

Claiming space and community: rural women's strategies for living with, and beyond, fear

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Abstract

Following the well-established literature on women's fear in urban contexts, a small but important literature has also begun to document accounts of boldness, fearlessness and empowerment. We extend this work by considering ways in which women live with, and beyond, experiences of fear. We argue that fear and fearlessness are not discrete and separate states, but rather they are often simultaneous conditions that women negotiate in complex ways. Moving away from a sense of victims and passivity, we suggest that women have spatial and social strategies that can be adopted when they face fear or take up forms of action that might be termed 'bold' or 'courageous'. Consequently, this work draws on Koskela's [Gender, Place and Culture 4 (1997) 301] previous discussion of 'bold women' in Finland to develop a notion of agency and highlight strategies that some rural women adopt in New Zealand. © 2004 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

I was driving along and it was dark, and I was just you know [arriving home], ready to park up and ready to turn the lights and everything off and I saw this person moving under that big tree over there and I thought, "What the hell are they doing?" because that's our property. I was really fed up, I can't believe I've done this ... I walked down the pathway and over the side and walked off to try and find this person ... I'm not 10 foot tall and bullet proof and it was like a young kid. He was about 13 or 14 and he comes walking up to me. And I thought, "Oh god, hang on! What am I doing?"

I said, "what do you think you're doing?" And he said, "Oh, I was just taking a slash and I thought you'd think, you know, what was I up to."

And I went, "Well is that your bag," because he had left his bag under the tree and I saw that and he goes, "Yeah."

I said, "Do you want to get it and go. This is our property."

He said, "oh yeah, sorry." And he grabbed it [and left].

[T]hat was my initial reaction. I just did that without thinking. And then it wasn't until he walked off and I thought, "Shit. What if he had been an older guy or drunk" ... But because it was just, "He's on our property. What is he doing?" You know it was really quite silly but at the time I didn't think anything of it. It was nothing. It was like, "Get off our property! You're on our property, so rack off." (Brenda:

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young, single woman, living with her family in Otago Town ¹)

Brenda is a rural New Zealand woman, who records one of the occasions when she has experienced a minor 'crime', an incident that combines experiences of fear and fearlessness. She is a respondent who participated in our study of rural women's experiences of safety, fear and crime in New Zealand and Britain. Brenda's account provides an introduction to our consideration of the simultaneous and ongoing processes of fear and fearlessness women face when going about their everyday lives. These are not neatly separate experiences but ones that women negotiate on an ongoing basis. This paper records how women's responses and choices indicate a sense of agency in the context of personal safety that is complex; being socially and discursively embedded as well as explicitly and materially spatial.

We develop our ideas in response to the well-established geographical, sociological and planning literature on women's fear in urban contexts (see for example Pain, 2000; Smith, 1987; Trench et al., 1992). Taking up Smith's (2003) recent call for work that deconstructs the notion of 'victim' and moves to other more empowering alternatives, we have reviewed our study to consider the numerous occasions women have described their responses and strategies for living with, but also beyond, fear and experiences of crime. Consequently we start here with an examination of the recent developments in geographies of fear before moving on to outline the way that women's boldness and fearlessness might be considered as a form of situated agency. In building this discussion we draw on our recent research in rural New Zealand and we then extend our analysis by discussing the social and spatial strategies women make when responding to experiences of fear and crime. We argue that rural women demonstrate the way that discursive, spatial and social relations are entwined in strategies that do not negate the existence of crime and emotions of fear and anxiety, but nevertheless forge ways to live with, and beyond, fear. Such possibilities counterbalance traditional constructions of women as actual or potential victims.

Prior to considering the theoretical and empirical discussion to follow, a brief introduction to our research is necessary. Drawing on the urban literature on women's fear we have considered the urban/rural division that currently exists in such work (Little et al., *in press*). Including contexts beyond the urban environment enables a greater awareness of the generic social and spatial dimensions underpinning constructions and experiences of fear and safety. We argue that a rural per-

spective highlights the powerful discursive construction of fear in relation to environments and social relations, for in contrast to urban empirical and cultural imaginings, rural life has often been idealized as safe, socially supportive, and predominantly free of crime (Halfacree, 1994; Valentine, 1997). But records of the incidence of crime and fear in rural areas unsettle these idylls (Kranich et al., 1989; Saltiel et al., 1992; Yarwood and Gardiner, 2000). Our position is informed by a study of rural women's experience of safety, fear and crime in both Otago (New Zealand) and Devon (UK). The investigation involved a multi-method (primarily qualitative) approach to gather perspectives of national and local agencies (relevant government departments, police, victim and women-specific support services) together with accounts from rural women living in four locations. These locations were selected within two hours drive of our respective universities and included a village site and a more remote site in each country. Appreciation of feminist research and politics meant that greatest emphasis was given to the gathering and analysis of women's own experiences and a conscious effort has been made to register the breadth and originality of women's various narratives and negotiations in our reporting of this study. The results of the New Zealand cases are the focus of this paper and these data were drawn from 117 postal surveys and in-depth interviews with nineteen of the survey respondents who volunteered to be interviewed.² Survey data were tabulated to produce descriptive statistics and open question responses were analysed to generate key experiential codes related to the key dimensions of safety, fear, crime and relevant services. Interview data were thematically coded for both the survey/case-grounded themes and the wider conceptual themes registered in the literature (see Sections 2 and 3). This particular paper originates from the triangulation of primary data surrounding simultaneous fear and fearlessness and the arguments that have been put forward by Koskela (1997). Consequently, the latter part of our paper takes time to outline and analyse the specific accounts provided by two women in the study. These data were selected since they exemplified both unique combinations of the diverse contexts and experiences rural women face, while also illustrating the generic complexity of simultaneous fear/fearlessness that we wish to explore in this paper.

¹ All participants are identified by a pseudonym, relative age (young: 18–35; middle-aged: 36–60; older 60+), household status, and location (in NZ: Otago Town, Otago Valley).

² 400 surveys were distributed to all permanent households in the two locations but were un-numbered and un-tagged to increase anonymity. Consequently reminder notices seeking late response could not be distributed and the response rate is rather modest. This strategy created a limitation on number of responses and other limitations included the lack of responses that could practically be gained from itinerant workers. Nevertheless there is a relevant cross-section of ages and household types in the respondent profile reflecting the wider social and demographic structure of the permanent resident populations in the two case areas.

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