability and masculinity as dominance. Traditional gender ideologies support the culture of rape and sexual coercion.

Nearly one in five women will be victims of sexual assault or attempted sexual assault at some point in their lifetime (Black et al. 2010). Even more common is women's fear of sexual assault. This research is important because women's lives are significantly impacted by the fear of sexual victimization. The ways women manage this fear has consequences for their mobility and quality of life.

Humans have capacity to challenge socially constructed inequalities and learn different scripts that may alter the ways in which they define themselves. Through socialization, women learn vulnerability, but also have capacity to unlearn vulnerability. Research shows that women use certain strategies to manage their fear of sexual assault. Some of these strategies include avoidance tactics. When women place constraints on their lives and their mobility, it impacts their quality of life. Other strategies women may use are defensive tactics. This research considers self-defense skills as one method that women may learn changed definitions of being a woman.

In this research, women enrolled in a self-defense class are interviewed and share their perceptions of warnings, fear, protective strategies, and experiences of sexual victimization. Self-defense class provided a context for women to express confidence in certain protective strategies or strategies they may see as ineffective. The women describe various avoidance and defensive behaviors. This research, as well as previous literature, shows that avoidance behaviors often include women placing limits on their exposure to public places.

This research first presents a review of the literature. The review of the literature includes descriptions of the social construction of femininity and masculinity broadly. Then, the social construction of femininity and masculinity are examined in the context of sexual assault and the fear of sexual assault. Avenues to challenge or change traditional constructions of femininity are also portrayed.

To follow are the literature review, the research methods, sample selection, and the data analysis. The findings are presented in the third section. Findings include ways that women learned what to fear, avoidance behaviors used, and defensive behaviors used. The last section of the findings features women's perceptions of creepy men, why they deem these men as risky, and how they manage their fear of that perceived risk. Then, several limitations of the research are highlighted. Finally, the discussion section reviews the implications are broader dynamics of these findings.



## REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The focus of this study is to examine women's perceptions and negotiations of the fear of sexual assault, cognitively and behaviorally. This research is not about victims of sexual assault, nor is it about the perpetrators of sexual assault. Rather this study is about those lives significantly impacted by *the fear of* sexual assault – women. Women may employ certain strategies to manage their fear of sexual assault, which constrain their lives. The goal of this study is to provide a greater understanding of the ways women negotiate the fear of sexual assault and the constraints associated with that fear.

There is much literature on the social construct of gender. The dichotomy between genders has been recognized, both biologically (sex: female and male) and culturally (gender: woman and man). Just a few examples of research on social construction gender are observations of preschoolers (Cahill 1989; Martin 1998), elementary aged children (Thorne 1986; Thorne and Luria 1986), amongst transgender populations (Mason-Schrock 1996) and through the process of transsexual transitions (Schrock, Reid, and Boyd 2005). Seemingly biological categories are as much socially constructed as the genders of masculinity and femininity (Fausto-Sterling 1993; Lorber 1993).

Studies have examined how humans interactionally create and reinforce the categories of men and women (Cahill 1989; Martin 1998; Thorne 1986; West and Zimmerman 1987). The categories we use to differentiate between genders exaggerate the differences and ignore commonalities (Thorne 1986; West and Fenstermaker 1995). Studies have shown that gender socialization goes beyond ideology. Cahill (1989) and Martin (1998) found that the process of gender socialization impacts everyday

movements, bodily comportment, and the use of space. Specifically women's bodies, movements, and voices are more restricted than men's (Cahill 1989; Martin 1998). The behavioral aspects of "doing femininity" include passivity, deference, and weakness; while "doing masculinity" refers to dominance, strength, and competitiveness (West and Zimmerman 1987). People embody gender emotionally, cognitively, and behaviorally.

Existing literature demonstrates men and women "doing gender" in their everyday interactions. One aspect of women "doing gender" is having a routine sense of vulnerability for their safety. This vulnerability or fear is intertwined into the ways in which they understand and experience their bodies. Therefore, as part of gender embodiment, women's relationships with their bodies are designed emotionally, cognitively, and behaviorally, by the fear of sexual assault. Rader (2005) reveals that "doing gender" and "doing fear" are deeply entwined; she refers to this as "doing gendered fear." This framework highlights the importance of gender while trying to understand the complexity of women's fear.

### *Doing Gender and Doing Fear*

Traits of masculinity include strength, bravery, and courage (among a multitude of others traits). Therefore, successfully "doing masculinity" involves discounting weakness, cowardice, and fear (among a multitude of others traits). Men may embody specific discourses of fear, often the act of "discounting" fear. Smith and Torstensson (1997) show that one aspect of men performing masculinity is the process of actively "discounting" fear and risk. Vaccaro, Schrock and McCabe's (2014) research on male martial arts fighters found that "controlling one's own fear while creating it in others is a

key to the identity code of manhood” (p. 432). Martial art fighting is an arena in which these dynamics are intensified. Vaccaro et al. explains how men draw from the larger gender ideology of “doing masculinity” successfully.

Schwalbe (1992) elicits a sociological perspective on men’s performances of masculinity. He coins the term “masculinist self” to describe the social status men have over women in our society. This elevated standing in society results in men having a narrow moral self. Schwalbe explains that men, since infancy, are granted moral high ground. This moral high ground gives them a sense of entitlement and lack of skills to successfully take the roles of others, specifically women. Schwalbe (1992) concludes that men must “expand their moral selves” (p. 48) in order to move beyond the “masculinist self.”

Dozier’s (2005) interviews with female to male transsexuals highlight the moral ground men are granted in society. When female to male transsexuals go through their transformations, they are surprised to find that society grants them more conversational and behavioral privileges than they had as women. However, the social privilege is granted is not to all men equally, Black men and feminine men may endure more harassment or abuse after transitioning from female to male (Dozier 2005). The interviews referenced by Schrock et al. (2005) demonstrate men’s need to expand their moral selves. They found that a specific aspect of transsexuals retraining themselves into womanhood is to learn more empathic role taking, thus overwriting the script of their previously societally indoctrinated “masculinist self.”

Quinn (2002) shows sexual harassment as a performance of masculinity. Specifically, the action of “girl watching,” is a common sport of men and show of

dominance. Quinn found that men see “girl watching,” as a normative action, harmless, and as a means to demonstrate their masculinity to other men. The woman that is “watched” is objectified. Meanwhile, women may perceive this behavior as harassment. “Girl watching” serves to uphold masculine power while also serves to remind women of their vulnerable standing compared to men. Cahill (2000) explains that “the men’s sex is expressed freely, almost defiantly, while the women cover theirs, for fear of being stolen, violated, consumed” (p. 55).

Women are socialized to incorporate a sense of vulnerability into their identities (Gidycz and Dardis 2014; Murnen, Perot, and Byrne 1989; Rozee and Koss 2001). Cahill (2000) discussed the production of the feminine body in the context of danger and vulnerability. She found that women perceive their bodies as a source of potential danger – a liability. Like Cahill (2000) and Rader (2005), Stanko (1997) conceptualizes the safety strategies employed by women and how they manage fear as a performance of their femininity. Stanko argues that women’s awareness of their vulnerability is acquired early in life. Reid and Konrad (2004) name this process as an “internalization of the woman as victim” (p. 420). The self-regulation and self-policing necessary for women to maintain their safety from men’s violence is accepted as inherent to being women. This construction of femininity as vulnerability is discussed more below within the context of learning self-defense skills.

Fine’s (1988) examination of sexuality discourses in public high school curricula is one example in which women are taught about their vulnerability. Within the majority of discourses, women’s sexual agency is minimized; subsequently the potential for women’s sexual victimization is magnified. Within these discourses, female adolescent

sexuality is seen as experiences that make women vulnerable and exposed to danger.

Likewise, Carmody (2005) found that women's sexuality was hidden within the discourse of fear and danger.

The dichotomous categories of men and women reinforce the respective roles and expectations, privileging men over women and displacing anyone who does not fit in either category. There are a multitude of areas to study regarding gender inequality. Gendered inequalities that are structured into our language and social institutions operate as social control mechanisms against women (Braun 2001; Braun and Kitzinger 2001; Murnen 2000; Sanders and Robinson 1979). Violence, specifically violence against women, is evidence of the most extreme form of social control. In addition, subtle harassment cues and hostile behaviors directed at women serve to remind them of their vulnerability and the need for constant vigilance and fearfulness (Sheffield 1995; Smith and Torstensson 1997). Sheffield (1995) views the domination and social control of women as "sexual terrorism" (see also Kissling 1991). She defines sexual terrorism as the systematic process by which "males frighten and, by frightening, control and dominate females" (Sheffield 1995:410). Women may feel constrained by an invisible force, bound by fear and the reality of sexual victimization. These gendered identities are constantly reinforced. Men assert dominance as a means of "doing masculinity" and women are "doing femininity" as they manage vulnerability.

### *Sexual Assault*

To better understand women's fear of sexual assault, it is important to examine more generally people's perceptions of sexual assault. One such perception is rape myths,

which are common and wide spread beliefs about rape and sexual assault. Rape myths are false beliefs and serve to perpetuate stereotypes and victim-blaming. Rape myths provide a supportive rhetoric for sexual assault and violence against women (Bevacqua and Baker 2004). Some studies measure the level of adherence to rape myths and beliefs by examining factors such as age, race, and gender (Feltey, Ainslie, and Gieb 1991; Proto-Campise, Belknap, and Wooldredge 1998; Monson, Langhinirchsen-Rohling, and Binderup 2000; Reilly, Lott, Caldwell, and DeLuca 1992), race and prior victimization (Carmody and Washington 2001), and relationship to perpetrator (Bachman and Carmody 1994; Bondurant 2001).

Rape myths are not harmless beliefs, they impact how victims define their experiences. These myths may influence police officers regarding arrests, members of the court, the victim's perception of herself, and the rapist's justification for his crime. In their interviews with convicted and incarcerated rapists, Scully and Marolla (1984) reveal four rape myths that the rapists utilized as justifications for their crimes. The myths cited by rapists were women are seductive, women mean yes when they say no, women actually enjoy it, and that nice girls do not get raped. Victims of sexual abuse (Hlavka 2014) used similar rape myth discourse to interpret, justify, and legitimize their perpetrators' abuse. Findings show that rape myth acceptance levels are different between men and women. Gender is the strongest predictor of adherence to rape myths (Feltey et al. 1991; Proto-Campise et al. 1998). Specifically, men were found to have higher tolerance levels of sexual coercion (Feltey et al. 1991), lower levels of victim empathy, and higher levels of victim blaming (O'Donohue, Yeater, and Fanetti 2003).

Unfortunately, sexual assault pervades our society. Nearly one in five women will be victims of sexual assault or attempted sexual assault at some point in their lifetimes (Black et al. 2010). College women in particular are at the highest risk for sexual victimization (Banyard et al. 2005; Day 1999; Flack, et al. 2007; Sanday 1996). Research indicates about half of all women college students have experienced some form of sexual assault while at college (Sorenson, Joshi, and Sivitz 2014).

*Stranger versus acquaintance.* The research on sexual assault distinguishes between two kinds of relationships between victim and perpetrator: acquaintance or stranger. Both types of sexual victimization involve nonconsensual sexual contact. The important distinction is the relationship between the victim and the perpetrator. The majority of rapes are acquaintance rapes (Bachman and Carmody 1994; Fisher, Cullen, and Daigle 2005; Rozee and Koss 2001). Banyard et al. (2005) found that specifically within college campuses more sexual victimization is perpetrated by an acquaintance or romantic partner. However, studies repeatedly find that women have higher levels of fear of rapes perpetrated by strangers (Bachman and Carmody 1994; Hickman and Muehlenhard 1997; Hughes, Marshall, and Sherrill 2003; Wilcox, Jordan, Pritchard 2006; Wilcox, Jordan, Pritchard 2007; Schafer, Huebner, and Bynum 2006). This paradox illustrates the power ideology has over actual statistical confirmation.

This dichotomy between acquaintance and stranger sexual assaults represents the larger societal ideology of public versus private spheres. Public/private ideology serves to place women in the private, domestic sphere and men in the public sphere. Historically, this ideology dictates that women's roles are within the home, performing the duties of

wives and mothers. A man's role is the head of the home and the economic breadwinner. This example may sound dated, but the ideology still influences us today.

Bevacqua and Baker (2004) illustrate how the implications of this public/private ideology are harsh and far-reaching in everyday life, public policy, and laws. Sexual assault, domestic violence, and sexual harassment are three forms of violence against women discussed by Bevacqua and Baker (2004). They show that each of these forms of violence against women are not private matters; rather it is reflective of the inequalities of the larger patriarchal structure of society. Specific to sexual assault, the feminist anti-rape movement attempts to expose that rape is about power and control, not sex. Feminism seeks to redefine rape and connect this "seemingly private trauma with the larger political picture of male supremacy and racism" (Bevacqua and Baker 2004:64). One huge part of this effort was to debunk *stranger* rapist fear and shed light on the fact most sexual assaults are perpetrated by acquaintances.

Bevacqua and Baker (2004) describe the feminist movements against rape, domestic violence and sexual harassment. Historically, feminists have successfully reformed law and polices. Several advances also have been made for more victim support, crisis hotlines, and shelters. However, none of these reforms have reduced the prevalence of violence against women, nor has it increased rates of arrest, prosecution, or conviction of perpetrators. Banyard et al. (2005) conducted a follow-up survey in 2000 with undergraduates' experiences with unwanted sexual contact or intercourse. This was a follow-up from the same survey conducted in 1988. When they compared the 12 year span, the results showed that the prevalence of unwanted sexual intercourse had not decreased. Also in this 12 year span, this college implemented direct services to victims,



increased awareness, and instituted a rape crisis center. Banyard et al. results echo that of Bevacqua and Baker (2004) regarding the lack of influence policy changes and services have on prevalence of sexual assault. It is important that these services exist to help victims, but it does not translate lower incidence rates of victimization. Bevacqua and Baker (2004) assert that the public/private ideology continues to this day and still “veils” or “shields” men from being held accountable for their violence against women. According to Bevacqua and Baker (2004), “Explicitly challenging this ideology must be central to any campaign to combat violence against women” (p. 78). Similarly, Hlavka (2014) asserts that it is not enough to change policies because “there are larger underlying cultural practices and discourses acting as barriers” (p. 354).

Another implication of the public/private ideology is how the victim defines her sexual victimization experience. Rape myths support the belief that the public sphere is more dangerous than the private sphere. This belief then impacts women who suffer sexual victimization at the hands of an acquaintance. Examples include, how victims perceive themselves, likelihood to report, levels of self-blame, depression, anxiety, and fear. Koss et al. (1988) found that stranger rape equates to less self-blame than compared to victims that know the perpetrator. Similarly, Monson et al. (2000) found that the perceived seriousness of the sexual assault decreases as the closeness of the relationship increases. Abbey et al. (2004) also found the relationship between the perpetrator and victim influenced the perception of the sexual assault and coping strategies. Abbey et al. analyzed victimization experiences and subsequent coping strategies relative to tactics the victims used to resist sexual assault. They found that there was a significant correlation between the tactics victims used, women’s definition of the sexual assault, and coping

strategies women used. How victims perceive these contexts and the variables influence how they cope with their victimization.

*Measurements and definitions of sexual assault and fear.* There are a multitude of variables in the literature regarding how to define rape and sexual assault. This definition is important for two reasons 1) from an empirical standpoint better definitions lead to more accurate and comprehensive results from large scale survey studies (Belknap, Fisher, Cullen 1999; Kilpatrick 2004; Koss 1996; Lynch 1996) and 2) how the victim perceives her experiences has direct implications for coping strategies, such as legal assistance, advocacy, and counseling. Labeling an experience of sexual force or coercion as “not rape” can be a coping mechanism or reflect the normalization of sexual coercion in the larger society (Bondurant 2001; Koss et al. 1988). The terminology may vary greatly between victims’ definitions, which makes it all the more important to accurately measure *all* experiences of sexual victimization.

Fear of other crimes, not solely sexual assaults, is also hard to define and measure. There is much research on fear of crime and its implications on people’s lives. In this literature, there is a strong distinction made between risk of crime and fear of crime. *Risk* of crime is often described as the cognitive assessment of the statistical probability of being victimized. *Fear* of crime is defined as an emotional reaction to the *perceived* risk. Both risk and fear are influenced by various factors, such as gender, age, race, socioeconomic status, neighborhood, and perceived vulnerability (Reid and Konrad 2004; Schafer et al. 2006; Smith and Torstensson 1997; Wilcox-Roundtree and Land 1996).

Measurements of fear of crime and perceived risk of crime vary greatly between studies (Rader 2004). Some of the research makes a distinction between risk and fear and proceed to measure and study one or the other. Several other studies outline why it is inaccurate to research just one and not the other. They argue that risk and fear are interrelated (Elchardus, DeGroof, and Smits 2008; Rader 2004; Rader, May, and Goodrum 2007; Smith and Torstensson 1997; Stanko 1997; Wilcox-Roundtree 1998).

Rader (2004) criticizes existing literature for using fear of crime as a dependent variable, and other variables as causal factors, such as perceived risk, constrained behaviors, prior victimization, gender, race/ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. No research has empirically demonstrated that fear of crime is predicted or *caused* by those variables. Rader goes further to reconceptualize fear of crime into three components 1) emotive that captures the emotional experience of fear, 2) cognitive that measures the individual's perceived risk of being assaulted, and 3) behavioral that assesses the ways that fear constrains a person's behaviors. She advocates for the use of this model which she titles "threat of victimization" to more adequately conceptualize fear of crime because it illuminates the complex ways in which the components are interrelated.

Rader, May, and Goodrum (2007) gathered empirical data and then utilized the concept of "threat of victimization" theorized by Rader (2004). Rader et al. (2007) found the model "threat of victimization" as partially supported by their data. They found that perceived risk had no association with avoidance or defensive behaviors. However, the fear of crime was related to perceived risk, avoidance behaviors, and defensive behaviors. Moreover, the positive relationship between these variables was found to be reciprocal. Rader and her colleagues suggest a possible "feedback loop," that perceived risk,

avoidance behaviors, and/or defensive behaviors also may increase fear of crime. The need for more research in this area is evident by the complex nuances between the variables.

Another criticism of research on fear of crime is Warr (1992). He criticizes surveys designed to capture fear of crime by arguing that researchers often omit altruistic fear or “fear for others” from analyses. Warr and Ellison (2000) assert this distinction as incredibly important because the motivation behind precautionary behaviors can represent “merely a matter of self-interest or are motivated by wider social bonds that link individuals” (p. 556). Warr and Ellison (2000) conducted a large scale telephone survey of households and found that altruistic fear has different predictors and consequences compared to personal fear. “What is true for personal fear, in other words, is not ipso facto true of altruistic fear” (Warr and Ellison 2000:563). Results of levels of personal safety mirror existing studies; namely women have higher levels of personal fear compared to men. However, after entering altruistic fear into their regression analysis the effect is sharply reversed, men’s levels of fear for others is twice as high as women’s. Overall, they found that altruistic fear is more common than personal fear, mostly in the form of fear for spouses and fear for children. Rader and Cossman (2011) also found that men have high levels of fear for others, most starkly seen if the others live in the same household as the man.

Women also have fear for others, most strikingly for their children and less so for their spouses (Rader 2008, 2009; Warr and Ellison 2000). Women’s fear for their children may be attributed to division of labor in the household, for example, more caregiving and time spent with children (Warr and Ellison 2000). More generally,

women's fear for others may be seen as fulfillment of their general caregiver role for the family (Rader and Cossman 2011; Snedker 2006). Rader and Cossman (2011) concluded women's fear for others while in college is an example of women doing gendered fear in that their fear is derived from their perceptions of themselves as caregivers. They exercise their perceived roles as caregivers by helping other women by informing them about risks and safety strategies.

Rader (2008; 2009) interviewed recently married or recently divorced men and women in order to further examine altruistic fear. Husbands reported feeling levels of increased fears for others (altruistic fear) after marriage, and wives reported having decreased fear for themselves (personal fear) after marriage (Snedker 2006; Warr and Ellison 2000). Likewise, Warr and Ellison (2000) found the majority of men in their study fear for their spouse. In fact, a large portion of those men actually fear for their spouse *more than* they fear for their own personal safety. Rader (2008) further elucidated those women's reasons for their decrease of personal fear after marriage was due to their husbands' presence, which made them feel safe. The increase of men's fear for others (their spouse) reflects men's social role as the "the protector" and could be viewed as one aspect of their performance of masculinity.

### *Learning Vulnerability*

Empirical research has been done to examine *what* individuals fear and *how* individuals learn those fears. Individuals may learn fear from prior victimization, shared experiences of victimization, and media sources. The content and sources of warnings vary dependent on ages. Findings show that warnings received and fears felt are similar

for boys and girls, for example, “do not talk to strangers” and “look both ways before crossing the street” (Burt and Estep 1981). While the warnings offered to young children remain consistent between the genders, the fears socially imposed upon boys and girls diverge during adolescence. Burt and Estep (1981) found that as men approached adulthood, they reported receiving less warnings and reported lower levels of fear. Conversely, as women approached adulthood, they reported an increase in both the amount of warnings they received and their level of fear concerning those warnings.

Warr’s and Ellison’s (2000) study on altruistic fear found divergence of parents’ fear for their children in relation to age and gender. A parent’s fear for sons and daughters are very similar from ages one to five. Children between the ages 6 to 10 show a drop of fear for boys and an increase of fear for girls. Again at ages 11 to 15, the fears that parents hold for their children are the same between the child’s genders. Thereafter, fear for sons declines substantially, while fear for daughters plateau. This shows the multifaceted aspects of how men and women learn to be fearful (or not) throughout their lives.

What women learn to fear is one of the main focuses of this study. Women are repeatedly warned of stranger sexual assault. They are told to avoid being alone in public settings and to not walk alone at night. These warnings serve to support the private/public ideology that women do not belong in the public sphere and are unsafe when unaccompanied in public. Such warnings are incredibly powerful, so much so that women have higher levels of fear compared to men even though women have lower rates of criminal victimization (Burt and Estep 1981; Madriz 1997; Pain 1997; Rader et al.

2007; Smith and Torstensson 1997;; Stanko 1997; Warr 1980, 1981, 2000; Wilcox et al. 2006).

Women fear sexual assault more than they fear being victimized by any other offense, including murder, physical assault, and robbery (Pain 1997; Warr 1985). This is not to say that women should not fear sexual assault. Sexual assault happens to women. It happens every single day. The perceived danger of being sexually assaulted is a central concern in women's lives (Krahe 2005; Madriz 1997; Stanko 1995, 1996, 1997; Warr 1985). The predominant warning women hear is protecting themselves against sexual assault. Consequently, women have an overarching fear sexual assault. This finding is consistent across studies and has been named "the shadow of sexual assault hypothesis" (Ferraro 1996; Fisher and Sloan 2003; Wilcox et al. 2006). This hypothesis explains women's emphasized level of fear (in comparison to men's fear) by focusing on the ways that sexual assault has risen to the status of a "master offense" against women within gendered cultural narratives (Ferraro 1996). As a master offense, the sexual assault of women becomes a taken-for-granted part of women's lives, and consequently serves to heighten women's fear of victimizations across all types of crime.

Regarding the source of these warnings, by adulthood women reported that their sense of sexual vulnerability was "common sense" (Burt and Estep 1981; Hollander 2001). When women describe their sexual vulnerability as common sense it shows these fears as ingrained and seemingly natural. Hollander (2001) describes how this perceived naturalness of vulnerability also serves to keep it invisible, and thus less likely to be challenged. These warnings of sexual victimization are repeated and reinforced, reminding women of their vulnerability to sexual assault.

*Management of vulnerability and fear.* Women, consciously or even not deliberately, manage their fear of sexual assault (Burt and Estep 1981; Furby, Fischhoff, and Morgan 1989; Sheffield 1989; Stanko 1997). Learned fear comes both from women's perceptions and from cultural definitions of femininity. Due to the subjective nature of fear, the burden of managing that fear is placed on the individual. In other words women are seen as responsible for their safety and therefore at fault if they are victimized (Bondurant 2001; Burt 1980; Burt and Estep 1981; Feltey et al. 1991; O'Donohue et al. 2003). Hlavka (2014) interviews data from victims of sexual abuse revealed that the victims perceived it as their responsibility to avoid or limit men's sexual aggression and harassment. Women may use a range of avoidance and precautionary behaviors in an attempt to minimize their vulnerability.

The ways in which women "do fear" is interwoven in the ways women "do gender" (Rader 2005). The framework from Rader's "doing gendered fear" shows the three interrelated ways of women doing fear 1) cognitively 2) emotionally and 3) behaviorally. First, doing fear cognitively is the process through which women assess their risk for sexual assault (Rader et al. 2007). Krahe (2005) also describes cognitive vigilance and ways individuals try to control their level of fear. Rader et al. (2007) specifically explains how women may "self-talk" which literally means have a conversation with oneself purposefully to calm any rising fears.

Another component to self-talk is victim blaming. Rader et al. (2007) discusses the process of "othering" (p. 79). Rader finds that women do not believe themselves likely to be victims because they do not engage in behaviors they view as risky. Furthermore,



women may blame *other* women that are victimized based on perceptions of their risky behavior. Radar et al. find that the women who do not think that they are likely to become victims believe that they are protected because they do not act in the stereotypical way in which women that are victims act. In other words, many women believe stereotypical rape myths. They work to cognitively put boundaries between themselves and risky behavior of *other* women. Rader and colleagues found this process so powerful that women even do it with themselves after they have been sexually victimized.

The second way of “doing fear” focuses on emotional experiences. Women do emotional work to negotiate their fear with their emotional expressions (Rader 2005). Rader et al. (2007) notes women have resistance towards admitting fear and that they often they downplay the level of fear they are feeling. Successful management of fear often involves the participation of other people. For example, while walking home at night, a woman may call a friend on the phone. She does not wish to discuss feelings of fear, rather she wants a distraction – to avert the fear (Rader 2005; Hochschild 1979).

The third way of “doing fear” involves behavior, sometimes called constrained behaviors. These behaviors can be grouped into two categories, avoidance behaviors and defensive behaviors (Rader 2005; Warr 1985). Avoidance behaviors aim to decrease risk by avoidance of places and/or people, such as not walking alone at night. Due to this behavior women report more spatial mobility restrictions which impacts their quality of life (Burt and Estep 1981; Cahill 2000; Madriz 1997; Stanko 1995, 1996, 1997; Rader 2005; Warr 1985). Hlavka (2014) found that young women respond to the potential of young men’s aggression by avoidance of areas or diverting attention. Avoidance

behaviors are most beneficial to avoid sexual assaults perpetrated in the public sphere, such as rape perpetrated by strangers. However, as previously discussed, the likelihood of a stranger sexual assault is much lower than acquaintance sexual assaults.

When there are higher levels of fear, there may also be an increased adherence to precautionary behaviors (Hickman and Muelenhard 1997; Pain 1997; Rader 2005). Because they fear it, women take more precautionary measures to protect themselves from stranger sexual assault, more so than compared to acquaintance sexual assault. Hickman and Muehlenhard (1997) found that women are more fearful of stranger rape because of the perception of having less control in those situations. Correspondingly, women have less fear in acquaintance situations because they perceive that they have more control (see also Hughes et al. 2003). This perception is problematic because it leads to a false sense of control. Murnen et al. (1989) examined coping strategies for dealing with unwanted sexual activity and found that “while women felt they had control, this control did not translate into dealing with unwanted sexual activity” (p. 101). If women perceive control without actual control for their safety, it hinders the development of effective strategies.

Unequal levels of fears between genders results in unequal management of that fear. In other words, because women have more fear they strategize more to avoid danger compared to men. The fear of sexual assault influences women’s behaviors, thus management of fear may significantly restrict the activities of women (Burt and Estep 1981; Cahill 2000; Madriz 1997; Stanko 1995, 1996, 1997; Rader 2005; Warr 1985). This is clearly stated by Burt and Estep (1981), “Fears have behavioral consequences” (p. 513). Similarly, Bevacqua and Baker (2004), “All women are affected, even those not

directly victimized, because they must live in the fear of violence and blame for violence” (p. 79).

Some defensive behaviors include the possibilities of carrying a weapon, learning self-defense skills, and home security systems. Self-defense skills and assertiveness training seek to increase women’s ability to be assertive in hopes to avoid and fend off sexual assaults (Gidycz et al. 2006; Greene and Navarro 1998). Often, studies that examine defensive behaviors group together weapons and tools (e.g., mace, taser guns and firearms). Rader and Haynes (2014) argue there should be a distinction between weapons (e.g., firearm and knives) and other defensive behaviors (e.g. watchdogs and mace). This distinction makes research results more accurate when statistically controlling for gender. Radar and Haynes found that men are more likely to carry weapons, and women are more likely to utilize other tools and behaviors. Warr and Ellison (2000) also found to carry a firearm is a gendered defensive behavior. They found that that men are twice are likely to carry firearms than women.

The cell phone can be seen as a tool for protection because it provides the ability for a potential victim to call for help or take evidentiary pictures. Nasar, Hecht, and Wener (2007) looked at mobile phone use, space, and perceived safety. The results showed that most of the respondents felt somewhat safer or a lot safer with their phone when walking at night. In fact, almost 40 percent of the respondents reported that they walked somewhere after dark where they normally would not due to the feeling of safety their phone provided them (Nasar et al. 2007). A large percentage of this 40 percent were women. A very small percentage reported they had actually used their phone to call for help, report a crime or accident. The authors of this study cite numerous research studies

of cell phones actually slowing people's reactions times and reduction of awareness (most of the examples are regarding driving vehicles). Nasar and his colleagues drew both positive and negative conclusion from mobile phone use and perceived safety. While the phone provides a perception of security, it may not translate into the actually delivering safety.

Tools and weapons are not the only types of defensive behavior. Women may seek knowledge or skills as means of empowerment rather than tools or weapons. It is not uncommon for women to participate in assertiveness or self-defense classes. The rationale is that assertiveness training may help women challenge traditional feminine characteristics, such as, passivity, nurturance, and compliance. Research has found that these traditional feminine characteristics may serve to restrict, limit, and distort communication with men regarding women's willingness to consent to sexual relations (Fine 1988; Murnen et al. 1989). Rozee and Koss (2001) as well as Gidycz and Dardis (2014) call attention to the "psychological barriers" women have, for example feeling obligatory to "be nice" and "put others' needs before their own" (p. 3). Educational programs often attempt to teach women how to be more assertive to protect against victimization. Overcoming psychological barriers takes a large amount of mental energy, physical energy, time, and open mindedness. After all, the goal of assertiveness training for women is to potentially rewrite the embodiment of their gender; discourses they have known all their life.

Kitzinger and Frith (1999) did a conversation analysis of sexual refusal interactions. They found that 'just say no' refusal skills are too simplistic and problematic. Training women how to say no effectively puts responsibility on her to

control the behavior of men. Simple advice to “just say no” overlooks the social process of refusals in the broad sense of social order and interaction. Often refusals in general, are hard to perform. They conclude that women are not inadequately communicating. Rather it is that men fail to take seriously the refusals of women. According to Kitzinger and Frith (1999), “The problem of sexual coercion cannot be fixed by changing the way women talk” (p. 311). Women are assumed to want sex unless they clearly and convincingly state otherwise.

*Self-defense skills as defensive behaviors.* McCaughey (1998) conceptualizes current gender socialization as a learned ideology that results in the way we use and experience our physical bodies. Her ethnographic research on self-defense illustrates women’s potential to unlearn vulnerability. McCaughey found that self-defense enables women to embrace a new knowledge regarding their bodies. Women have the potential to learn to use their bodies to effectively resist or fight. She finds that “self-defense is a reprogramming regimen for the body” (McCaughey 1998:281). According to McCaughey, in order to fully embrace this new bodily comportment, women must overcome their traditional gendered scripts of being nice, passive, and helpless. Self-defense skills have the potential to deconstruct earlier knowledge and transform traditional gender roles regarding body comportment (Gidycz and Dardis 2014).

Gidycz et al. (2006) studied the efficacy of a sexual assault risk reduction program with prospective three-month and six-month follow ups. They found that women who took that risk reduction program increased their protective behaviors over the six-month period in comparison to a control group. There were no significant differences

between the groups regarding rates of sexual victimization. Women who happened to be victimized while in the risk reduction program reported less self-blame and more perpetrator blame. Possibly this finding was likely more in relation to the awareness curriculum rather than the physical self-defense skills. Furby et al. (1989) found high levels of confidence in women's abilities to protect themselves from rape – in terms of avoidance of risk and physical resistance. Furby et al. were unable to examine if women's high levels of confidence translated into *actual* effective safety strategies when dealing with victimization.

A common belief is physical resistance during an attack may prove more harmful to the victim. The rationale is that the perpetrator will escalate their violent behavior in response to physical resistance. Several studies have attempted to shed light on this discrepancy: Do self-defense strategies help to escape or escalate the intensity of sexual victimization? Ullman and Knight (1992) analyzed police case files of attempted and completed rapes. They found that physical resistance did assist women to escape attempted rapes. Increased physical resistance of the victims did not exacerbate physical injury outcomes. Ullman and Knight make it a point to say that even though there are advantages to physical resistance, women should not be held responsible when they do not physically resist. Tark and Kleck (2014) reviewed National Crime Victimization Surveys and conclude that additional injuries following a victim's physical resistance are rare. Ullman and Knight (1992) studied only stranger perpetrated rape cases. The vast majority of sexual victimizations are perpetrated by acquaintances, so the applicability and effectiveness of self-defense skills may be debatable (Bachman and Carmody 1994). McCaughey (1998) asserts that self-defense is not a false sense of security. She argues

that a woman's confident demeanors may deter sexual attacks. Bachman and Carmody (1994) contend however, "...readiness to use force does not provide security..." (p. 320). As already discussed, the relationship between the victim and offender can influence women's perceptions of control and vulnerability (Hughes et al. 2003). Bachman and Carmody (1994) examine resistance strategies and effectiveness regarding assaults perpetrated by intimates or acquaintances. They found that the victim-perpetrator relationship was a significant predictor of how physical resistance affects the physical injury outcome of the assault. "Victims of intimate assault were more likely to use self-protective behavior, they were also more likely to report that this behavior made the assaultive situation worse" (Bachman and Carmody 1994:329). Physical resistance may be less effective within the context of intimate or acquaintance relationships (see also Koss et al. 1988). The definitive effectiveness of self-defense may always remain unknown, after all, we are unable to know what would have or could have otherwise happened.

This is a lose-lose situation for women. We are unable to advocate for women to have less fear because the danger of sexual assault is real and precautions are necessary. Equally, we are unable to advocate for women to improve their physical self-defense strategies due to inaccuracies of effectiveness. Broadly speaking, women are not responsible to stop sexual victimization. Men have the responsibility to stop violence against women. Hickman and Muehlenhard (1997) proposed that "the solution lies in focusing educational efforts on the people who can stop rape: men" (p. 544). Hickman and Muehlenhard (1997) add that, "Only then, can women feel safe among both friends and strangers and be fully free to live life as they choose" (p. 545).

## RESEARCH METHODS

The focus of this study is to reveal ways in which women perceive, manage, and negotiate their fear of sexual victimization. The majority of the literature discussed above used scales, surveys, and other numerical assessment to measure women's fear of sexual assault. These measurements work well to analyze levels and frequencies of fears. However, quantitative studies miss important contexts and thought processes through which women learn, understand, and experience fear. For example, Hughes et al. (2003) used vignettes and had each women enter a value regarding how confident she was that she could manage a dangerous situation. Women are expected to infer their confidence regarding a potential victimization into a single value. Rader (2011) used data from nation-wide survey that measured the level of fear with a single yes/no question: are you afraid to walk at night? Respondents had to fit their responses into pre-defined categories, which placed limits on responses.

The intent of this research is to give women a voice to discuss their fear as they experienced it, in their own words. Humans are not passive recipients of information. Women have the capacity to accept, reject, or transform the meanings of warnings and fears. Self-defense, in particular, is an opportunity for women to transform perceptions of fear and reactions to that fear. First, my research will examine women's thoughts and feelings regarding sexual assault. Second, I hope to better understand how women learn what they should fear. Third, how do women feel and what do they do when they feel fearful. Finally, I hope to understand how self-defense skills may influence the women's



sense of safety and fear of sexual assault. Self-defense classes provided a context to discuss how women manage and negotiate their sense of safety.

Personally, I identify with other women regarding these feelings of fear and management of safety. Levels of fear between women vary. I do not assume that all women perceive or react similarly to the fear of sexual assault. As a white, middle class, women from a rural area, I found myself identifying with several of the women with similar backgrounds. Specifically, I had also completed a self-defense class four year prior, which was similar to these women's class. My standpoint in this research was poised as somewhat critical of the efficacy of this self-defense curriculum. Two issues I foresaw from learning self-defense were a false sense of security and increased levels of fear. Women already have so many warnings and fears ingrained in their sense of self. Skeptically, I could see self-defense classes as means to intensify fears. This potentially would leave women in an even more hyper-vigilant state, resulting in increased use of avoidance and precautionary behaviors.

### *Sample*

All participants were women students at a Midwestern university. The enrollment at this university was approximately 14,500 students. All participants of this study were enrolled in *Self-Defense for Women* class for college credits. During the 2009 semester I recruited the sample, there were three sections of *Self-Defense for Women*, which were divided between two instructors. Each section had approximately 25 students, for a total semester enrollment of 75 students. The class was fifty minutes twice a week. One general education credit was earned by completing this course.

Each instructor of the self-defense classes gave me permission to talk very briefly to the class and leave a contact sheet. Any students interested in participating were instructed to contact me. After participants contacted me, we discussed the research study in more detail. If the participant was still in agreement, we set a time to conduct an interview in a private room at the library.

As incentive, both instructors agreed to award any volunteers four extra credit points for their participation. In addition, participants received one five dollar gift card to a restaurant located near the university. The gift cards served as a way to show my appreciation and say thank you for the participant's time. This expense was provided from my personal funds.

### *Data Collection*

The interviews consisted of approximately 16 main questions (Appendix A). Semi-structured interviews were used because they gave participants opportunities to share experiences regarding their personal perceptions of fear and safety. These interview questions focused on demographics, who has told them warnings, content of warnings, perceptions of weapons and defensive tools, how often they thought about the warnings, perceptions of risk, feelings of fear, feelings of safety, experiences and perceptions of the self-defense class, and feelings about using the self-defense skills they were taught. Open-ended qualitative questions were used for the study rather than numerical scales or yes/no questions. This gave the women an opportunity to use their own words to describe their perceptions of fear and safety regarding sexual assault. This approach also allowed for an in-depth understanding of how women learn and manage

fear of sexual assault. The interviews lasted anywhere from 34 minutes to one hour and 34 minutes. The average length of the interviews was one hour.

In total, 13 women were interviewed. Eight described their racial category as white, two African American, one African, and one Hindu. Ages ranged from 18 years old to 22 years old. Four participants were 21 years old or older. Six women resided in the residence halls on campus. The remaining seven had housing off campus within several blocks of the campus.

Of the 13 women interviewed, three of the women told me about direct experiences of sexual assault or attempted sexual assault. There were six experiences of sexual assault or attempted sexual assault in total between these three women. Of the six experiences, one was perpetrated by a stranger. The remaining five were perpetrated by acquaintances. Ten women gave accounts of sexual assault or attempted sexual assault in which friends or family members were the victims. This included a total of 22 experiences, all of which were perpetrated by an acquaintance to the victim. These categories were not mutually exclusive; most of the women were in more than one category. Other direct experiences of crime reported by the participants were one count of vandalism and two counts of assault. There were three counts of domestic abuse where friends or family of the interviewees were the victims, one count of burglary where a friend of one of the interviewed women was the victim and one count of physical assault where a friend of the woman being interviewed was the victim.

### *Protection of Participants*

Potential risks included the possibility that this topic would evoke emotional reactions, possibly leading to distress and discomfort. The volunteer nature of recruitment allowed women to avoid taking part if they were not comfortable with the topic. Before each interview, the participant and I went through the consent form together (Appendix B). The participants were made aware that they could terminate their participation at any time without consequence. Pseudonyms are used for all individuals that participated.

The topics of sexual assault and fear are sensitive in general. Actual self-victimization experiences were not included as specific interview questions. However, disclosure of such personal experiences was probable and statistically expected. Before each interview, the participant was provided a list of local sexual violence resources and services (Appendix C). This was for the participant if she should need additional help after the interview was completed.

Additionally, I had been trained and had experience as a sexual assault advocate. I worked as a sexual assault advocate for a local non-profit organization for one year. I completed 40 hours of sexual assault training for that employment and participated in other training opportunities. This experience and training enabled me to support the participants with any emotional difficulties that might arise during the interviews.

### *Data Analysis*

Each interview was voice recorded and then transcribed. Transcripts were coded and memoing was used to work through the data. Memoing was useful to analyze the

data for themes that were intertwined throughout all the interviews. Memoing allowed my considerations and thoughts to be recorded fully. Organizing my ideas and thoughts on paper, in the form of memos, helped me appreciate common themes. Memos also assisted in retention of my ideas (Birks, Chapman, and Francis 2008). Even if concepts did not seem to fit together, it was beneficial to memo about disconnects throughout the interviews. The constant comparative method was used to compare the core concepts and discern patterns within the data (Charmaz 1990; Glasner 1965). Memoing was able to capture the process, from beginning to end, of how I came to grasp common themes. This is what Birks et al. (2008) explained as keeping a record of “the decision-making trail” (p. 70).

It was also important to include excerpts from the transcribed interviews. Insertions of verbatim excerpts were crucial for precise comparisons between data (Charmaz 1990). The verbatim excerpts preserved the voices of the women. One of the focuses of this paper was to let the women’s voices and experiences be heard. A question I would often pose to the memos was: “why does this matter?”

In the beginning, memos were often simple and quick. These more simple codes and subsequent memos often had to do with topics that the participants would state explicitly. It was rather easy to draw out common explicit statements and memo their potential importance. As the work progressed, the memoing became more complex. These memos helped give substance to concepts in the form of working definitions. Often as the more complex themes emerged, the memos became flooded with different avenues that the data could potentially lead. In those cases, the memos would need to be broken into several sub-memos or different components. This branching of the memos served to

increase the complexity of the concepts. Memoing allowed further clarifications and developments of theoretical categories (Lofland et al. 1995; Martin and Turner 1986). As themes evolved into the more theoretical realm of analysis, grounded theory was used for guidance as to which theoretical framework was most relevant to apply to the discoveries within the data (Glaser and Strauss 1967).

## FINDINGS

Findings include women's use of some avoidance behaviors, perceptions of risk, and past experiences as influence on women's adherence to avoidance behaviors. The sources that women learn what to fear are grouped into three categories 1) media sources 2) indirect experiences and 3) direct experiences. Women's opinions of defense behaviors varied. These specifically include cell phones, tools and weapons, and self-defense skills. The last findings presented are women's perceptions of creepy men, why they deem these men as risky, and how they manage their fear of that perceived risk.

### *Avoidance Behaviors*

One way women managed their fear was avoidance behaviors. Women discussed examples of typical avoidance behaviors, such as not going places at night or alone. Not surprisingly, all the women interviewed mentioned a heightened fear and vigilance while walking alone at night. Each of the 13 women gave at least one scenario of a having heightened sense of fear while walking at night. For decades, research and advocacy has sought to debunk myths about strangers perpetuating victimization. Instead, acquaintance sexual assault is much more widespread. This fear in public settings illustrates that the

fear of the stranger rapist still pervades these women's lives. Perceptions of high risk, prior victimizations, and prior victimizations of friends were common reasons for avoidance behaviors.

Elizabeth perceived parties, in general, as very risky. She avoided parties due to the risk she associated with them, "so I never go to parties cuz I don't trust that situation either." Elizabeth saw parties as untrustworthy, so she avoided them. More specific than parties in general, Heather told me about a particular party house where several of her friends had been victims of sexual assault or attempted sexual assault: "...no way, we'll never step foot in that house again." Based on the experiences she has heard from friends, that particular house was categorized as too risky to go there. Similarly, Abby had an experience with meth being slipped into her drink at a house party, she too declared, "I'll never go back to [that] house." Heather's avoidant behavior was especially heightened when she was on a school field trip in a different state: "then I probably wouldn't go [to the store]. Cuz I don't like being alone, like anyways. I'm sure it would have been fine, but the risk is still there especially, like being like in that part of the country [out of state school trip]." Heather avoided going to the store if she did not have someone to go with, she perceived greater risk when she while she was alone and in an unfamiliar location.

Angelina and Lucy described high levels of avoidance from the public sphere. Both were exposed to sexual assault perpetrated by an acquaintance. But both were more fearful and more avoidant of public settings than private settings. This reflects a disconnect, also in the literature, regarding the public/private ideology. Women are socialized to fear stranger-perpetrated attacks more so than acquaintance-perpetrated attacks. This discourse of fear for public stranger-perpetrated attacks is so ingrained, even

Angelina's and Lucy's *lived experiences* of acquaintance-perpetrated victimization does not alter their fear of public sphere as more danger than private sphere.

Angelina was vigilant about avoidance behavior, "I guess this world is not a safe world, it is not a safe world anymore so, but every day I try, I stay in my house." In this excerpt, Angelina told me about how she does not feel afraid and her reason is that she is always at home:

I don't think so, maybe maybe, ahh no, no I don't consider that because, except here, which cuz mostly parents are very hard on me so I never went out and I was always at home, so I don't think that, except riding home on the bus, but a lot people around so that's quite different. But I'm usually always home, from school home, and even here, that's what I do from school home school home school home.

Again this illustrates the perception that the private sphere equals safety and the public sphere equals danger. Lucy was also quite vigilant about avoidance behavior; she talked about not going out in public if she did not have another person with her:

Like, right now, I never go anywhere without my friend, like to a party, to even [store] like at night, I'm like nah, I'm gonna go with somebody. **Interviewer: what if there's nobody to go with you?** Lucy: "Then I don't go, I don't go."

Both these explanations illustrate social limitations placed on women due to fear. The women restrict their exposure to public settings, only go out with others, and prefer day light hours. Angelina and Lucy each place much emphasis on the safety of their private spheres. However, sexual assault is more likely to happen, statistically, in the private sphere than the public sphere.



Angelina described two experiences of attempted sexual coercion. Angelina re-told a friend's experience during which a sexual assault was perpetrated by an aunt's husband. Also, she directly experienced a man's unwanted sexual advances toward her. She thought of this man as a friend as he would often give her rides to the store. However, on one of those rides he made it clear to her that he expected something in exchange:

I had a friend that we were actually friend from high school, like seventh through eighth grade. One time, he asked me, "oh do you want a, actually I asked him, can you please give me a ride to go home?" He was like, oh ok, sure no problem." Cuz it was snowing too. And he gives me a ride, I thought all along this guy was was, I mean I knew he was ... a women's man, he likes women...so I was riding with him...he was like, "Do you know I like you?" I was like, "umm, no, don't you have [girlfriend]?" ... And I mean by just talking, he actually have mind to, actually his take hand and put on my lap, like, I was like "ok, just get your hands off me." I mean I didn't give him permission to touch me! Ya know, he was like, "well, I told I liked you." I mean what else? Not okay to touch me...this man is is actually, I don't know, he's actually, he just want to have his way because he's ya know, he's he's because he's a man and he thinks ya know he's this so, he sees a women he just wanna go after her and have her.

Angelina seemed to know this man enough well enough to trust him to get a ride home and she expressed her indignation about this man that thought it was okay to touch her without her permission. Angelina articulates that the man felt entitled to place his hand on her lap on the premise that he liked her.

Lucy described an intense experience of sexual assault. She came home from school and found her uncle attempting to sexually assault her mother. The sexual assault happened while Lucy's siblings aged eight, six and two years old were home. Lucy

recounts: “he was trying to rape her. He was there for like two and a half months and was like; well I can’t get any other women. My mom was like, ‘what are you talking about?’ That is when he pinned her down.” Her mom and siblings went to a shelter for several days after this assault. Regardless of these experiences with sexual assault in the private sphere, both Angelina and Lucy still believe that they are safer with friends and family in comparison to being in public.

Emily told me her experience with acquaintance rape. She described herself as “hermitted” after the victimization, meaning she closed herself off to social and public locations. She described this as lasting for about one week. Avoidance of people and places seemed to be a coping mechanism for Emily. She specifically said that she “went through all the stages and I am over it.” I assumed she was referring to the stages of grief, but I still asked her what “stages” she was talking about,

Well, like, first I was like, No, didn’t happen, crazy, then like okay, Mad! So mad! SOOO MAD! How could you do this to me? [I’m] not just a random girl, like not a big deal to have sex with, like it’s a huge deal for me and so pissed! Then just sad, how could you put yourself in that situation. What? Why? Like, ugh, so stupid, why would you do that? Why pick me? I haven’t done anything wrong, [I’m] nice to everyone. Why? Why? And then like okay, ya know [I] can’t just live inside, life, have to get out and then like okay, ya know, world isn’t bad, bad situation. Bad things happen to good people. It’s okay, and you’re fine, I mean in some way, shape, or form. Now gonna be made stronger, some reason, there is a reason, I don’t know it. But God knows it so, okay.

Emily explained heightened levels of avoidance and also much anger while trying to cope. Her account is very revealing of how her emotion evolved while she came to terms with her victimization.

### *Learning to Fear*

All of the women, at some point during interview, mentioned feelings of fear, anxiety, being scared, or feeling paranoid. Not every story included fear of sexual assault. Some stories demonstrated fear more generally. These feelings are fairly commonplace for women in society. One of the purposes of this study was to discover *how* and *what* women learn to fear. Out of the 13 women, 10 named their mother as a person who gave them warnings. Four women mentioned their father as giving advice. Six women mentioned family members (not mother or father) giving advice, such as, a sibling, cousin, or uncle. Six women mentioned a non-family member giving advice; most of which were high school or college teachers. When advice from the current self-defense instructors were included, all 13 of the women had mentioned at least one non-family member as an advice giver.

The majority of the women named their mother or father as the teller of warnings. This was consistent with the previous studies that show both mothers and fathers have fear for their children (Rader and Haynes 2011; Warr and Ellison 2000). What the existing research does not show is how mothers and fathers may differ in the way they express fear for their children. Here we see that mothers more often verbalized warnings to their daughters compared to fathers. This is not to say that fathers' level of fear for their daughters was more or less than the mothers. It highlights the differences between the fathers and mothers in *expressions* of fear for others. Sarah specifically says that, "my dad doesn't really get involved in that sort of stuff [safety warnings]." Chelsea told me her dad gave her a whistle. I asked what her dad said when he gave it to her: "He's a

pretty non-confrontation guy so he's like, 'so here's this.' It was pretty much when I turned like 21 and stuff and I would be downtown." Fathers have different methods for expressing their fear for their daughters.

*It's commonsense after all.* Many women had difficulties when they tried to remember who specifically told them warnings. It's understandable as women have heard warnings from a variety of sources and for most of their lives. Some of the women took a pause to try to recall who said a specific warning. A common default answer was "probably my mom." This was likely to be true, but it seemed neither them or myself was very confident in their answers. Likewise, an answer I would get is that no one told them and it was just things they have always known. As Mackenzie said, "it's just kind of one of those things." By the same token from Shannon, "No, they're just little things that I did naturally." The four women below echoed this same sentiment, that warnings and fearfulness as natural and normal:

Umm just like the *normal* [emphasis added] stuff like have keys in your hand so if someone was going to attack you or whatever. (Abby)

Um, I learned a lot of them [warnings] in self-defense, but some of them I had already been using because I'm just *naturally* [emphasis added] scared. As well as: Well, a lot of its just *instincts* [emphasis added]. (Shannon)

Probably [use] most of them [warnings]. I'm like a *naturally* [emphasis added] like scared person. I don't know why. (Heather)

I just kind of knew. And: I always hear stay with groups of people, that's just like *common sense* [emphasis added]. Likewise: Like I'm a very cautious person, like all the time. I'm always looking around me to just see what going

on. I guess I just do that *unconsciously* [emphasis added].  
(Chelsea)

It is not surprising that the women deemed warnings about safety as commonsense. This illustrates the perceived naturalness of fear and the embodiment of women “doing gendered fear” (Hollander 2001; Rader 2004). Sometimes I was able to elicit the source of warnings and fear. The sources are grouped into three categories 1) media sources 2) indirect experiences and 3) direct experiences.

*Learning from media sources.* During the interviews, women were asked if they learned about women’s risk and safety regarding sexual assault from any television programs or movies. Six women names television shows or networks, nine women named movies, and two named specific books. Abby discussed two cases of abduction and sexual assault that had received national media attention, Natalee Holloway and Dru Sjodin. Abby explained that her mom talked about the Natalee Holloway case a lot. Sarah mentioned a mainstream magazine and provided a detailed retelling of the date rape story she had read. Her reaction to the story:

So, I definitely and very careful about that sort of thing [watching your drink at a party] but then again like I don’t ever think that would happen to me. And just, I just read in Cosmopolitan this rape story and I was like wow, I could never, I I don’t know what I would do if I was ever, like if there was a date rape drug in my drink the next morning. Like just reading like her after effects, I was like wow, I wouldn’t, I don’t know what I would do.

Megan and Abby each mentioned email forwards that included warnings to women about different perpetrator strategies. Megan told me a very detailed example of an email her mom had sent her:

my mom always sends me like stuff like emails and one was always know the amount of money you have when, I don't know if that's on here or not, because I guess, I think it was Los Angeles, there was a serial killer and he kept attacking during the day time and they figured out why. No one stopped, like no one would scream, and the lady worked at a jail so she was really cautious about everything. She pumped gas, she put like \$10 in her tank and she knew she was putting gas in her tank and she was gonna get a pop, so she grabbed like \$12 out of her purse, locked her doors and went into pay for it. Went back into her car, of course, locked her doors cause she does that and this guy, looked really presentable, clean-cut, knocked on her window and was like "open your door", and she's like "No", so she opened her window a little bit... he was like "you dropped this \$20 bill." She goes, "no" and she rolled up her window and he got pissed and started trying to open her door, but her door was already locked. She told the officials that that was most likely the serial killer and that was probably how he got a lot of women to open their doors. So, but yeah, my mom always tells me stupid stuff like that, which is really not likely to happen, but you never know.

Lucy remembered watching safety videos after she and her family moved to the United

States:

I've always seen, my mom, when I was younger, like 12 or 11 she had these safety videos, and then it would always, she was like, 'ok, we're new here.' And that was right when we got accustomed to new life and stuff, she was like, 'there are, like it's not as ya know safe or, there's people just people killing each other, there's people burning people's houses, and murder, all that stuff. And I was like, frighten, and then she put these videos in and like, ok, you see you lock the door, make sure all the windows are shut, like if you're by yourself, or in like a neighborhood that's not so safe, and turning on the lights makes someone think that ya know there are people there and that they're more likely won't break into the house. And having loud tv and radio on, so if they were to ever break-in, they'd think somebody was in the house.

These are specific warnings and stories that the women vividly remembered. Almost all of the women mentioned seeing some sort of representations of sexual assault or warnings in the media. Not all of them remembered specifics, rather some of the women vaguely said “yeah, probably on the news.” Media sources reinforce and uphold fear and warning of dangers to women.

*Learning from direct experiences.* While we talked of warnings a few women remembered experiences from when they were younger that had evoked fear. Megan told a story of when she was about 16 and went to a party:

One time when I was younger I went to this party thing ... then these two guys were really drunk and I kind of had the feeling that they were on drugs too. I didn't really know them at all, and they decided it would be a great idea to sword fight each other with actual swords. So we had to leave cause one of them was kind of pissed and kind of wanted to kill the other one... the cops had to come and we had to leave. And one person ended up hitting a deer with my friend's truck so we had to sit outside in a car like next to the truck for like five hours, and it was freezing, and we had to go to this guy's house that I'd never met before, we had to spend the night there because we couldn't go home cause we were still in high school and drinking so we were like “Oh, god, we can't go home now.” So we went to his house and I slept in his basement and like went home the next day.

Megan used this story to explain how she feels parties in general are risky. She concluded from this adverse experience not to go to parties unless she knows everyone there, “Okay, if I don't know everybody I'm not going.” Even though her experience did not involve a sexual assault, she seemed to view the setting and situation as one in which an assault could have occurred. She concluded from this experience that social gatherings are

dangerous situations and that she should avoid such situations in the future. Megan's experience did not involve being told a warning or advice from a parent or anyone else. Instead, her unlucky experience in itself taught her how social gathering may involve unexpected and potentially dangerous outcomes.

Tracy recounted a story from early in her childhood, when she was about 12 years old. She went to throw her garbage into a trash can at a gas station. However, a stranger had set his glass on the trash can. Inadvertently, Tracy threw out the stranger's glass along with her garbage, and he was not happy about it:

I was at a gas station and we were cleaning out my parent's car ... so we were cleaning it up and there was this cup right next to the trash can, and this guy is smoking a cigarette and talking on the phone, and I said "Oh hey, you know since its actually, it's on a trap door," [the chute for the trash can] I just had to go push it in. He snaps at me and is like "what the hell are you doing, that was my glass, blah, blah." He looked like he was about to hit me. My mom was like, "get inside right now," and she pulled me in the bathroom and she had to tell me what was going on and stuff. Then she told me to stay in the bathroom and stuff like that, it was bad...She told me, this guy has some anger issues and you know "I'm sorry you have to go and see this but some people honestly don't know how to control their anger and they will actually act out on it, so when this happens you have to get away somehow, you know." That was the first time we actually talked about why someone would go and lash out like that.

Tracy gave such a detailed account of this memory, which happened about 10 year prior. Obviously, it had quite an impact on her. The impact was likely from both the stranger's outburst as well as her mother's reaction to the situation. From this, Tracy learned what situations and people may be dangerous. Her mother's instruction to "get inside right now" and "stay in the bathroom" likely also taught Tracy about removing yourself from the situation helps avoid danger.



*Learning from indirect experiences.* Women also learn to fear through indirect experiences told to them by friends or family. These stories may give context to a warning for safety or may serve as warning in itself. Tracy's friend told her a story about a woman being involuntarily drugged while hanging out with friends. This woman had left the social gathering early. Tracy tells her story:

And she's driving down the highway and she feels really funny, she didn't know what was going on, so she pulls over... and she called her boyfriend to pick her up. The next day once she got out of it she asked her friend what was going on, if she knew anything about it. And evidently this guy put meth in her can. I don't know what happened after that, but I thought that was really crazy, why in the world would anyone do that? And it wasn't the guy that lived there; it was a friend of one of the guys who lived there, so it was like a friend, of a friend, of a friend. Put something in her drink and left.

Tracy told me this story while we were talking about safety and risk within the context of party situations and alcohol. This friend may or may not have told Tracy specifically to not leave her drink unattended. Regardless, the take away message was to keep your drink with you at all times.

Some stories had nothing to do with sexual assault, my questions were about fear of sexual assault, but often the women drew from experiences that had made them fearful more generally. This lumping of different fears together is not surprising because fears are often intertwined. Some of the women did talk very specifically about experiences of sexual victimization. Megan explained how she learned what rape was at a really young age:

But I learned at a really young age, like what rape was. My best friend...we're the same age...but she told me when we were in sixth grade that her boyfriend had raped her and one of her friends had known about it. So, probably sixth grade, I learned about rape really easily, and I didn't know what to say. Of course then, as I got older I was like "wow, we should really tell someone about it, although it happened many, many years ago, you should do something about it. But, you know, it's kind of difficult when we were both young, didn't really know what was going on. The guy that did it is in jail now anyways because he was not a good guy. I think he was 16 or 17 and she was in sixth grade. So, clearly he knew he was taking advantage of her. And the way she told it, she told me "I don't know if it was really rape." I was like, "what happened?", and I just let her tell me her story. In sixth grade that's a lot to hear, you know. And apparently he had a gun, which was on his dresser and he put it under the pillow and was like "let's have sex." And she didn't say no and she didn't say yes, she was scared. And she quit talking to the friend who...she wasn't really her friend, they were both dating older boys in the sixth grade and she told her friend Samantha, "don't leave me alone with him." And as soon as they got there her friend went right upstairs with her boyfriend and left them downstairs. And, so, yeah, that happened. So I learned really fast.

Elizabeth described how she saw the party scene as risky and dangerous. Upon further inquiry, Elizabeth's mother had told her "stories about if she went to parties and stuff and people around there would end up taking advantage of different girls and stuff like that." Specifically, Elizabeth's mom was twice sexually assaulted:

It happened to her once when she was like 14 or 15. She went to a party and like this guy like raped her and stuff and then like took her underwear and told all his friends he got in her pants but really he raped her, so... She told me that story, and I was like, "No parties for me"...she said she got raped, I think twice. Once when she was 14 and once when I was like two years old. We lived in these apartments ... and I guess there was a guy there she was kind of friends with and stuff but he ended up raping her but she couldn't do anything about it because she had a kid

in the other room that was like two, so she couldn't really do anything about it. So, I think those are the two times she told me about. So, I'm always like paranoid, like I have to make sure I know the people that I'm around.

Although these experiences are indirect, it is still a powerful source of how women learn what to fear. These stories shape women perspectives of what is dangerous and what to fear. Consequently, the women may use avoidance or defensive behaviors based on these fears. For example, Elizabeth use of her mother's victimization experiences serve as Elizabeth's justification to avoid certain social places and people.

### *Defensive Behaviors*

The women were interviewed at a very transitional period in their lives. None of the women owned the homes in which they currently were residing. Thus, they did not have the means to use certain types of defensive behaviors, such as home security systems or deadbolts. All of these women were either in residence halls or rental units. Three of the women did mention they felt more secure when able to lock a door. Specifically, Heather was at a party and unable to leave because she did not have a sober ride home. She was very glad she was able to lock the door to the room in which she stayed. Some women desired to have secure door locking system, but were not able to have one. This disconnect was easily explained because of their barriers to it, as they were renting and lacked authority to install security devices. Regarding defensive behaviors, there were three more areas of discussion that arose from the interviews, cell phones as mechanisms of safety, views of mace as a tool, and the potential use of physical self-defense skills.

*Defensive behaviors: cell phone.* Often the women would describe their phone as giving them a feeling of security. Specifically eight of the 13 women mentioned their phone in terms of providing them with a sense of safety. Heather described how her phone gave her a sense of security when walking at night: "... [I] always have my cell phone in my hand so I'm ready to like call someone, something started to happen." When I asked her who she would call, she said, "My roommate first or campus security and I have the security number in the phone." Emily and Angelina talked about the different ways to use the phone as a defensive tool, such as to call for help, to take a picture of the perpetrator, or use the GPS. Emily even mentioned throwing the phone at the attacker. None of the women had experiences in which they actually used their phone to call for help. Four of the 13 women mentioned using the phone to talk to someone while walking at night, but this was not to call for help. It served as more of a distraction from their feelings of nervousness or fear while walking at night.

The research on the effectiveness of cell phones as a means of safety show that phones might provide a false sense of safety because being on a cell phone likely reduces awareness. Somewhat surprisingly, a few of the women mentioned talking on the phone as risky due to the reduction of awareness of surroundings. Abby explained that talking on your phone while walking could make you a target to perpetrators because you are more distracted. Elizabeth said, "Or if you look like you're distracted, like if you're talking on your phone or trying to find your keys in your purse and not paying attention that could make you an easier target too." Also, Shannon explained, "be aware of your surroundings and if you're on the phone or even if you're texting too, be constantly

looking around, making sure no one's following you." Several of the women seemed cognizant of negative as well as beneficial outcomes to cell phone use.

*Defensive behaviors: weapons and tools.* Some research studies group the use of any type of weapon into the one category of defensive behaviors, including the use of firearms, knives and mace. Rader and Haynes (2014) propose that weapons (firearms and knives) need to be separated from other defensive behaviors, such as carrying mace. Reflective of the need for that separation, the women I interviewed also seemed to make a clear distinction between firearms and mace.

All of the women talked about mace, not all had mace, but almost all had contemplated the purchase at some point. It is important to note, that all these women were currently in a self-defense class and mace was a topic covered in the class. None of them owned or carried a gun. Out of the 13 women I interviewed, one owned a weapon and one a small pocket knife. Two owned mace. None had ever used a knife or mace. The remaining 10 women did not carry any weapons or tools. Three specifically stated they did not want to and did not feel comfortable carrying a weapon or tool, such as mace. Seven of the women thought mace would be a good idea, but had yet to make a purchase.

Molly was the only participant that actively thought about mace, decided it was a good idea, and followed through with a purchase. Molly discussed a variety of options as weapons for her to carry, such as mace, keys, cell phones and small knives. Molly got mace after she decided it was the best option for her, "Umm, I'm scared to carry weapons. I think it's [mace] the best because you can spray and run. And, the keys, I

don't think it's really helpful. The spray's the best one. It's easy. You can always like hold it in your purse and then, yeah it's easy."

When asked if she would carry a weapon or mace, Megan responded, "I don't know, I guess I've never really been a fan of weapons. But I don't think that pepper spray would be a bad idea. I don't think I would ever carry a gun." Later, Megan told me that in the previous summer her dad had shot her stepmother. Likely her view of weapons is influenced by her close exposure of domestic violence involving guns.

Elizabeth spoke of her uncle's advice for her to carry a small knife instead of mace. She was not too keen on the idea however: "I don't really know, I don't really want to have one [pocket knife] cuz I don't know, I don't really want to stab anyone." Elizabeth also talked in great detail about why she is leery to carry mace. She had a lot of doubt regarding whether or not she would ever use it on someone. She had an incredibly specific hypothetical story about the possibility of mace working against her. She told me what she predicted:

If someone's coming up behind you and like your mace, you try to spray it at them but the wind picks up and it gets back in your own face, you're kind of screwed ... it's just kind of in my head. Cuz I can just see me being the one to like spray it the wrong way in my own face, or like have the wind...the attacker's like "ahhh, what are you doing? You just made my job easier.

Elizabeth was more than just uncomfortable carrying weapons and tools. She also saw the potential for mace to be used against her, as demonstrated in her hypothetical assault.

Elizabeth did not believe herself to be apt enough to use mace. Even more so, she believed that using mace would put her at a disadvantage and even help the attacker.

Emily talked the most in detail about guns compared to all the other women. She was the only woman to mention that she had shot a gun, although not in a defensive context:

...one of her friends got a taser, like whoa, my God, I've shot guns before, I am left eye dominant so guns are not my thing, shot a glock and I liked that, but not going to carry one ever, probably, I mean, I know how to use, not interested in carrying one ... like a taser anything above mace, no not trained enough to carry that.

Emily seemed comfortable to shoot guns, even liked it as an activity. However, she readily discounted the idea of her carrying a gun. She deemed herself not qualified. She also distanced herself from carrying other weapons, such as a taser gun. Emily did admit she thought about carrying mace when she worked in a different area, but quickly recounted, "Yea, I thought about it, this summer I will work in a different area but I don't, wouldn't carry something I have never experience, wouldn't want to mace myself."

Majority of the women declared mace as a "good thing" to get. However, they explained that they did not follow through to purchase mace. Often the excuse was that they did not have time or forgot. Shannon went into detail to explain that she keeps forgetting because she never saw mace on the store shelves, "yeah I should get that and then I never really write it down to get. I'm sure if I saw it sitting some where I'd grab one, but it's never really out [on the shelves at a store]." This shows a mismatch between perceived effectiveness and lack of follow-through.

The failure to get mace may represent cognitively distancing themselves from the reality that they would ever need to use it. These seven women seem to believe mace "in

theory” was a good thing to have, but were not ready to commit to carrying mace. Abby did own mace but when she told me she cognitively distanced herself from it. She did not buy it for herself; instead a roommate’s mom bought it for her. When I asked her where she kept the mace, she replied, “It’s in my purse so it’s not, I should probably have it on my key chain or something but I don’t.” So Abby did have mace, but not readily available, possibly because she does not think she will need it or does not want to use it.

Perhaps owning mace would make their fear too tangible. The women positively endorsed the idea of mace. This endorsement complies with the dominant narrative of public places as dangerous for women. At the same time, the women showed hesitation to actually obtain and readiness to use it. On the other hand, this finding may signify women not buying into the discourse that the public sphere is dangerous. And that it is does not warrant protective measures. Their keen agreement that mace as good idea may also may simply represent the lectures from the self-defense teacher at the time or a preconceived notion of what I, as the interviewer, wanted to hear.

*Defensive behaviors: self-defense.* The women I talked to enrolled in this particular self-defense class based on their preference of the time and day of the week it was offered. There were a multitude of other classes to choose to fill the general education requirement, but they chose the self-defense course. The majority of the women were fairly nonchalant about the impact self-defense had on their perspective and physical skills. I asked open ended questions that focused on their options of the self-defense class. Several women lamented that the self-defense course was too much talking and not enough learning physical skills. A noteworthy fact is that it was these same



women that completely discounted the efficacy of the physical moves they had learned. They believed that these physical moves could be more effective if they spent more classroom time learning and practicing moves. At the same time, these women claimed that none of the moves would help against an attacker anyway. For example, Tracy wishes, “we’d do more hands-on things.” But her confidence level to effectively use the moves is low:

Not very confident ... I’m pretty sure you won’t be able to get out with just a twist of the wrist kind of thing. I really would think I’d need a different defense class if I wanted to learn how to get away...girls are kind of weaker than guys so if you punched him he might be able to still hold onto you, so... I don’t know.

Similarly, Mackenzie complains of too much time spent on lecture in the classroom. But she also recounts many failed attempts of “getting loose” when she practiced the self-defense moves with her boyfriend, “I always joke around with my boyfriend and like do it with him and I can never get out. Like unless I’m super quick about it.” Another example of this disconnect is Elizabeth:

It sounded like fun and I just wanted to learn how to protect myself, but really I’m disappointed with it cuz we spend a good 30 minutes talking and only 20 minutes practicing, and I’m not gonna talk myself out of a situation ever. So I’d rather have more time to actually practice the moves instead ... most the stuff we do in that class, I feel like, yeah right, I’m not gonna be able to use this stuff in real life because if you have a man grabbing your wrists whose hands are obviously bigger than mine, something to wrap around my whole wrist and have a tight grip ... this is not gonna make them let go, I’m not strong enough for that ... I feel like they would look at me and laugh and be like what are you trying to do, like, seriously, cuz that’s not gonna work. I don’t know, those strategies just don’t seem very effective at all.

These women do not believe that learning the physical moves would be effective in defending themselves from an attacker. Yet, they still desire to learn more of physical moves. This desire may simply represent not wanting to listen to lecture in class, which is the alternative to learning physical moves. On the other hand, this desire may represent a thirst for effective self-defense skills. Regardless of the amount of classroom time spent on learning physical moves, women still seem to perceive low efficacy.

Women perceive themselves as unable to defend against victimization based on the fact that they are a women and smaller and weaker than men. This mindset is shown from Tracy, “girls are kind of weaker than guys.” Elizabeth also highlights this view as she explained how the attacker’s hands would be bigger than hers, thus not allow her to get away. Elizabeth anticipates that the attacker would even see her attempts to physically resist as comical, “I’m not strong enough for that ... I feel like they would look at me and laugh and be like what are you trying to do, like, seriously, cuz that’s not gonna work.” These skepticisms illustrate that it may take more time and possibly convincing for women to confidently challenge traditional gendered beliefs and learn new bodily comportment.

Some women were satisfied with the content and structure of the self-defense class. These women believed that the physical skills would help them in the event of an attack. Six of the women had confidence that if attacked, they would be able to physically resist and get away. They talked about having enough physical strength to do whatever it took to get away. Illustrating this point, Emily says, “Oh yeah, I’d punch them in the face, are you kidding me? Of course! Yeah, no, definitely a line, and if you cross it, it’s okay to punch you in the face.” Emily’s confidence and enthusiasm for her approach was

evident as she talked. Emily happened to be one of the women that shared an experience with me about her sexual victimization by an acquaintance. In her account of the night it happened, she alludes to a date rape drug possibly being used. She insinuates that she did not “drink that much” to be as intoxicated as she was that night. She never specifically said the perpetrator used a date rape drug, but she directly her correlates victimization with being more careful as to not leave her alcoholic drink unattended. Regardless, her strategy to avoid sexual assault by “punching him in the face” would not work in that situation.

There is a disconnect between what women see as effective versus what they will likely be able to use to resist a sexual assault. This disconnect is also reflected in existing literature. Women’s strategies they claim to be ready to use, often seem more effective to defend against sexual assault perpetrated by strangers. In other words, if a stranger approached Emily and clearly crossed a line, I believe she would use her strategy of punching and physical resistance. However, based on her lived experience and statistics, a perpetrator is more likely to be an acquaintance. This renders her “punch him in the face” plan as potentially less readily effective.

When assessing their self-defense skills, the women seem to only judge efficacy based on stranger perpetrated assaults. Missing here is the large portion of unwanted sexual attempts that are perpetrated by acquaintances. Heather illustrated how different the avoidance and defensive tactics are with a friend:

Umm, yea I would approach it differently. I know this one guy, recently, we’re really good friends and friends for a long while. Recently [he] tried to like make out with me at this party and I was like what are you doing? I quickly twisted away, let’s just go back ... [we were] in his room at the time and I was just like – bad situation. I quickly

twisted out of it and went away. I'm sure if it was like a different guy, like I don't know, I would have been much more stronger than like more like lets go outside right now instead of like oh let's go outside I don't want to do this.

Heather explains how it was awkward and difficult to get away and avoid her friend that tried to make-out with her. She attributes difficulties to being friends with him for a long time and she thinks that if it was a "different guy" she would have been "stronger" in terms of getting away from the situation. Women in such situations are less likely to jump to physical resistance moves. Instead, women use more non-confrontational tactics, as Heather describes how she kept "twisting away."

Elizabeth told me about her friend's strategy. Again, a non-confrontational strategy just like Heather's story. Elizabeth's friend stole the man's condoms to avoid having sex with him. She was at a man's house and he was pressuring her to have sex. She did not want to have sex with him. Instead of physical resistance or even verbal resistance; she used a roundabout tactic: no condoms equals no sex.

She stole his condoms. He left the room and she stole them, cuz she opened the drawer next to the bed and took all of his condoms, cuz she's like "I didn't want to have sex with him so I stole his condoms instead because then we couldn't do anything." He comes back and he's like, "I could've swore they were here." And she's like "I don't know what you're talking about." And he's like I know they were there, I put my hand on them before I left when I opened that drawer. She's like "I don't know what you're talking about." He was kind of drunk so he never put two and two together...He fell asleep after that and she left, so, yeah, she took his condoms and left.

The option she chose was to steal all of his condoms when he was not looking because that provided her reason to not have sex with him. This highlights that women do not see "just say no" as effective, which she made or may not have tried. Consistent with

Kitzinger's and Frith's (1999) analysis of refusals, these interactions can be tricky and difficult. Elizabeth's friend believed she needed an excuse, preferably one that would be "good enough" and non-negotiable.

### *The "Creeper"*

Women fear sexual assault. Women still go out in public. Women still go to parties and social gathering. Women still date. Women still have sex. Women still do all this. So how do women, in their day to day lives, negotiate their fear of sexual assault? One theme woven in each of the women's interviews was fear of "the creeper." The labels varied slightly between the women, such as, sketchy, shady, creepy, weird, or odd. Consistent through all of the interviews was that this creeper is a man, he poses risk to women, he is a threat to their safety, he should be feared, and he should be avoided. The creeper is not to be trusted. The creeper has strategies to target women his goal is to perpetrate sexual assault.

Almost everyone, men, women, adults, and children, can probably relate to an experience of a person giving them "the creeps." The women I interviewed had very specific reports of creepers. And they pegged those creepers to have very specific intentions, namely trying to "take advantage" of women and "do things he shouldn't do." When I pressed further for them to define "take advantage" the women gave examples of sexual things, touching, and trying to have sex with them. In other words, trying to commit sexual assault.

Women described fear management strategies regarding the creeper. Almost all the women described the same process of spotting the creeper in the crowd. It was hard to

get them to explain their identifiers of the creeper. I believe that they were afraid of coming across as judgmental, many of them added caveats like “it sounds so judgmental” or “I know it is a stereotype, but...” Their descriptions were common in that they described that the creeper as having an *essence* about him. He could be quiet or loud, could be dressed shaggily or well-groomed, but women described a creeper vibe based on “something.” Sarah’s description exemplifies several of the other women’s accounts:

It’s usually umm. I how do I spot those guys? Umm, [pause, struggling for words] this might be stereotypical. To me they just kind of just have this essence of shadiness. Like they are, how do I explain it ... It’s hard. Because I feel like every girl, every person could just pinpoint and like say, that’s that shady guy. Like we all have our own thoughts about it. But it’s, it’s, ah, it could either be like the really quiet guy ... or could be really obnoxious dude.

*Men’s stare.* Common throughout the interviews was description of the way the creeper looked, stared, glared, and watched. This glare was a very specific and clear signal that the man was indeed a creeper. Elizabeth talks about just “getting the creeps” from some men, she mentioned the way they watch or look at her, “Just if they look at me *weird* [emphasis added] or look at me *too long* [emphasis added] or if I notice them like glancing over at me even though they’re doing something else...”

Irrespective of the terminology used to label the glare, the feelings that the glare triggered were similar for all the women. The very first thing that Tracy said when asked about the creepiness of a man is *how* he is “staring.” Abby says, “I don’t know just like *the look* [emphasis added] that they have on their face, kinda weird. They’re looking *too long* [emphasis added] at you and umm I don’t know just get a feeling.” Mackenzie,

echoes this awareness, “Sometimes you can just tell by *the way* [emphasis added] they look at you...It’s almost like they’re *peering* [emphasis added] at you, I don’t know.”

The women describe two components to the creeper’s glare 1) the length of the glare and 2) the vibe or essence they perceive from the glare. Abby struggled to explain the creepiness of the stare, “they’re [the creepers] like the ones sitting in the corner ... they’re staring at you. It’s not right ... And then ya know you can just tell when someone is staring at you weird.” She cannot quite explain it, but she knows it gives her the “feeling of something not right.” In one of her examples, the glare from a man she deemed creepy was powerful enough that Abby and her friends completely left a social gathering. These accounts show the women “doing gendered fear” namely managing their vulnerability against the creeper. To manage their fear of the creeper, women often chose non-confrontational means, such as to leave or avoid him as much as possible.

Men’s accounts of these scenarios are likely different from the women’s perspectives. I am not making a judgment as to whether this creeper is or is not strategizing to perpetrate sexual assault as many women assert. Drawing on the literature, “girl watching” (Quinn 200) serves as a way for men to perform their masculinity. Quinn’s study on “girl watching” was specific to work place sexual harassment. However, I believe the basic premise of applies to this context as well. Even though, there is no verbal interaction between the women and the creeper, this situation exemplifies how men “do masculinity” and women “do femininity.”

Embodied in men’s masculinity is power, strength, control. Men are socialized to exhibit these traits. After fully transitioned, female to male transsexuals described accounts of their male presence making women uncomfortable and fearful (Dozier 2005).

Men may not even intentionally cause fear in women, rather the sheer presence of a man may cause fear in women. Conversely, embodied in women's femininity is passivity and weakness. The intent of the man's glare is irrelevant. The focus here is how women *perceive* the men's glares. To better get at the underlying processes we can use Schwalbe's (1992) concept of the "masculinist self." In other words, the men may or may not mean to perpetrate frightening glares but it still is a fundamental part of being a man in society.

As the men perform their masculinity, women are also performing their femininity. Many of the women talked of their "instincts" as helpful to manage fear. Here is Shannon's account:

Well, a lot of it just *instincts* [emphasis added], like if you think that someone might be, like like, you can sense, I really heighten senses if someone like watching me or like anything like that just being aware how your feeling and if you noticed anyone that been following you.

Women often label these "instincts" as natural or common sense. However, I would argue that this is their gendered vulnerability being performed. Women's "instincts" to assess risk and subsequently manage that risk or fear is exactly what women have been socialized to do; thus, a successful performance of femininity. Categorization of these creeper glares on the continuum of sexual victimization shows that the power of the glare represents harassing behaviors directly toward women. The glare is a subtle (or maybe not so subtle) form of sexual harassment. These creeper glares have *so much power*. Abby left a social place based on a look from a man, no confrontation or verbal interaction, not even hand gestures, solely *a look*. Men are socialized to uphold this dominance. Women are socialized to avoid or pacify to men's dominance.



## LIMITATIONS

Like most research, this study has limitations. First, due to the small student based sample size, these results cannot be generalized to a broader population. Also there was selection bias because all of the women recruited were all enrolled in a self-defense class. Another selection bias was that only women that volunteered or self-selected were included. Surveys and quantified scales work well in research to standardize questions across all participants. My intention was to elicit women's in-depth explanations about their understandings and experiences of fear of sexual assault. This study draws its conclusions based on the patterns that emerged across women's narratives.

Secondly, the majority of the participants were white. Overall, there were not enough participants in this study to deduce any possible impact of race and ethnicity. The two international students in the study seemed to have the highest adherence of avoidance behaviors. However, due to complex matrixes of social variables (age, gender, socioeconomic class, sexuality, race, and ethnicity) and the small sample size, I cannot draw any conclusion based solely on their status as international students.

Third, the motivation the women described to take this self-defense class was quite variable. On one end of the broad spectrum was Abby who was very determined and motivated to take the class. She even told a story of becoming frantic when her computer powered down while she tried to register. On the other end of the spectrum were women who recounted taking the class solely based on the available course schedule. For example, not wanting to take any classes on Fridays for the sake of a three day weekend. Samples of women from other self-defense classes may have engaged or

invested women in self-defense class. These samples of women are likely to gain more insight into women whose motivation stems from really wanting to learn self-defense.

Lastly, it would have been ideal to interview the women before the first self-defense class started, at a mid-way point through the semester, and again after the class ended. I conducted my interviews at a single time point when the semester was about two-thirds finished. One of the interview questions was about how the self-defense class may have changed how they look at sexual assault. The answers produced opinions about the class. However, pre and post interview sessions would have been much more telling of the influence of self-defense skills.

## DISCUSSION

One of the goals of the feminist anti-rape movement is to debunk rape myths. Specifically, the rape myth to fear stranger rapes has been exposed as rhetoric to keep women out of the public sphere. Much sexual assault education seeks to raise awareness of the prevalence of acquaintance sexual assault. Research continues to show the pervasiveness of sexual assault, still the majority perpetrated by acquaintances. Understandably, the awareness of acquaintance danger has not *replaced* the awareness of stranger rapes. Women are taught to fear both. This fear does have logic because there is real risk for sexual victimization within both the public and private spheres. Women's fears are valid.

In addition to this stranger versus acquaintance danger, this study describes another demographic that women fear, the creeper. Creepers seem to transcend the boundaries of stranger/acquaintance and private/public ideology. Creepers are men that

may perpetrate in a public setting or semi-private (e.g. house party). The creeper is sometimes a stranger or could be an acquaintance. Often, it seems that the creeper is situated at the outer edge of women's circle of friends. This creeper may a real threat or may simply represent the embodiment of women's fears of sexual assault. The fear of the creeper could represent an odd midway point of not quite stranger but not quite acquaintance danger either.

This is important based on the similar rationale of why debunking the stranger rapist myth is important. Women may fixate their fear on the creeper regardless of statistical risk. For example, the women talked in great detail about the creeper, his intentions, and their fear of the creeper. These were the same women who reported victimization by close acquaintances. Rather than point to acquaintances as perpetrators, women still fixate their fear on the creeper. This shows the influence of dominant cultural narratives that define stranger rape as the only *real* rape.

Developing strategies to decrease women's fear or decrease avoidance behaviors (thereby increasing their freedom and mobility) is a complicated process that has ethical implications. Talking with women about these topics elicits several nuances regarding what they perceive as risky and how they manage their fears. Women fear and plan for potential stranger assaults far more often than they fear or plan for acquaintance assaults, even though acquaintance assaults are much more likely to occur. Importantly however both types of sexual assaults are more likely to happen to women than to men. A campaign for women to have less fear of stranger assault cannot be fought because it is a *reality* that when this type of assault happens, it generally happens to women. Strangers commit sexual assaults against women every day. Acquaintances and friends commit

sexual assaults against women every day. This is a lose-lose situation for women.

Women will never feel safe or be safe in a society that structurally supports gender inequality and sexual coercion.

Given the pervasive and normalized rhetoric of sexual coercion in our society, sexual assault will not stop until violence against women also ends. To end sexual assault and all violence against women, we need to challenge the gender inequalities that still reign supreme. Specifically we need to challenge and change normative institutions of masculinity. The only ones that can stop sexual assaults are men. Men need to be taught to how not use sexual pressure and coercion. In the meantime, women are left to their own devices to manage their fears and try to decrease the risk of victimization. Using avoidance behaviors, women remove themselves from places and interactions and sometimes do not go anywhere. Using defensive behaviors, some women believe they are prepared to physically resist an assault using whatever is necessary, mace, punches, and kicking. Unfortunately, women may still be missing crucial strategies to defend against acquaintances that attempt sexual assault.

Through my conversations with the women in this study, I realize there are few avenues available for them to stop unwanted sexual advances. Elizabeth's story of her friend that stole the man's condoms is the quintessential example of the ways women try to negotiate away from unwanted sexual advances. This woman anticipated no verbal, physical or behavioral resistance that would have been as successful to thwart the man's unwanted sexual advances. Instead, she stole his condoms. No assertiveness training, rape myth debunking, or self-defense classes have ever taught "condom stealing" as a method. However, taking away the means to have sex was successful to resist *those*

sexual advances. Clearly the absence of condoms would not thwart sexual assault in a multitude of other scenarios. I am not advocating that any self-defense course start teaching condom stealing curriculum. However, it happened to work for this woman. In some situations stealing condoms may not have been effective. What I want to point out is that a large portion of skills taught to women will not help them defend against acquaintances perpetrated sexual assault.

Women need to feel confident and empowered during the moments that they are trying to nonchalantly “twist away” from male friends being sexually aggressive or the moments in which women need to steal condoms to be safe from unwanted sexual aggression. These are the moments in which women need a cultural narrative to draw from that empowers them; one that emphasizes the wrongness of sexual coercion rather than the “naturalness” of men’s sexual aggression. However, in reality women are often left scriptless in these moments.

When women attempt to get away from men being sexually aggressive, they use the interaction patterns they’ve learned throughout their lives, which include psychological barriers such as the obligation to “be nice” and “put others’ needs before their own” (Gidycz and Dardis 2014; Rozee and Koss 2001). Educational programs and some self-defense classes seek to overcome some of the “be nice” barriers by teaching women to be more assertive. Would more assertiveness help the women better communicate their refusal to have sexual contact? Possibly. But do men to which women need to be more assertive in their responses actually ask permission to have sex? Likely the dynamics of the interaction are much more nuanced than that. How are women supposed to be assertive against *unspoken* coercion and pressures from men? The whole

avenue of logic basically surmises that women should be educated to overcome socialized scripts of femininity. Then, when confronted by a sexually aggressive man, be assertive enough to overcome the scripts of femininity *and* masculinity that both parties have known all their lives. After all, men have ingrained in themselves traditional scripts of masculinity. Through these learned and ingrained scripts of masculinity, men may not even be aware of using sexual coercion. Men may be unable to take the view of women and understand the pressure and fear she may be feeling. Assertiveness training may be seen as putting the responsibility on women to stop sexual assaults. Women are given the task to change their socialized scripts of femininity. Meanwhile, men are not given the task to change their socialized scripts of masculinity.

Back again to this point: the only ones who can stop sexual assault are men. Furthermore, the only way to stop men's sexual assaults is to overcome the inequalities within the patriarchal structure of society, both in ideology and the ways that ideology becomes infused in gendered behavioral expectations. One avenue would be to actively teach men and women to fully comprehend the meaning of consensual sex, dynamics of clarifying consent, and the idea that consenting is a process. Consent is not a singular fixed moment in time. Consent is a continuous process that seeks to empower and validate everyone involved.

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## APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

### Warm-up

1. Can you tell me a little bit about yourself?
  - a. How long have you been at MSU, Mankato?
2. Do you live in Mankato? How do you like it?
  - a. Do you live on or off campus?
  - b. Rent or own? Apartment or house?
  - c. Do you live alone or with others? What is your relationship to the people you live with (family, peers, intimate partner, etc.)?

### Learning Risk and Safety

1. Have you heard warnings directed at women (including you) about their (your) risk for sexual assault? In other words, have you heard others give warnings to women (you) on how to be safe from sexual assault? What things did you hear?
  - a. Tell me about what they said and how they said it. How old were you?
  - b. And who was it (what relationship between them, e.g. mom, friend, aunt, etc.)?
2. Did anyone specifically advise you to use a weapon or a device of some sort for safety reasons (e.g. mace, peppery spray)?
  - a. Tell me about what they said and how they said it. How old were you?
  - b. And who was it (what relationship between them, e.g. mom, friend, aunt, etc.)?
3. Have you learned about women's risk and safety regarding sexual assault from any television programs or movies? Do you feel that the media portrayal of sexual assault was realistic? Why or why not?
4. Do you know anyone that has had experience(s) with sexually assault? What is your relationship to them? What kind of thoughts or feelings did you have after hearing about that/her experience?
5. Is there anything else you would like to mention about your thoughts and feelings about risks and safety regarding sexual assault?

### *Managing Vigilance*

6. Do you feel that these warnings influence your thoughts or behaviors? How so?
  - a. Do you ever find yourself thinking of these types of warnings at any point during the day or night?
7. Do you ever feel safe from the risk of being sexually assaulted?
  - a. Specific environments? Situations? People?
8. Do you ever feel afraid of being sexual assaulted? Tell me about those feelings.
  - a. Specific environments? Situations? People?
9. Tell me about any emotions and feelings you have during the moments when you feel unsafe or at risk. In other words, when you feel that you have to carry out the advice (e.g. keys in hand, not walk alone, etc) – How did you feel?
10. How would you compare the feelings and emotions you have, if any, to your friends? Have you ever been with your friends when you feel at risk? How did your friends react? Similar to you or differently?



11. Is there anything else you would like to mention about your thoughts and feelings about the amount of caution you may take regarding sexual assault?

*Self-Defense*

12. Tell me about the self-defense class you are taking at MSU, Mankato.
  - a. Why did you decide to enroll?
  - b. What kinds of things are you learning about?
13. What, if any, do you think were the most important things/knowledge/skills you gained from that class?
  - a. How do you feel about using these self-defense strategies on someone you don't know?
  - b. How do you feel about using these self-defense strategies on someone you do know (friend or acquaintance)?
14. As you look back on the knowledge you received from the self-defense class – how, if at all, did the class change the way you thought about risk and protection regarding sexual assault? In other words - how, if at all, do you feel that the class has influenced your outlook on sexual assault?

*Demographics:*

- a. How old are you?
- b. What racial category do you use to describe yourself?

*Ending*

15. Is there anything else you think I should know to understand you feelings and experiences better?
16. Is there anything else you would like to ask me?

## APPENDIX B: INFORMED CONSENT FORM

You are invited to volunteer in a research study. This study is being directed by Jessica Friton and Dr. Vicki Hunter of the Sociology Department at Minnesota State University, Mankato. You were selected as a participant in this study because you are a woman and a student in a self-defense class. We ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to participate in this study.

To gain information about the experiences and feelings women have regarding fear and safety from sexual assault, we are conducting interviews with women in Self-Defense for Women (HP130) at MSU, Mankato. The interview will cover the following areas: general questions about yourself, questions about your thoughts and feelings regarding sexual assault, questions about your experiences with self-defense classes.

If you agree to participate in this interview, please sign this Informed Consent Form. You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep. The interview will last about one hour and will be tape recorded so that your answers are represented accurately. Signed consent forms and tapes used during the interview will be stored in a locked cabinet in the office of my advisor, Vicki Hunter (Armstrong Hall 113N). The tapes will only be stored until they are transcribed. Following transcription of the taped interview, the tapes will be destroyed. This consent form is the only document that will bear your name and only Jessica Friton and Vicki Hunter will have access to the consent forms. Fake names and code numbers will be used on the tape-recording, the transcripts, and all published reports, thus they will not contain information that can be linked to you personally. At the end of the interview, you will be able to choose one \$5.00 gift card to either Chipotle, Noodles and Company, or Starbucks as a token of appreciation for your time.

The most significant risks related to participation in this study involve the emotional or psychological risks associated with talking about topics (e.g. the fear of sexual assault) that may be upsetting to you. We would encourage you to skip any questions you do not want to answer and will remind you that you can choose to end the interview at any time without consequence. We do not want you to experience any emotional or psychological difficulties as a result of helping us with this study. If you would like to discuss your feelings after participation in this study, we would like to inform you of free and confidential services and resources for you. These services and resources are listed on the second page of this consent form.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You do not have to be in this study if you do not want to be. You may refuse to answer any question(s) by simply telling me you would prefer to skip that question. You can terminate the interview at any time by telling me you wish to end the interview.

This project has been reviewed and approved by the MSU, Mankato Institutional Review Board. Question concerning your rights as a participant in this research may be addressed to the Institutional Review Board Administrator, Dr. Anne Blackhurst at (507)

389-2321. If you have questions about this study, please contact Jessica Friton at (507) 227-8393 or Vicki Hunter at (507) 389-5611.

**I have read the material above, and any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that a copy of this form will be made available to me for relevant information and telephone numbers. I agree to participate in this interview and know that my responses will be recorded on audiotape. I realize that I may terminate this interview at any time and that I can skip any questions I do not want to answer.**

I am at least 18 years of age: \_\_\_\_\_ (Participant's initials)

I give permission to release my name to the respective Self-Defense Instructor for 4 extra credit points: \_\_\_\_\_ (Participant's initials)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's Name Printed

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Interviewer's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## APPENDIX C: SEXUAL ASSAULT SERVICES HANDOUT

### On-Campus (MSU, Mankato):

- **Women's Center**  
218 Centennial Student Union  
Mankato, MN 56001  
507-389-6146  
<http://www.mnsu.edu/wcenter/>
  
- **Sexual Violence Education Program**  
Coordinator: Lauren Pilnick  
Direct line: (507) 389-5127  
[lauren.pilnick@mnsu.edu](mailto:lauren.pilnick@mnsu.edu)  
218 Centennial Student Union  
(Located in the Women's Center)  
Mankato, MN 56001  
<http://www.mnsu.edu/here4you/>
  
- **Counseling Center**  
Provides free, confidential appointments  
245 Centennial Student Union  
Phone: (507) 389-1455  
<http://www.mnsu.edu/counseling/>

### Mankato and Blue Earth Services:

- **Blue Earth County Sexual Violence Resource Center**  
410 South Fifth St.  
P.O. Box 3526  
Mankato, MN 56002-3526  
(507) 304-4295  
HOPE Line (24 hours):  
1-866-806-6171  
<http://www.co.blue-earth.mn.us/svrc/index.php>
  
- **LA-MANO, Inc.**  
Provides bicultural and bilingual services  
(507) 344-8361  
(507) 344-8590  
1400 Madison Avenue  
Suite 218  
Mankato, MN 56001  
<http://lamanomn.org/default.aspx>

### Additional Resources:

- **Crime Victim Services, Inc.**  
305 S. Minnesota Avenue Suite 102  
St. Peter, MN 56082  
Office: 507-934-2222  
24hr Safeline: 1-800-630-1425
  
- **Committee Against Domestic Abuse (CADA)**  
Located in Mankato  
507-625-8688  
Crisis Line: (800) 477-0466  
<http://www.inspire-hope.org/>
  
- **ISJ Hospital**  
Suicide Prevention Hotline: 1-800-865-0606