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Gender Identity and Sense of Self Sufficiency

Abstract

This study examines the effects of gender identity on sense of safety on a college campus. Data was collected through an online survey sent out to students at the University of New Hampshire. Students answered nominal and ordinal questions about their gender identity, as well as Likert-scale questions regarding opinions on safety while walking on campus. The results of the survey showed correlation between gender identity and sense of safety while walking alone at night, however, the survey showed no correlation between gender identity and sense of safety while walking at night with a friend. Collecting data from a larger and more representative sample would improve findings on students, specifically those who identify as transgender and non-conforming.

Introduction and Literature Review

Though former research has suggested that one's gender affects attitudes and behavior regarding crime and victimization, I chose to specifically conduct my own research on the effects of gender identity on sense of self sufficiency at UNH. Violence against women is one of the most significant problems involving gender inequality around the world (Frazier and Falmagne 2014). My main concern involving gender inequality is the toll it takes on women's sense of self-sufficiency. By sense of self-sufficiency, I mean her personal confidence in the ability to take care of herself if she were ever threatened. Between 20% and 25% of college women have been victims of completed or attempted rape (Fisher, Cullen, and Turner 2000). For this reason, I am interested in researching campus safety and violence against male and female students. We live

in a society that is full of fearful women and fearless men (Starkweather 2007); with the majority of sociological surveys conducted being from a student sample, it has become explicit that this particular mindset exists on college campuses.

Bridget Turner Kelly and Alina Torres expressed in their article the term “Chilly Climate,” which was coined by researchers Roberta Hall and Bernice Sandler (2006). This refers to the idea that female undergraduate students do not fully possess equal opportunities as men. This can refer to academic and social opportunities. Connecting this term to campus safety, Sarah Starkweather’s results in her article found that most students usually felt safe on campus, but women were more likely than men to have felt unsafe (Starkweather 2007). My findings support this claim. Starkweather found that students used many different strategies to make themselves feel safer. However, men were less likely to rely on avoidance strategies, while some women self-imposed restrictions such as not going out alone after dark. Also, men were “unwilling or unable to relate to questions about fear and safety, explicitly or implicitly [seeing] fear as a ‘women's issue’” (Starkweather 2007:355).

Additionally, Chadwick L. Menning (2009) focuses on the environments surrounding fraternity and non-fraternity parties on a college campus. His main finding was that men and women picked up on different cues while evaluating their current safety. However, women felt no more threatened than men, which was my null hypothesis. This pattern amongst gender identities is a result of women’s sense of self sufficiency being weaker than men’s. The second article used a telephone survey conducted on 1,010 women, both undergraduate and graduate students, about “victimization, perceptions of danger, worry about crime, and precautionary behavior” (Wilcox, Jordan, and Pritchard 2007). In one of their subtopics, the authors concluded

that fear during the nighttime exceeds fear during the daytime, however women fear for their safety more than men at any time of the day. These articles found contradicting results, which is why I chose to further explore this phenomenon.

Research Methods

In early November, our Research Methods class sent out a survey to students at the University of New Hampshire. We collected answers from 459 respondents, although only 362 of those respondents completed my dependent variable survey question. My dependent variable was gender identity, so students were able to say if they identified as male, female, transgender man, transgender woman, nonconforming, or other. My independent variable was sense of safety on campus, and was expressed through multiple Likert scale-type questions. I focused on two of them: feeling safe from any possible threat while walking on campus alone at night, and feeling safe from any possible threat while walking on campus with a friend at night.

Results and Discussion

First, I looked at the overall gender identities of my respondents, as shown in **Figure 1**. **Figure 1** shows that 22.9% of respondents identified as male, and 74.9% identified as female. Finally, 2.2% identified as transgender man, gender nonconforming, and other. No one identified as transgender woman. Since there was such a small portion of the sample that identified as something other than male or female, I knew the lack of representation would influence my findings. It is important to keep in mind while discussing my findings that a more representative sample would make my results more valid and reliable.

Figure 1

Gender Identity	Count	Percentage
Man	94	22.90%
Woman	307	74.90%
Transgender Man	3	0.73%
Transgender Woman	0	0%
Gender Nonconforming	5	1.23%
Other	1	0.24%
Total	410	100%

I also split up my sample by grade at the University of New Hampshire. Of the sample, 15% are freshman at UNH, and about 22% are sophomores. Juniors represent 40% of the sample, seniors hold 18% and 5% are grad or nontraditional students. Although I did not take class standing into account when cross-tabulating my variables, knowing this gives me a better picture of what my sample consists of.

My independent variable was gender identity, which was shown in **Figure 1** above. The majority of my sample identified as female, and the second highest response was male. This was a good representation of males and females on campus, however there was not a good representation of people who identified as transgender, nonconforming, or other. This influenced my cross-tabulation drastically. Not having a good representation of people who identify as someone other than male or female lead to falsely high percentages of responses in their

category. Although it shows that the majority of this category feel unsafe alone at night, the dependent variable, it was only one more respondent than the category of feeling safe. I kept this issue in mind when looking at sense of safety.

My dependent variable was sense of safety on campus. **Figure 2** below shows the responses to the question, “Do you agree with the following statement “I feel safe from any possible threat while walking on campus alone at night”? The majority of respondents expressed agreement or strong agreement with the statement provided. However, a large portion of my respondents expressed disagreement with this statement. Thirty percent of the sample disagreed, and 3% strongly disagree that they felt safe on campus alone at night.

Figure 2

Response	Percentage
Strongly Agree	20.49%
Agree	46.99%
Disagree	29.51%
Strongly Disagree	3.01%
Total	366

To see if accompaniment of a friend would change people’s answer, I decided to ask the question “Do you agree with the following statement “I feel safe from any possible threat while walking on campus with a friend at night”? I got the following results, as shown in **Figure 3**.

Figure 3

Response	Percentage
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Strongly Agree	47.12%
Agree	46.30%
Disagree	6.30%
Strongly Disagree	0.27%
Total	365

As you can see, the percentages shift but only slightly. The majority still express some level of agreement with the statement they they feel safe when walking with a friend at night. Adding accompaniment of a friend to the mix, the percentage of disagreement dropped to a total of 6.3%. That means 26% of my respondents who do not feel safe a night when they are alone, *do* feel safe at night if they are with at least one other friend.

Figure 4

Gender Identity and Sense of Safety

		What is your current gender identity?			
		Men	Women	Transgender Men, Transgender Women, Gender Nonconforming, Other	Total
Please indicate your agreement with the following statements. - I feel safe from any possible threat while walking on campus alone while at night.	Strongly agree, Agree	21 91.6%	167 80.75%	8 42.86%	241 67.89%
	Disagree, Strongly Disagree	2 8.3%	138 69.27%	4 21.43%	159 44.11%
	Total	24 100.0%	205 100.00%	12 100.00%	361 100.00%
Please indicate your agreement with the following statements. - I feel safe from any possible threat while walking on campus with a friend at night.	Strongly agree, Agree	81 97.58%	298 92.36%	6 30.77%	341 95.42%
	Disagree, Strongly Disagree	2 2.4%	21 6.64%	1 5.26%	31 8.58%
	Total	83 100.0%	319 100.00%	7 100.00%	389 100.00%

		What is your current gender identity?	
		Men	Women
Please indicate your agreement with the following statements. - I feel safe from any possible threat while walking on campus alone while at night.	Chi Square	39.94*	
	Degree of Freedom	2	
	p-value	0.00	

*Note: The Chi-Square approximation may be inaccurate—expected frequency less than 5.

		What is your current gender identity?	
		Men	Women
Please indicate your agreement with the following statements. - I feel safe from any possible threat while walking on campus with a friend at night.	Chi Square	3.52*	
	Degree of Freedom	2	
	p-value	0.17	

*Note: The Chi-Square approximation may be inaccurate—expected frequency less than 5.

Figure 4 above is a cross tabulation of my independent and dependent variables: gender identity and sense of safety. My directional alternative hypothesis is that women are more likely to feel unsafe walking on campus, specifically alone at night. For the purpose of my hypothesis, I focused on studying the effects gender identity has on a person's sense of safety on campus alone at night. My p value of 0 is less than alpha .05, which means that my findings are statistically significant. I was able to reject my null hypothesis, that gender does not affect a person's sense of self sufficiency.

Although my findings are significant, looking at the percentages brought me to the conclusion that it was not as correlated as I had expected. I previously acknowledged that my sample was not a good representation of people who identified as transgender, nonconforming, or other, ultimately leading to falsely high percentages in that category. To account for this, I merged these categories into one and found that 43% of people who identified as someone other than male or female did not feel safe alone at night. Although this is a high percentage, it only accounts for three people who took my survey. Because such a small portion of my sample were part of this demographic, I could not make a clear assumption regarding sense of safety in their category.

Focusing on people who identified as men and women, 91.6% of men said that they felt safe walking on campus alone at night, while about 61% of women said the same. Although that is still a majority of women who feel safe, it is only 2/3 of the respondents. I was hoping for a bigger portion to make up the majority. Looking at the other end of the spectrum, 8.4% of men said they felt unsafe walking alone on campus, while 39% of women said that they felt unsafe. That is more than five times as many men. To get a more generalized idea of what could be the

influential factor – walking at night or being alone – I looked at respondents’ answers about feeling safe walking at night with a friend. I found no correlation between gender identity and walking with a friend at night on campus. I therefore failed to reject my original null hypothesis before specifying accompaniment in the survey.

Conclusion

Overall my findings were surprising but still important. I was able to reject my null hypothesis because women were more likely to disagree with feeling safe alone at night than men. However, still a majority of both men and women agreed with feeling safe walking on campus alone at night.

Before conducting this survey, I was aware of few reasons why women would be less likely to feel safe than men in various situations. Taking a class on sexualized violence enabled me to account for this phenomenon. We live in a society that hyper-sexualizes the female body, as well as hyper-masculinizes the male body. Women are meant to be attractive and always seen as a prized possession of someone else. We are taught that men are supposed to be big, strong, and a force to be reckoned with. When these two generalizations are put next to each other, men become slightly threatening to women. The main problem with society is that we teach women to not get raped, but we don’t teach nearly enough men to not rape. The main purpose that I had with conducting this research is to show people that sexualized violence, and the fear of it, has

not decreased in women at all. Women are raised to be on their toes at all time, and to be concerned for their own safety. This is not an issue that can be addressed overnight.

Limitations

Some limitations in how I collected data negatively impacted my findings. First, using only data collected from one university campus makes for a non-representative sample. This limited my ability to make generalizations about college students nationwide or worldwide. I also focused on college students, so my findings don't extend to adults. Also, not everyone who started the survey was successful in completing my specific questions. We were able to get 459 students to take this survey. However, only 362 respondents, or 79% of the total respondents, answered my questions on sense of safety. This small sample did not help me to get an ideal representation of our campus population. Finally, the lack of representation of the transgender and nonconforming community influenced my percentages considerably when looking at my cross-tabulation. This led me to fail to make a strong conclusion about their overall opinions of campus safety here at UNH. If I were to conduct a similar study, I would want to have a stronger representation of all gender identities so that I can make a conclusion that involved all parties.

Citations

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