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FEAR JOURNALS: A STRATEGY FOR TEACHING ABOUT THE SOCIAL CONSEQUENCES OF GENDERED VIOLENCE*

Although violence against women is an important topic for many sociology classes, teaching about it can be problematic. Students may see violence against women as an individual rather than social problem, may trivialize or blame victims, or may react defensively. In this paper, I present an approach to teaching about violence that addresses some of these difficulties. Students keep a one-day journal of their experiences of fear and use of safety strategies, and then analyze their findings both individually and in discussion with their classmates. This analysis helps students to see violence not simply as an individual experience, but as a form of social control that differently affects social groups. In this paper, I describe this exercise, illustrate its effectiveness using excerpts from students journals, and discuss the advantages and disadvantages of this pedagogical approach.

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VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN is an important topic for many classes in sociology, including introductory classes, the sociology of gender, criminology, stratification, and social problems. Yet teaching about such violence can present a variety of problems. Konradi notes that sexual assault survivors often feel silenced when violence against women is discussed. As one of her students said, "I'm afraid to talk... I'm sure they [other students] will think badly of me; I've heard the stupid things they say. Sometimes I leave class and I just ache inside" (Konradi 1993:13). Non-survivors may also lapse into uncomfortable silence: in my own classes I have observed such students sometimes censoring themselves for fear of saying something "wrong." At other times, students may trivialize sexual assault, blame those who are victimized, or react with disbelief to information on the prevalence and consequences of violence against women. A case in point is the young man in a recent class

who stated that he doubted the information I had just presented on date rape because, in his words, "I know a lot of promiscuous women."

Another problem I have observed is what I call "otherizing": constructing sexual assault as something that happens to other kinds of people, unlike oneself. This interpretation marginalizes any survivors in the classroom (Yllo 1988). Similarly, students (and instructors) may limit their discussion of violence against women to abstract rates and issues, ignoring the emotional content of the topic and the potential resonance with students' real lives and experiences. Resistance from male students is another potential pitfall. Men may react defensively to this topic, feeling that the class' discussion of the widespread prevalence of sexual assault suggests that all men are to blame (Davis 1992; Neitz 1985). The fact that most perpetrators of sexual violence are men and that most victims are women may encourage students to see this issue as one of "men vs. women," without recognizing that most men do not commit violence against women, or that gender is not the only social status targeted for violence; both women and men may be targeted because of disability, sexual identity, race, religion, and so on. Paradoxically,

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cally, women may also resist learning about violence against women because they may want to deny both their personal vulnerability and the more general oppression of women (Davis 1992; Neitz 1985). Students may be uncomfortable with conflict inside or outside the classroom (Lusk and Weinberg 1994); discussing violence against women, and gender issues more generally, can provoke substantial conflict. All of these reactions may impede student learning.

Missing from all of these reactions is the understanding that violence against women is a social problem. In other words, gendered violence is caused by social structural as well as individual factors, and is a problem that affects us all, even if we have not ourselves been victimized. I address this point in my classes directly, pointing out that if current estimates are accurate, more than 25 percent of the female students in the class have experienced actual or attempted rape (Koss, Gidycz, and Wisniewski 1987), and many male and female students have experienced or witnessed battering and abuse. This means that even if a student has not been victimized, he or she likely knows others who have. My classes have discussed the social costs of violence against women, noting that we all pay for this violence indirectly through medical care, legal costs, and welfare costs. Male students' defensiveness is eased by emphasizing that most men do not commit violence against women, and that the positive efforts of nonviolent men are needed to solve the problem.

I have found these strategies to be helpful in my own classes. However, I offer here an additional strategy that is highly effective in conveying both the centrality of violence to women's lives and the social nature of its causes and consequences. I approach the topic of violence by asking students to examine the issue of fear. Fear is a widespread experience; it affects those who have not been victimized as well as those who have. Focusing on the experience of fear allows all students to connect with the issue of violence. This is a pedagogical issue as well as

a practical one. We know that connecting course material to students' lives helps them understand and retain the information (McKeachie 1999). The emotion of fear is not stigmatized in the same ways as the experience of victimization, and therefore it may be easier for students to discuss in classes. Moreover, examining patterns in fear suggests how the threat of violence differently affects the lives of social groups—most obviously women and men, but also groups defined by race, ethnicity, sexual identity, age, and physical ability—highlighting the social structural nature of fear and violence (Neitz 1985). Over time, I have developed an exercise that helps students connect this issue with their own experiences and then combine their individual insights with those of other students to see the larger social patterns.

Below, I describe the exercise and how I use it in class. I then discuss student reactions to the exercise, and its potential pitfalls and advantages. I conclude with a summary of how this exercise helps solve the pedagogical problems I describe above. Because this exercise can be used in many different classes, the in-class discussion can take a variety of directions. I focus on how I have used it in a sociology of gender class, but I briefly indicate alternative lines of discussion that may be appropriate for other classes.

THE FEAR JOURNAL

Instructions

The exercise has two parts: a take-home journal assignment and a subsequent discussion during class time. The journal assignment asks students to keep a one-day log of their feelings of fear and use of safety strategies, and then to analyze the role that fear plays in their lives. The goal is to help students use their own experiences as a basis for sociological analysis, making connections between course material and personal experience (Roth 1985). Students receive the following assignment:

Fear Journal

The purpose of this exercise is to increase your awareness of (1) the role danger and fear play in your life and (2) the ways in which you keep yourself safe. To complete this exercise, choose one day that you expect to be an average one for you. On that day, carefully note and record the following:

1. Every time you feel endangered, note where you are, who you are with, and what about the situation feels dangerous or unsafe to you. (If you never feel endangered, please note that.)
2. Every time you do something to keep yourself safe or to reduce your risk of violence (even if you aren't feeling particularly endangered when you do it), note where you are and what specifically you do to protect yourself.

As you write your journal, be as specific and detailed as possible. Then, reflect on what you have written, and describe:

3. Any conclusions you draw about the role of fear in your life, and
4. Your reactions to this exercise.

Students are told to bring their typewritten journals to class, and to be prepared to discuss them with their classmates.

Students often ask me to define what I mean by the terms "fear" and "violence." What kind of violence counts—emotional, physical, institutional? What kinds of fear are important? I take this as an opportunity to discuss the meaning of these concepts, to students individually and to society more generally. In classes that focus on violence, this is an extensive and foundational discussion for the class. In other classes, the discussion is more abbreviated, and my main comment is that students should use a definition that is meaningful to them. Some people define fear quite narrowly, to mean fear of individual, physical assault. Others define it more broadly, to include fear of low grades, car accidents, or police brutality. These differences can be discussed and analyzed in class.

Journal Content

Student papers usually range from one to four typewritten pages, although in some cases individual students have written eight pages or more. In general, students are careful and insightful observers of their daily behavior and emotions around the issues of danger and fear. What they write closely mirrors social scientific writing on gender differences in fear. In general, women students provide extensive, detailed journals of a day filled with moments of caution and fear. For example, this young woman describes the first few minutes of her day.¹

Every morning I leave for work at 6:15 a.m. while it's still dark outside. Every day I step outside of my door and look around the parking area to see if there are any lurking, bad men. I then walk quickly to my car, having my key all ready to put in the lock. After I get in I lock the door. When driving to work I also have a few things I do to keep myself safe. I never look at other drivers while stopped at a light, for fear that they will notice me and attack me in some way and I also go the speed limit, so that a police man will not have a reason to pull me over. When I finally do get to work I still have a few more precautions to take. The office where I work is in a commercial area and hardly any one else except for me starts work at 6:30 a.m., so it is a little scary. While I drive into the building area I scan the trees and bushes for any sign of anyone lurking. I stop and park my car and wait a few seconds, still scanning the area. I get my keys ready and sprint to the door of the office. I get in and lock the door behind me. I don't turn on any lights in the section that faces the street because I don't want anyone to know I am here. [female student]

In contrast, male students generally say they feel little or no fear, or focus on fears not related to violence, such as fear of failure in school, or of being involved in a car accident. The following quotes are typi-

¹All excerpts from student journals are used with permission. Names and other identifying details have been changed to protect confidentiality.

cal of male students:

I never felt endangered throughout this whole day. The only time I may feel threatened is when I bike late at night in [a large city], but I usually stick to good roads and avoid bad areas. On any given day... I rarely have to think about keeping myself safe. [male student]

There was not one point in my day where I felt unsafe or any fear at all. [male student]

When I think about the role danger plays in my life and how I keep myself safe in everyday life I find identifying examples is difficult... Fear does not play a big role in my life. I do not feel threatened by many things, mainly because of my size and the fact that I am male. If anything I notice that other people are intimidated by me, they are either afraid to make eye contact or say hello. [male student]

The contrast between the average male and average female journal is dramatic; this becomes obvious to the students during the small group discussions. It is important to note, however, that fear is more stigmatized for men than for women. Women are expected to feel fear, but men are expected to feel and display courage in the face of danger. I address this issue in two ways in class: I discuss these gender expectations explicitly with the class, and I ask the students to report on their safety behaviors as well as feelings of fear in their papers. This allows students to observe the consequences of danger in their lives even if they do not experience or wish to express fear.

There are, however, papers that do not fit these general patterns. Some women write of experiencing little to no fear. For example, one young woman wrote:

I did not feel endangered at any time today... I have concluded that fear plays only a very small role in my life. There have been days when I've felt more threatened than today, such as walking alone at night through the education building, but most days I do not feel threatened. [female student]

These unusual women provide a good starting point for investigating how women's

fear of violence can be reduced. During discussions, these students explore possible reasons why they do not fit the general patterns. Frequent explanations include self-defense training, sports participation, growing up in a particular environment, or strong female role models.

Similarly, some men write of experiencing extensive fear in their lives. Often, this fear is provoked by some identifiable factor in their lives, such as a physical disability, a past experience of victimization, or membership in another group disadvantaged by race, disability, or sexual identity. This student, for example, described how his hearing disability affected his experience of danger:

The parking garage is always a fearful place for me. I always seem to be cautious walking down the long corridor to get to the stairs or the elevator. I am always afraid someone will attack me... In general, I am usually a very cautious person because of my hearing loss. I have always relied on my vision to protect me. [male student]

Another student wrote that his fear stems from his sexual identity:

Upon arriving home I hear the neighborhood kids throwing homophobic epithets back and forth across the street. I realize this makes me fearful... because no parent rushes out to disparage the offense. Clearly, others hear it too. I am afraid of living in a community whose children speak evil because I don't believe children to be evil-speaking by nature. Children learn their hate, which of course, means that there are people teaching it. When I was sixteen I was assaulted by a man outside a shopping mall and before punching me twice in the face he called me a "faggot." For me, such language is a precursor to violence. I recognize that my whole body cringes, the muscles in my neck tighten up, but I don't say anything—even though I want to. I think about my silence later as an act of self-defense produced because of fear and how this keeps so many gay people invisible and in the closet even though we know that revolution requires our courage... I recognize how those who defy gender/sexual proscriptions are putting themselves at risk.

The violence is real. During the moment that I heard these kids yelling hurtful words, there was no immediate threat of violence but, as I was reminded, there is no real safety either. I am always a potential target for violence simply because I am alive. [male student]

This fear exists for lesbians as well, as this woman described:

Reflecting even further...I realized that if my girlfriend did not live over three thousand miles away fear would play an even larger role of my life... For us to display affection in public is not acceptable to most of society. If she were here, and I was asked to do this assignment, I think that there would have been many more situations in which I felt unsafe. [female student]

Some students of color write about fears of racial violence and, in some cases, fears of police mistreatment. These kinds of comments are a useful point of departure for discussing the interaction of multiple systems of hierarchy. Gender is not the only status that affects fear; race, social class, physical ability, sexual identity, and age are also relevant.

The composition of the class has a tremendous effect on the kinds of responses this question generates. I have used this exercise in sociology classes at two state universities in the Pacific Northwest. Like the universities more generally, these classes are predominantly white and middle class; like sociology majors more generally, a majority of the students are women. I would expect more responses attentive to race and class in a more diverse context. In more homogeneous contexts, the teacher may have to raise some of these issues.

Class Discussion

On the day their paper is due, I divide the students into small groups. I give each group a worksheet with the following instructions:

Discussion of Fear Journals

Instructions: Please form groups of no more than five people. Introduce yourselves, ap-

point a notetaker/spokesperson, and discuss the following questions.

- 1) What are your individual findings about the role of fear in your lives? Each person should briefly summarize his or her findings (maximum time: 2 minutes each).
- 2) Are there any patterns in your experiences? (Think especially about factors such as the quantity of fear, who or what is feared, what situations provoke fear, etc.) Are there any differences in your experiences?
- 3) Where do you think your fear comes from? What causes it? If you are not afraid, where do you think your lack of fear comes from?
- 4) What kinds of strategies have you or others you know used to protect yourselves from danger? Make a list. Are there other ways that fear affects your lives?
- 5) How big a change do you think it would make in your life if your fear disappeared? How would it change your life? How would it change the lives of others you know? How would it change your community and the society in which we live?
- 6) What could we do (as individuals, as a university, as a community, as a society) to decrease fear?

After the small group discussion, the class comes back together, and we go over questions two through six as a class. For each question, I ask spokespersons from several small groups to summarize their group's conclusions. Below I outline the direction of discussion for each question. Depending on the course, this discussion can take one or several class periods.

Patterns of Fear

We begin by discussing patterns in the fear of violence (Question 2). Students describe findings from their small groups. I present research findings from sources such as Gordon and Riger (1989) and Warr (1984) that generally parallel the groups' observations. It is always very clear that, on average, women are far more afraid than men, in far

more situations. However, it is also clear from the conversation that it is too simplistic to end the analysis there. Some individuals do not fit the dominant gender patterns, while students in other disadvantaged groups also have higher than average levels of fear.

We then turn to the objects and contexts of fear: where are people most afraid, and of whom? Again, the patterns are generally clear. Both women and men report fearing male strangers, but not female strangers or intimates of either sex. Women in particular mention feeling afraid when outside alone at night. I then present data about the reality of violence: who perpetrates it, and where and when it most frequently occurs. It is immediately clear that with the exception of the sex of the perpetrator, there is a disjuncture between where women feel most afraid (at night, on the street, with strangers) and where the majority of violence against women occurs (at all times of day, inside, perpetrated by intimates) (Tjaden and Thoennes 1998). In other words, although women tend to fear assault by strangers in public spaces, it is acquaintances and intimates who pose the greatest risk. I also note that although adult women tend to report a great deal of fear, it is young girls who are most at risk. According to recent studies, over 60 percent of rape survivors reported that their victimization occurred before age 18, and nearly 30 percent reported that it occurred before age 11 (National Victim Center 1992; Tjaden and Thoennes 1998). Finally, I point out that while men generally say they have little to no fear of violence, they in fact are at considerable risk of experiencing it (Bureau of Justice Statistics 1999). However, both men and women are at far less risk overall than the current media obsession with violence might suggest. According to the National Crime Victimization Survey (Bureau of Justice Statistics 1999), violent crime has been decreasing since 1994. Media depictions of violence, however, have increased. Thus while violence (and the fear it engenders) is indeed a major social problem, it is a different kind of problem than what is commonly assumed.

This paradox leads us to the next question: where does fear (or the lack of fear) come from?

Causes of Fear

We then focus on the causes of fear for women and other disadvantaged groups (Question 3). We discuss the prevalence of rape, battering, sexual harassment, and other forms of violence against women that could increase fear in victims and others. However, we also discuss the social constructedness of fear. I present Gordon and Riger's (1989) findings on media sensationalization of violence, especially violence against women. For example, when Gordon and Riger examined newspaper coverage of rape and attempted rape, they found that more than 90 percent of attacks reported by major newspapers were completed rapes, while victimization surveys suggest that fewer than 25 percent of rape attempts are actually completed.²

We also discuss the pervasiveness of violence against women in the entertainment media and in advertising. Students are able to provide many examples of violence against women in television and film, but can recall few examples of women who successfully defend themselves against such violence. Why do the media present such an unrealistic view of violence against women? The obvious answer is that they are driven by economics — by the desire to sell papers or attract viewers. We also discuss the effects of more subtle communications such as warnings (Burt and Estep 1981) and other everyday conversation (Hollander forthcoming); each of these serves to remind women that they are believed to be vulnerable and in need of protection. For example, when a man offers to walk a female classmate home after a night class, what message is conveyed about the woman's ability to protect herself from danger? When universities offer evening shuttle services to women (but

²Moreover, victimization surveys themselves probably underestimate rape attempts, because victims may not see these as "real" rapes (Koss 1985).

not men), what is the message? These offers and services are undoubtedly well-intentioned. However, they emphasize women's perceived vulnerability and contribute to women's fear.

Another interesting question is why men report little fear when as a group they experience a great deal of violence. While this discussion is speculative, it inevitably leads in provocative directions. Men may actually feel fear, but hesitate to admit it because of the constraints of masculinity: fear is associated with weakness, and so admitting fear threatens men's gender performance and identity. Another possibility is that men do not in fact feel fear because they believe they can protect themselves from harm, while women have no such confidence in their own abilities (Hollander forthcoming). Both explanations suggest that fear of violence is in part socially constructed rather than a direct reflection of one's risk of victimization.

This discussion can also encompass other social hierarchies, such as race, class, or age. For example, white and middle class Americans report a great deal of fear of violence, even though statistically they are at less risk than people of color or poorer Americans (Bureau of Justice Statistics 1999). The elderly, especially women, also report high fear, although low rates of violence (Pain 1995). Overall, fear of violence has been increasing, but reported rates of violent victimization have decreased quite dramatically over the last several years (Bureau of Justice Statistics 1999). Why do some groups overestimate their risk, and therefore have inflated levels of fear? Why are other groups' fears invisible or dismissed? This conversation emphasizes another course theme, the interlocking nature of different systems of hierarchy.

Effects of Fear

The class then moves to a discussion of how fear affects our everyday lives, as individuals and as communities (Question 4). As the small group spokespersons report their discussions of safety strategies, I make a list on

the board of all the strategies mentioned. We then discuss whether any strategies are used more by women or men. It becomes clear that women practice a broader range of strategies than men do, and that those strategies tend to be more restrictive of their daily lives. We also discuss the role of social class: those who are poorer have fewer options for safety strategies. For example, they may not have the option of installing security systems in their homes, or may not have the financial ability to take a taxi rather than riding a public bus. It becomes clear in this part of the discussion that fear and safety are distributed along lines of social stratification. This too moves the discussion to a sociological rather than individual level.

I ask the students to think about the larger ramifications of these strategies. For example, if women choose not to go certain places or choose not to leave their homes at night, does this limit their educational or occupational choices? Are certain jobs "off-limits" for most women because of perceived danger? Does this limit their involvement in public life? What are the consequences for women, for men, for male-female relationships, and for society? It is important to point out here that even those men who do not commit violence against women benefit from a social system in which women are routinely terrorized by men. I have found it useful to conceptualize this benefit in terms of the concept of privilege (McIntosh 1995). Men receive these benefits not because they deserve them or ask for them, but simply because they are male in a gender unequal society.

Finally, we discuss the efficacy of these safety strategies. If fear of violence (as well as violence itself) is a social problem, will these kinds of individual-level strategies solve the problem? Here it is important to stress again that most violence against women is perpetrated by acquaintances, not strangers. Are these strategies effective against the kinds of violence women are most likely to experience? What strategies might help women avoid acquaintance violence?

A World Free of Fear

The goal of Question 5 is to demonstrate how large a role fear plays in many people's lives. The small group reports consistently suggest that the elimination of fear would be a significant change for most women. Men's conclusions are more varied, however. Some men say that their lives would be unchanged; others (principally those who are disadvantaged by race, disability, or sexual identity) say that their lives would be different in large or small ways. Some men note that although their own daily experience might be unchanged, the lives of others they care about would be greatly improved. Again, asking students to address this question at the community and society levels as well as the individual level helps them see the issue of fear as a societal issue, not simply an individual problem. I then ask the groups to report on how, concretely, this would change their lives. This discussion is bittersweet; while it reinforces just how much women's lives are controlled by fear, it does provide a vision for what the future could be.

Strategies for Change

I then ask the students how we could attain this vision (Question 6). How could we reduce the level of fear among women, and some men, in society? As the groups report their discussions, I make a series of lists on the board, one for each level of analysis (individual, university, community, society). This provides a visual reminder that both individuals and groups can change social conditions. We discuss which options might be more or less feasible, and why. We also discuss the "crime prevention advice" offered to women by police, parents, and other authorities (Stanko 1996). For example, women are told they should stay home after dark, rely on others (especially men) for protection, and invest in locks, alarms, and other safety products. These kinds of strategies usually figure prominently in students' initial ideas for reducing fear. Students quickly see that most advice serves not to reduce violence or fear but to constrain

women's lives. We conclude the discussion by brainstorming strategies that might decrease both fear and violence without making women prisoners in their homes. This necessarily (and appropriately) shifts the focus of the discussion from women to men. If women are to live free lives, then men's violence must stop. Similarly, if gay men and lesbians, people of color, and the poor are to live free of fear, then heterosexist, racist, and classist violence must stop. Here I think it is important to return to the concept of privilege; even those who do not themselves commit violence benefit from living in a social system where some groups are limited by violence and fear. For example, even if some men do not commit violence against women, they face less competition from women in the workplace because, for example, some women may decline to work night shifts, forgo further schooling, or refuse to travel alone. Thus fear is not simply a "women's problem," and nonviolent men have a responsibility to work to end structures of oppression. This conversation moves beyond the solutions to violence normally offered by politicians and police (women should stay home, criminals should be locked up) and addresses more fundamental issues of social inequality and justice.

STUDENT REACTIONS

I have used this exercise seven times to date. Each time, students have commented that it was an illuminating and important experience for them. In their papers, many women students report that they had been unaware of the pervasiveness of fear in their lives:

When I first read the instructions for this assignment, I thought my paper would be very short in length because I do not necessarily feel like a timid, fearful person. However, after putting more thought into this assignment and being aware of my actions on a daily basis I have realized that many of the actions I take to reduce my risk have become second nature.
[female student]

This exercise has lead [sic] me to understand how large a role fear plays in my life. I truly need to make changes so I don't allow my fears to control my actions. I never really realized how fearful I actually was. [female student]

This is kind of shocking to me when I look at my reactions to situations. I have never payed [sic] much attention to this area before. I think I just thought it was normal. But when I really took it for what it was I think that I really surprised myself! When I first looked at this assignment I didn't think that I would learn anything by it, but it is really shocking to look at the findings. [female student]

In contrast, male students (especially white, heterosexual men) often describe a new or heightened awareness of the role of fear in women's lives, and of their own privilege in living free of fear:

I have learned that I am lucky that fear does not play a large role in my life, because it lets me do more of the things that I want without being afraid of what might or could happen. This exercise has also shown me that I take certain things for granted, like walking down the street or an alley late at night without even thinking twice or have [sic] any fear that something could happen. Whereas women in particular have to be careful and watch where they go so they are not attacked. Overall this exercise has created more awareness of the things I take for granted where other people have to be careful and are fearful of their surroundings. It is difficult for me to picture a life where fear is very prevalent and one has to be careful all the time. [male student]

Not all men react the same way, however. This gay man notes that although he feels quite safe in general, he does modify his presentation of self in order to be seen as "strong and capable" rather than "weak and feminine":

This is not a topic I have given much thought to. I assumed that I took normal steps to protect myself in our society. When I received this assignment I knew that I walked around in relative comfort and free of fear but now I wonder if I walk around and regulate myself in a way that allows me to feel safe as a queer. [male student]

Thus, this exercise helps to problematize men's sense of safety as well as women's fear. By completing this exercise, students begin to see how much attention and energy is spent attending to safety. Female students often react to this realization with frustration and anger:

I find it very unnerving to realize how much of my day has fear within it. I wonder how that would change were I male. Could I walk to my car at night and not be looking over my shoulder every five seconds? It is not fair. [female student]

The questions that I can't get out of my head when I do an exercise like this is: Why isn't the safety of half our population not important enough to be on the forefront of everyone's minds? Why aren't all women taught tools of self defense? What is it about our culture's socialization methods that lead men to believe it is OK to act in ways that create fear for women? [female student]

Before this exercise, I never had examined the role fear played in my life. Now I see that many of the things I do every day that have become habit are results of fear. Not all these things are unusual, for example most people lock their doors, but some of the things I do, like looking around me when I walk at night, are habits that only some people have, specifically women who live in less safe areas. It angers me that anyone should have to watch his/her back, but what especially angers me is that I not only take precautions, but that I also have to give up things I want to do in order to be safe. I think it's ridiculous to drive a few blocks when one could walk or bike, but I am forced to drive to keep myself safe. This exercise really helped me to see how fear plays a role in my life that causes me both to be cautious and to do things I do not want to do. [female student]

Both male and female students also report discussing this exercise with others, particularly boyfriends and girlfriends or dormmates. These discussions often prove illuminating to the students.

I am amazed by how often I consciously do things to ensure my safety. I talked to many of

my female friends and asked them about how they keep themselves safe. They took many of the same kinds of protective action as I stated in my above journal. While I was recording all of my endangered feelings, I realized how much mind power is spent being paranoid everyday. I tried to imagine a day as a male, and how much less stress, and paranoia would be involved. It made me angry. [female student]

Male students often report an increased understanding of the women who are close to them; female students often report a new awareness that they are not alone in their fears. The class sessions when we discuss this exercise are among the most engaged of the term. Students are very attentive, and there is tremendous class participation, during both the small group discussions and the subsequent whole-class discussion.

Substantively, the discussions help students move from an individual to a social and systematic level of analysis. During these discussions, students begin to see larger patterns; they move from seeing fear as an individual experience to understanding it as socially patterned. Those who are fearful may begin to feel that they are not alone, that others feel similarly, and that the root of their feelings is not individual vulnerability but social factors. Those who are not fearful begin to understand the pervasiveness and gravity of fear in others' lives. This may lead them to greater sensitivity to significant people in their lives. Students move from understanding violence and fear as individual experiences to seeing them as a form of social stratification and control.

POTENTIAL PITFALLS

While I have had considerable success with this assignment, it does have potential problems. Grauerholz and Copenhaver (1994) express concern that "experiential" pedagogical methods (ones which require students to disclose personal experiences and information) may carry considerable risks for the student when used to explore sensitive topics, including violence. For example,

they may raise "difficult and painful issues" that "are not, perhaps cannot be, addressed adequately in the classroom." (Grauerholz and Copenhaver 1994:319) They may also violate students' privacy and confidentiality, or they may pose grading problems: how can one grade students' personal experiences? These risks are magnified by the fact that the student-teacher relationship is inherently one of unequal power: students may feel uncomfortable, yet unable to challenge or resist the assignment. Moreover, the assignment may magnify the existing power difference. The student is required to reveal personal information to the instructor, while the instructor is under no obligation to reveal personal information to the students. This asymmetry could prove uncomfortable to the student.

Each of these is an important issue. I choose to approach the topic of violence through a discussion of fear precisely because I have found fear to be a more comfortable topic for students to discuss, and one that does not require students to reveal past victimizations. I believe that the topic of violence against women is critically important to classes on the sociology of women or gender, and indeed, to many other classes. To avoid talking about violence because it is too painful a topic would be irresponsible, because it would leave out a major determinant of women's experience and status in society. The question, then, is how to approach the topic in a way that is sensitive to students' different experiences and needs. One possibility is to talk about violence in an abstract way. However, as Konradi (1993) notes, this abstraction can bring its own problems for survivors of violence, who may feel strong emotion in response to the topic, yet be unable to express these emotions in the context of an abstract discussion. An impersonal approach, then, may make the conversation less difficult for the instructor and some students, yet more damaging for others.

Teaching about violence via fear has several advantages. First, it changes the conversation from one of victims versus non-

victims to one of violence versus us all. Every student I have talked to has at some point felt fear at the possibility of violence, even if they do not feel it regularly. Violence can thus be framed as a widely-shared social problem, not simply a problem for victims. This is inherently a more sociological framing of the issue. Violent victimization is related to the experience of fear, but it is not the sole focus of the conversation.

Second, approaching violence indirectly via the issue of fear permits students more control over how much personal experience they reveal to the instructor and to the class. Students can choose which day to document in their papers. If a day brings up experiences or emotions that they do not wish to write about, they can simply choose to describe a different day. The paper format also permits them to convey more private information to me alone if they desire, rather than having to reveal their thoughts and feelings to other students, and provides students with a warning that issues of violence will be discussed in class. I tell students in advance that they will be asked to summarize their papers in small groups; here too they can choose how much to reveal.

This approach to violence against women is not risk-free, and the negative consequences Grauerholz and Copenhaver (1994) warn us about can occur. I would suggest, however, that it is impossible to study this topic without this kind of risk. I also would argue that it is our responsibility as instructors to do what we can to minimize it. For example, I tell students explicitly that they do not have to reveal personal or confidential information to me if they are not comfortable doing so. In order to reduce the asymmetry of information between teacher and student, I make a point of talking about my own experiences of fear when discussing the papers. I do my best to build trust in the classroom before this exercise, through feedback on papers, frequent small-group discussions, and ongoing efforts to create a comfortable and supportive classroom climate. Finally, I provide each class member

with an extensive list of violence-related resources—hotline numbers, student counseling center numbers, books, information on self-defense classes—and explicitly state that I am available if students feel they need more information on these topics.

Grading experience-based assignments is a difficult issue. If papers are based on students revealing their experiences to the instructor, how should those papers be graded? In the fear journal assignment, should a student who carefully details the many instances of fear experienced in a day receive a higher grade than a student who writes that she or he experiences no fear? I think the key is to base the grade not on the experiences the student reveals, but on his or her analysis of them. Are students self-reflective about their experiences? Do they attempt to apply a sociological lens to them—for example, suggesting reasons for their fear or lack thereof? These are the kinds of questions that should guide evaluation. In addition, I grade these papers on a limited scale of plus, check, and minus, and announce to the students in advance what the grading criteria will be. There remains, however, the issue that Grauerholz and Copenhaver (1994:324) raise, that even “if grades are assigned on the basis of a student’s ability to make the connections between personal and societal levels of violence, the issue of grading is problematic in terms of the extent of the student’s ability to bear making the connections. For some students, making these connections may be too painful to express on paper.” Although I am sympathetic to this issue, I believe it is unavoidable if we are to teach about sensitive topics. It is impossible to make all students feel completely comfortable with all topics. Our responsibility, in my opinion, is to approach the topic in a sensitive manner, and be sure that resources are available to students who may have difficulty with a topic.

The greatest problem I have experienced when using this exercise has been its effects on women’s fear. Some students have written in their journals that becoming aware of

their fear has actually made them feel more afraid—a common reaction when learning about the realities of sexual violence. This is the reason why McCaughey and King (1995:375) criticize traditional rape education, asking, “What good does it do a woman to know that a man might rape her...? Most women already live with the awareness that they are potential victims of rape, and already are more critical than men of many rape myths.” Most rape education focuses on a discussion of the prevalence of sexual assault and the variety of strategies women use to protect themselves. In doing so, however, educators “paint a picture of men as dangerous and women as victims with much to fear.” (McCaughey and King 1995:374) Other students have written that they have concluded from my assigning this exercise that they are in more danger than they thought and that therefore they should feel more fear and should practice more safety strategies:

This exercise has made me more aware of the precautions I take, and also what I don't do. Maybe I should pay more attention at times when I'm not worried. That is the easiest time for an attacker to strike. [female student]

Thus one danger is that this exercise will increase women's fear and reify the belief that women are vulnerable to violence and therefore need to take extensive precautions to protect themselves from danger.

I have found it necessary to explicitly counter both of these assumptions. With regard to fear, I point out the discrepancies between women's fears and the realities of the violence they most often face. Women are much more afraid of violence than men, yet their risk of experiencing it is lower, at least according to official reports (Tjaden and Thoennes 1998). Moreover, the circumstances in which women report feeling afraid are not those in which they are in greatest danger: while most women report fear of strangers, most violence is perpetrated by intimates and acquaintances. I tell my class that one possible consequence of doing this exercise is an increase in fear, and

we discuss as a group the reasonableness of that reaction.³

With regard to safety strategies, I tell the class that students must make these decisions for themselves. They must balance feeling safer by using such strategies with the way that many strategies limit one's freedom in the world. I also note that research has suggested that most safety strategies actually increase women's fear. I conclude by asking them which safety strategies impose the fewest limits on women's freedom. In general, the only one they can identify is self-defense training. I then present research results that show that learning self-defense empowers women, making them more confident not only in dangerous situations but also in everyday life (McDaniel 1993; Ozer and Bandura 1990). Indeed, students make this connection in their own papers:

Last year I decided to take an active part in my own healing and signed up for a self-defense class. I chose the course on campus, which focused not only on the physical, but the mental aspects of self-defense. I found that I had the power to stop an assault, but most importantly, I could take control of a situation to prevent an assault from taking place. I healed wounds of the past and built an armor for the future. [female student]

Aside from not being alone often, I also feel fairly aware of danger and how to avoid it. I've taken a self-defense class, and am currently taking my second term of Tae Kwon Do. From the self-defense class I learned many tips and strategies to living safely all the time, from trusting my instincts to involved escape tactics. This coupled with the skills in kicking and punching that I have learned in Tae Kwon Do has really increased my confidence in my ability to, first, recognize and avoid danger, but also that I could get out of a dangerous situation if the need arose. [female student]

³Although I have not measured whether students' fear changes after this information is presented, it is clear that their knowledge about rape myths and realities improves. On subsequent exams, students demonstrate that they can identify rape myths and provide corresponding facts. Indeed, this is usually the question with the most correct answers on the final exam.

It is important to clearly state that women are not physically incompetent and that women can and do defend themselves against sexual assault. I do this by discussing research on the efficacy of women's self-defense, which suggests that physical resistance significantly increases women's chances of escaping a potential attack (Bart and O'Brien 1985; Ullman and Knight 1992, 1993). This information could also be combined with showing and discussing "mean women" videos, as suggested by McCaughey and King (1995). Images of women successfully resisting male violence help to deconstruct the myth of the male "unstoppable attacker" and the female "disempowered victim" (McCaughy and King 1995: 378). Women, they demonstrate, *can* be physically effective, and *can* protect themselves from danger. I thus attempt to end the discussion on a positive note, suggesting ways that women can use the fear journal exercise as the basis for empowerment.

CONCLUSION

Teaching about violence against women can be challenging for a number of reasons. Students, both survivors and non-survivors, may feel silenced. The experience of violence may be trivialized, "otherized," or purely abstract. Groups of students, particularly men, may react defensively, fostering divisions within the class. Finally, students may see violence as an issue of individual victims and perpetrators, rather than as a social problem.

These issues are both pedagogical and sociological. We know that students learn better when they are engaged with the material and when they see the connections between course content and their own lives. Moreover, seeing the social nature of an issue such as violence is fundamental to the sociological perspective. Approaching the topic of violence through the issue of fear helps to solve these problems. It helps students who might otherwise feel alienated to engage with the topic of violence, and to see

its connection to their own lives. As Davis (1992:234) notes, "resistance declines when students' own work, rather than our lectures, points to the stratified nature of societies in which they live." In addition, this strategy facilitates discussion of how social statuses such as gender, race, class, age, and sexual identity condition the experiences of violence and fear. In this way, teaching about fear helps to fulfill both sociological and pedagogical goals.

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