PRAGMATIC, OFFENSIVE, AVOIDING CONFRONTATION –
Women’s Strategies in Coping with their Fear of Crime
by Dr. Bettina Cummerow (aka HOLST)


Fear of crime. Concerning the international debates in criminology, fear relating to criminal victimisation has first been empirically researched in the later 60ies in the U.S.¹ and is still a relevant topic, especially in regular driven criminal victimisation survey work². Yet while what is actually meant by criminal victimisation has been subject to considerable scrutiny, what is meant by ‘risk’ in this context has been less closely examined. This paper presents own findings by exploring women’s fear of crime to suggest that thinking about ‘risk’ through a gendered lens that might better inform those wider concerns of criminal victimisation in general.

Empirical findings show in comparison to men, a constantly higher level of women’s fear of crime³. Their fear is interpreted as a female reaction to a higher physical and mental vulnerability of women (Skogan/ Maxfield 1981: 69-72, Killias 1990). They suggest, that there exists a special women’s risk of being victimised of men’s violence, which indicates a special asymmetric dimension of blaming women’s personal and sexual integrity by sexual harassment, sexual abuse and rape. Related to a traditional female role socialisation and the thesis of women’s worse chances to defend themselves in concrete situations, women are expected be fearful (Riger 1981: 47-66).

Recent research conceptualises multivariate designs to analyse the correlation between fear of crime and personal and social factors more in detail⁴. Following this model, fear of crime could be understood as one of three interpersonal attitudes towards crime and corresponds to two personal estimations: first the ‘personally anticipated risk to criminal victimisation’ and, second, the ‘personal estimation of capabilities how to cope with’. These (cognitive) estimations correspond to the personal emotional fear relating to criminal victimisation, especially if individuals anticipate the lost of personal relevant integrity and ego-blaming.

¹ U.S. National Crime Victimization Surveys’, reporting in Eight-City-Surveys (c.f. Hindelang et al. 1978; also see Ferraro 1995: 1-5).
³ This is remarkable in context with conventional criminal victimization survey work, clearly identifies young men as being at a greater risk from street crime than any other category of people.
⁴ Boers (1991) picked up recent findings and statistical significant correlative factors for systematically developing an interactive model for understanding fear of crime (Boers 1991, S.211 ff.).
The findings of multivariate models point to the significance of two important personal factors: gender and age in the (statistical) correlation with the level of the anticipation of ‘risk to criminal victimisation’ relating to further social factors indicating the ‘personal coping capabilities’. In analyse more in detail, Boers and Kurz (1997: 195) found out an (statistical) effect between personal vulnerability and social factors, in relation to the individual position in social milieus. They suggest, that in certain social milieus, that represent a higher level of social, physical and mental vulnerability, individuals will estimate lower personal coping capabilities in correspondence with a higher level of personal emotional fear of crime and – as an cognitive feedback – they will anticipate a higher risk of being criminal victimised (and vice versa). But also in this analysis, Boers and Kurz operate with aggregated data material on a base of statistical correlation. Besides there is a high salience of this topic, so far conventional criminal victimisation survey work has not examined a closer insight in the relationship to ‘risk’, fear and anxiety in every-day-life - to better inform about the dynamics and effects related to the statistical significant factors. This suggests a gender-sensitive, subject orientated research perspective.
**Process of Analysis**

Précising the relevant questions on fear of crime and gender, referring on current research in criminology and the strategies of public crime prevention in Lübeck 1999

Conceptualising the empirical study on women’s fear of crime

Creating the Interviews’ Guideline

- Pretest
- Modifying the Guideline

Field Explorations and Interviewing

January – April 1999: Interviews with 10 women living in Lübeck.

(each took one and a half up to 2 hours)

Results

Coping – Styles as frames of intention and activities

- *personal, development aid‘-project*
- *pragmatic Coping*
- *avoiding behaviour as a matter of principle*
Analyzing the gender-related fear of crime. In an empirical study, I have chosen qualitative research strategies to explore the experiences, constructions and re-interpretations related to the fear of crime in women’s every-day-live. The empirical data base were semi-structured interviews, that took one and a half up to 2 hours. A guideline with relevant questions led through the interviews, for guaranteeing continuity and systematic comparison.

The Sample

In the time of January to April in the year 1999, I interviewed ten women\(^5\) who lived in Lübeck, a middle sized city with 214,697 habitants in Schleswig-Holstein, a northern country in Germany\(^6\). The interviewees were recruited by the method of the strongest contrast in the relevant dimensions indicating their live-styles and social status. The sample varies by age, social status in correspondence with formal graduated degrees, actual professional status, the income, the living place and more.

Central Aspects in the Interviews

As a central point of the qualitative methodology in generating the data, I combined the method of a problem-orientated, receptive dialog\(^7\) structured by a guideline of questions. In fact, this guideline is a flexible instrument to focus the relevant aspects and to allow systematical comparison of the interviews. So the interviews were semi-structured, whereas the interviewees pointed out the individual relevance of the topics by themselves. The starting point in reference to the theoretical implementation of recent surveys work, was the leading question of women’s ‘risk’ and fear of crime in public places. First of all I took in mind the different dimensions of affective fear of crime and the more rational anticipation of ‘risk’. As an Example: To understand the meanings of own and/ or mediated victimisation, I opened the main part of the interviews with the question if fear of crime is a relevant topic in the Interviewees’ every-day-lives. This functioned as a stimulus question to begin a discussion about women’s fear of crime in general, leading to the more personal aspects of individual behaviour and the consequences in the emotional fear and the probably taken coping-strategies of the interviewees.

It was also an important opener to let the Interviewees tell about their experiences and probably own victimisation. Three of the interviewed women indeed talked about sexual abuse, one when she was in the age of eight, a second when she lived

---

\(^5\) The sample of interviewees varies by age, social status in correspondence with formal graduate levels, actual professional status, the income, the fathers profession, the living place and more.

\(^6\) male: 101.55, female: 113.146. (c.f. Statistical Departments of Federation and Regions of Germany, in December 2000 (URL: http://www.statistik-bund.de/jahrbuch/jahrtab1.htm). Lübeck is a kind of a traditional free hansecity. Concerning social structure of habitants, Lübeck is comparative to other middle sized towns Germany.

\(^7\) c.f. A. Witzel 1982,pp. 66.
with her ex-boyfriend and a third told quite in the beginning her own dramatic history of being raped. For me as the interviewer it was hard to cope with, because I had been in a professional way empathetic. It was important to carry the situation quite sensitive and to bring them to a good end. In one case we slightly stopped the interview a came to a quite private dialog about the personal history of the Interviewee. The two women who reported the sexual abuse coped well with their experience so that they hardly got emotional. In fact, all these three interviews were not object of analysis, because of ethical scruples and reasons of methodology: These three interviews possibly distort the range of the data material.

But generally the interview followed the manual of questions, giving orientation to reflect on the main topics as mentioned above.

Second it was important to reflect the Interviewee’s statements in their every-day-lives. Therefore I asked for the patterns of time-way-circles in celebrating their jobs, hobbies and more. To generate a holistic view, it was important to gain further information about the Interviewees lives and its circumstances connected to the individual and social status. For this reason I also asked for the current marital and vacation status, if and how many children she has got and the residential situation and with which amount of income or other social transfers she manages it.

A last and ending point was the complex of Demands of crime prevention in the Interviewee’s perception. Which offers do they recognise in their community and how do they think about it? It was important to refer on the personal point of view in adaptation with own resources. A main aspect was the interrelation with own ideas and concrete demands on crime prevention. With the final question, which strategies would provide a personal secure feeling, gave the chance to the Interviewees to complete their personal point of view.
### Table 1: Sample (Overview)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewee, Age</th>
<th>(1) educational level</th>
<th>(2) present occupational situation</th>
<th>(3) income (netto)</th>
<th>(4) residential and familial situation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A, 22</td>
<td>secondary school (Realschule); no vocational training completed.</td>
<td>assistant in a Montessori nursery school</td>
<td>ca. DM 800</td>
<td>living in a flat-sharing community in the countryside near Lübeck, unmarried, no children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B, 23</td>
<td>elementary college (second-chance education); vocational training as a pharmaceutical assistant and as a nursery school teacher.</td>
<td>assistant in a pharmacy</td>
<td>“at the moment not much, but enough for a living”</td>
<td>living with her parents in an apartment in a neighbourhood built in the 1950s.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C, 29</td>
<td>secondary school (Realschule); vocational training as a lawyer’s assistant.</td>
<td>employee in public administration</td>
<td>DM 2100</td>
<td>living in her own flat, unmarried, no children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D, 43</td>
<td>college; degree in social education</td>
<td>public relations manager and adviser in a women’s counselling centre</td>
<td>DM 3000</td>
<td>sharing a flat in the city with three other women, unmarried, no children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E, 65</td>
<td>primary school</td>
<td>retired; formerly farmer on a horse farm; for more than 10 years unsalaried social work in re-socialising programmes for prisoners and in a Protestant women’s circle.</td>
<td>ca. DM 2000</td>
<td>living in her own flat in a mixed neighbourhood for 25 years, widow, one 45-year-old son.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Occupation</td>
<td>Income</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>------------</td>
<td>--------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F, 23</td>
<td>University entrance degree</td>
<td>4th year student of medicine, consultant for female students' affairs</td>
<td>DM 1200 (parents' support); additional income from working as an assistant nurse in hospital: DM 200-400</td>
<td>Sharing a flat close to the city with a girlfriend</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G, 61</td>
<td>University entrance degree; university degree in philology, qualification as a high school teacher</td>
<td>Teacher in grammar school for 4 years; quit her teaching post after the birth of her 1st daughter, then worked as an assistant manager in the family's shipping company</td>
<td>&quot;no upper limit&quot;</td>
<td>Living with her husband in their villa in an exclusive neighborhood, supporting two daughters in their middle twenties.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H, 19</td>
<td>Dropped out of primary school before the last class, quit a job-training programme for young people without qualifications</td>
<td>Single parent of a 2 1/2-year-old daughter, no salaried employment</td>
<td>Welfare DM 1500 (incl. welfare for the daughter)</td>
<td>Living in a low-rent flat sponsored by the municipality, engaged to a prisoner.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J, 28</td>
<td>Secondary school (Realschule); vocational training as an assistant in public administration</td>
<td>Employee in public administration, additional work: sale of home-painted jewelry</td>
<td>Ca. DM 1800</td>
<td>Living in her own flat in a neighborhood close to the city, unmarried, no children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K, 31</td>
<td>University entrance degree; dropped out of university (English philology); vocational training as a gardener</td>
<td>Described herself as: “housewife and mother”, 1 1/2-year-old daughter</td>
<td>DM 1700 (incl. welfare for the daughter)</td>
<td>Living with the father of her daughter in a flat close to the city, unmarried.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Guideline

1. Introducing the subject and the main topics of the interview. Telling about my specification on qualitative research strategies to point out the interest on the Interviewee’s personal experiences and her point of view. Request to introduce herself.

2. living conditions
   - Age
   - marital status, parenthood
   - graduations, vocational training and actual situation of occupation
   - amount of salary
   - residential situation: area and conditions, infrastructure → what is typical / salient ?
   - Interests, Hobbies, regular activities, time-way-patterns
     → request to describe the current state of orientation: In-house or going out?
       → pick up the typical time-way-patterns
       → Does she often go out / alone / with friends ?
       → By which means of transport ? Does she usually go by feet / bus / car / bicycle ?
       → Does she mention tendencies of giving up going by feet or riding by bicycle on certain ways / in certain areas? Does she mention to choose different means of transport depending on time and areas, e.g. in the afternoon, what is her motivation for doing that?

3. Setting the main emphasis by the Interviewee
   → Is feeling uncomfortable in certain situations a problem in your every-day-live ?
   → Have there been difficult situations in the past, that might have you frightened?
   → What has happened ? Have you been attacked ? Have you had problematic situations in public places ?
   → Where has it happened, who was involved, which feelings occurred, in the situation and after that, effects.
   → Request for describing concrete the situation and feelings.

4. Concerning the anticipation of personal ‘risk to criminal victimisation’
   → Which situations cause fear?
     → Which noticeable factors indicate you ‘risk’??
     → reasons of feeling frightened, esp. conditions of the situation in general, concrete.
     → Which factors intensify fear ?
PRAGMATIC, OFFENSIVE, AVOIDING CONFRONTATION –
Women’s Strategies in Coping with their Fear of Crime

- What do you expect to be ‘risky’?
  - What and where? Certain situations?
  - Why? Are there certain reasons why you might think so?
  - Experiences - Practical knowledge?

- Are there in Lübeck concrete areas/locations which let you feel uncomfortable?
- In your residential area?
  - Which are they and why?

5. Coping Behaviour
- Are you caring?
  - How do you cope with that?
- How do you cope with your fear in situations like you have already mentioned?
- What does it look like in certain situations?
- What are your feelings?
- Do you have certain prevention strategies?
- What are your prevention strategies?
- Have you ever practised courses in self-defence?
  - if so, what kind of it? What was the character of this / these courses? Who did them offer?
- What other kind of work-out are you practising?
- Do you see any connection with your personal fear?
- As how effective do you anticipate your personal coping capabilities?
- On what are they depending in your personal point of view?
- Does information about crime and victimisation plays a role? Where do you get them? What about the female role set in (Crime-)TV?
- What do you know about offenders and their aggressive behaviour?
  - Which relevance do you ascribe your theoretical or statistical knowledge?

6. Demands on crime prevention
- What do you expect on public crime prevention?
- Which chances / effects do you expect in crime prevention?
- Which public persons / institutions should be involved?
- What might let you feel more comfortable?

Each of the interviews was fully transcribed and flew into in-depth analysis as a mixture of qualitative content-analysis in combination with
PRAGMATIC, OFFENSIVE, AVOIDING CONFRONTATION –
Women’s Strategies in Coping with their Fear of Crime

elements of heuristic interpretation following the strategies of Oevermann’s Hermeneutics.
How women cope with their personal fear of crime. As a first result, the qualitative in-depth-analysis pointed to the relevance of the topic ‘fear of crime’ in the practical every-day-live of the interviewees. But there are differences in anticipating a personal risk (and what the interviewees define as ‘risky’) and the strategies of coping with the personal fear of crime.

The interviewees plan their personal ‘risk’ consciously, because they intentionally ‘know’ - as a result of socialising and social learning, where they could be confronted with a special behaviour of certain social groups, that make them feel uncomfortable and might injure their personal integrity by sexual harassment. This corresponds to strategies of avoiding certain public places for instance by choosing other routes, drive by (own) car (or Taxi) instead of riding the bike or walking alone, to go better in company with a friend and further more. Avoiding behaviour has got a key role in the interviewees’ coping behaviour.

But the meaning of avoiding behaviour, empirically differs in three styles of coping with the personal fear of crime. Anticipating a personal risk of (criminal) victimisation means (a) emotional stress in the matter of defining the personal fear of crime as an aspect of a more global perspective of men’s violence against women, or (b) the tendency to weight the personal coping capabilities pragmatically, or (c) ‘traditional’ stereotyped gender roles frame personal retreatment corresponding to a strong tendency of avoiding behaviour. In summarise, the qualitative analysis generates descriptive coping-styles with different strategies corresponding to various patterns of women coping with crime.

The analysis points to the anticipation of a personal ‘risk’ and the arrangement in coping with crime, corresponding to the cultural mediated ‘masculinities’ and ‘femininities’. As such, they have a feedback in the interviewees’ views of the world and themselves and could be understood only in a gender-sensitive concept of social status and live styles in their cultural context.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coping-Style Dimension</th>
<th>Personal ‘Development Aid’-Project</th>
<th>Pragmatic Coping</th>
<th>avoiding behaviour as a matter of principle</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intention</td>
<td>self-determination and self-consciousness, situational control</td>
<td>rational chosen dealing with the personal ‘risk’, control</td>
<td>avoiding ‘risk’ because of general anticipation of men’s (sexual) violence against women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>anticipation of personal ‘risk’</td>
<td>global victimisation of women; sensitive in social interaction in public (e.g. annoyance and sexual chatting)</td>
<td>„realistic“ Information about context and conditions of risk and victimisation</td>
<td>diffuse fear of crime in not illuminated, lonely areas like public parks, dark entrances and not illuminated parking and streets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coping</td>
<td>strengthening individual resources and competencies on self-defence with feminist background</td>
<td>pragmatic explanation of anticipated risk and the personal affected capabilities of coping</td>
<td>(self-) attributed status as potential victim ‘as a woman’ in general, myths of rape (like the ‘evil stranger’) give a direct practical sense</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>practical prevention strategies</td>
<td>Training of sovereign behaviour and personal autonomy of conduct</td>
<td>Training of practical (physical) techniques of self-defence</td>
<td>restricting personal autonomy of activities and mobility, most important coping resources are car and taxi</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 2: Coping-Styles as frames of intention and activities (Overview).*
PRAGMATIC, OFFENSIVE, AVOIDING CONFRONTATION –
Women’s Strategies in Coping with their Fear of Crime

Men, ‘fear’ and risk. Conventional criminal victimisation survey work, clearly identifies (young) men as being at a greater risk from street crime than any other category of people. Moreover, Crawford et al (1990) and Stanko (1990) have both pointed to men’s greater unwillingness to admit or to talk about their fears relating to criminal victimization in general. How men experience, understand and then articulate their relationship with ‘risk’, ‘fear’ and danger, is relatively under-explored in the context of criminology and victimology.

By now, in a planned second step of research, it would be important to locate men’s relationship to fear and anxiety within a broader cultural context of the values associated with masculinity to point to how men realize fear of crime. This will provide a framework in which to understand both the inhibition and the expressions of fear and of risk-taking behavior of men and the coping-styles related to women’s fear of crime.
References


Bettina Holst M.A. | Center for interdisciplinary Research on Women and Gender at Kiel University | holst@zif.uni-kiel.de