

Are elderly men worried about crime?

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Abstract

It has been well documented that older adults, especially women, are more inclined to express fear of crime, but their risk of victimization is significantly lower than for people from other age groups. Even if gender issues related to fear are known, fear of crime among men is undocumented. This article explores how worry about victimization among older men ($N=156$), from 3 francophone cities in Quebec, Canada, is influenced by age groups (60–69, 70–79 and 80 years old and over), health, depression, social support and prior victimization. There are significant results associated with the 3 dimensions of worry about crime (emotional, behavioural and cognitive). We conclude by commenting on the following question: Is worry about crime among elderly men a reality?

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1. Introduction

The field of masculinity has rapidly evolved during the last decade. Many issues have been covered, such as: masculine identity development in school, gender relationships, pornographic use, etc. Seidler (2006) states that masculinity theories have emerged in part as response to both the radical feminist discourse, and to men who have adopted a “pro-feminist” approach. These theories have not given place to men’s emotions and experiences. Certain authors, such as Weeks (2005), argue that research should not dichotomize men’s and women’s issues; while many others plead for studies done specifically with men in order to better understand their social and personal identities.

The field of masculinity is also emerging in social gerontology. There appears to be a tendency in social research to promote a life course or life span approach to better capture the essence of aging and masculinity. In a context where older men are often invisible, there is an explicit need to understand aging men’s issues (Fleming, 1999; Kosberg &

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Mangum, 2002; Spector-Mercel, 2006). According to Spector-Mercel, Western hegemonic masculinity scripts have been:

doubly truncated: first, as gendered scripts, and second, as masculine scripts. The ageist spiral that “covers” gender statuses with the domineering “old” label, together with the images of older men as invisible, unmasculine and a paradoxical social category, make it culturally unfeasible to be both a “true” man and an old person (2006, p. 78).

There are major gaps in knowledge concerning older men, such as social participation (Thompson & Whearty, 2004), impact of disability (Fleming, 1999), men’s rights (Kosberg & Mangum, 2002), older male’s heterosexual life (Kosberg, 2002), etc. In this respect, not much is known regarding more personal and social vulnerability aspects of older men’s lives; such as victimization, sense of frailty, insecurity, or fear of crime.

Fear of crime emerged as a research domain in the 1960s (Lee, 2001). Since then, it has been a continuous preoccupation on the part of researchers, interveners, political decision-makers (Possamai & Murray, 2004), and mass media (Lee, 2001). Research results affirm that the elderly (Chadee & Ditton, 2003), especially elderly women (Keane, 1992; Ortega & Myles, 1987), manifest the most fear of crime, even if statistically they are part of the group the least at risk of being victimized (Fetchenhauer & Buunk, 2005; Jackson, 2004; Possamai & Murray, 2004). This phenomenon is now known as “the fear of victimization paradox” (Hale, 1996). In 1988, Ferraro and LaGrange published, in this journal, an article entitled: “Are Older People Afraid of Crime?” The authors concluded that the fear of crime among the elderly requires more research in order to better understand this paradox.

Researchers have advanced several explanations concerning the prevalence, causes, and consequences of fear of crime among the elderly. Besides age and sex, research suggests that this fear could also be related to certain sociodemographic variables such as size of city, race, income, education, and marital status (Haynie, 1998; also for a review of literature see Hale, 1996). Above all, the vulnerability of women in general, and especially that of elderly women, has often been associated with a higher fear of crime. The perception that women are more affected by the fear of crime than men seems to be well anchored; and has been, at the end of the day, the object of little questioning.

In the last few years, researchers have made progress to better understand men in general (Moss & Moss, 2007), but only a few rare studies have been interested particularly in the fear of crime among men. Those which have (e.g., Haynie, 1998; Schafer, Huebner, & Bynum, 2006) concluded that, in effect, elderly men manifest a certain fear of crime; but these studies only evaluated gender differences. It remains to examine more precisely how the fear of crime manifests uniquely among elderly men.

2. Background

Statistics on the prevalence of fear of crime have not really changed since the 1970s (Roberts, 2001). Depending on the type of data analysed, between 27% and 43% of the elderly are affected by fear of crime in Canada (Beaulieu, Leclerc, & Dubé, 2003; Roberts, 2001). As background information, four elements appear to us as central to this subject: fear of crime, perceived vulnerability with advanced age, the influence of past experiences of victimization, and the importance of analysis by gender.

Worry about victimization

What is fear of crime? Since the mid-90s, there has been a certain consensus that the fear of crime is composed of three dimensions: emotional, cognitive and behavioural (Greve, 1998; Rader, 2004; Williams, McShane, & Akers, 2000). However, most of the time each of these dimensions is measured specifically and analysed independently of the other two (Ferraro, 1995; Greve, 1998; Rader, 2004).

The emotional dimension corresponds to an emotional evaluation of the fear of being victim of a criminal act (Rader, 2004). The emotional character of fear of crime manifests itself notably in response to statements about the sentiment of being afraid to walk alone day or night in one’s neighbourhood (Hale, 1996). According to Greve (1998), this measure constitutes the best way to evaluate fear, as it possesses a strong emotional dimension. Yet this traditional question has been much criticized due to the fact that it may measure something other than fear of crime.

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