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Predictors of self-protective behaviors in non-sexual violent encounters: The role of victim sex in understanding resistance



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ABSTRACT

Self-protective behaviors are actions that victims take in a violent encounter to thwart the attack or avoid/minimize injury. This study examines the predictors of self-protective behaviors in non-sexual assault incidents with a particular focus on how the sex of the victim may moderate these conclusions. Non-sexual assault incidents in the National Crime Victimization Survey were analyzed ($n = 16,309$) and four categories of self-protective behaviors were regressed on a variety of predictors using multivariate probit models. A variety of pre-assault factors (e.g., demographic characteristics), situational characteristics (e.g., location of assault), and the relationship between the victim and offender are associated with the use of resistance. Situational characteristics emerged as the most consistent and strongest predictors of self-protective behaviors. There was little evidence to suggest that separate models for male and female victims were warranted.

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1. Introduction

Self-protective behaviors are actions that a victim employs in a violent altercation to thwart an attack or avoid injury. Studies have found that victims utilize a variety of self-protective behaviors in incidents of violence and the frequency with which they are used varies meaningfully as a function of the type of victimization ([Hindelang, 1976](#)). For example, self-protective behaviors are utilized infrequently in robbery (e.g., 40% in [Wolfgang, 1982](#)) compared to physical assaults, where self-protective behaviors are consistently reported in the majority of incidents (e.g., 74% in [Thompson et al., 1999](#)). Studies of sexual assault report the highest use of self-protective behaviors, with typically more than 80% of the incidents featuring some form of resistance by victims (e.g., 86% in [Atkeson et al., 1989](#)).

Research regarding the use of self-protective behaviors in incidents of violent victimization has focused predominately on the outcomes (e.g., rape completion) in incidents of sexual assault against women. Much less attention has been given to the use of self-protective behaviors in non-sexual assaults ([Bachman and Carmody, 1994](#); [Bachman et al., 2002](#); [Block and Skogan, 1984](#); [Lizotte, 1986](#); [Skogan and Block, 1983](#); [Tark and Kleck, 2004](#); [Thompson et al., 1999](#)). Likewise, the body of research examining victim behavior in incidents of violence has also focused on sexual assault. This body of research has examined whether the demographic characteristics of the victim and offender (e.g., age, race); the offender's use of alcohol and/or drugs; the relationship between the victim and the offender; and various situational characteristics (e.g., time of the incident, location) predict whether a victim utilizes self-protective behaviors ([Amick and Calhoun, 1987](#); [Atkeson et al., 1989](#); [Bart and O'Brien, 1985](#); [Block and Skogan, 1984, 1986](#); [Brecklin and Ullman, 2001](#); [Clay-Warner, 2003](#); [Koss et al., 1988](#); [McDermott, 1979](#); [Siegel et al., 1989](#); [Tewksbury and Pedro, 2003](#); [Ullman, 1997](#); [Ullman et al., 1999](#)). Research

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has yet to systematically study who and under what circumstances self-protective behaviors are utilized in non-sexual assaults. This is problematic if the results from non-sexual assaults differ from those of sexual assault. In addition, compared to females, males are rarely sexually assaulted. As a result, research has not devoted as much attention to the use of self-protective behaviors among males, or examined how these results might differ as a function of the sex of the victim.

The current study contributes to empirical knowledge regarding self-protective behaviors by exploring whom, and under what circumstances self-protective behaviors are utilized in non-sexual assaults. In addition to being one of the first studies of non-sexual assault to predict self-protective behaviors, this is the first study of non-sexual assault to use a more nuanced operationalization of resistance. In addition, this study includes covariates that have been omitted from previous studies, namely the victim's history of victimization, variables related to socio-economic status, and residential mobility. Furthermore, this study pays particular attention to how the sex of the victim may moderate the predictors of self-protective behaviors.

2. Background and significance

2.1. Theoretical framework

Traditionally, theories based on a rational choice framework have been used to explain predatory crimes such as robbery. These victimizations usually entail the exploitation of the victim and occurs in the absence of provocation (Felson, 1993). However, Tedeschi and Felson (1994) contend that this perspective can be extended beyond predatory victimization to understand expressive (or dispute-related) violence which comprise the majority of non-sexual assaults. Tedeschi and Felson (1994) maintain that these offenders still make the choice to physically attack their victims and thus exercise what Tedeschi and Felson (1994) call a “weak form of rationality.” Aggressors may make the decision so quickly that it appears to be impulsive and irrational, however, they still weigh the alternatives before engaging in violent conflict.

Although Tedeschi and Felson (1994) were focusing on the offender, a rational choice framework can be further extended to understand victim behavior as well. Victims may also exhibit this “weak form of rationality” where information available (however limited) is used to make split-second decisions that potentially impact the outcomes of violent confrontations. Drawing from Black's (1983) theory of “self-help”, a victim's use of countermeasures can be thought of as means in which the victim retaliates or seeks to regain control within the incident. Indeed, Black (1983) specifically mentions victims' use of violence in assaultive encounters as a means of self-help. The application of a rational choice framework to understand self-protective behaviors is not unique to this study. As Guerette and Santana (2010) and Tark and Kleck (2004) note in their studies of the consequences of utilizing self-protective behaviors, compared to the decisions of offenders and the situational characteristics of the incident, self-protective behaviors operate on the same tenets of Routine Activities Theory (RAT).

Research has suggested that victims (at least hypothetically) approach assaultive encounters in a manner supportive of a rational choice perspective. Furby et al. (1992) asked the respondents to list possible strategies that could be used to prevent the completion of a sexual assault. Many of the strategies listed entailed assessing the situation before deciding a course of action, such as evaluating the offender's strength and/or environmental surroundings. Furthermore, the results of Furby et al. (1992) study imply that the strategies that people consider as viable responses to a potentially violent confrontation are contingent on respondent demographics and situational characteristics.

Of course generating possible responses to a hypothetical assault may not correspond to actual victim behavior. However, the body of research that has examined how victims respond to incidents of sexual violence suggests that many predictors of resistance can be interpreted using rational choice theory (RCT). The next section reviews the literature surrounding the predictors of self-protective behaviors. Considering that previous research has not focused on the predictors of victim behavior in non-sexual assault (with the exceptions of Block and Skogan, 1984; Skogan and Block, 1983), the extant literature reviewed focuses on sexual assault.

2.2. Predictors of resistance

Demographic characteristics may inform the experiences that a victim draws on when in a violent encounter and may be related to differences in ability to use some countermeasures (e.g., physically resisting the offender). Furthermore, drawing from Hobbesian theory, Black (1983) hypothesizes an inverse relationship between self-help and help-seeking from formal sources. If Black's (1983) assertion is correct, then minorities and younger victims may be more likely to use self-protective measures as some research has suggested that they are less likely to report to the police in some situations (Hart and Rennison, 2003; Rennison, 2007; Sigler and Johnson, 2002). Likewise, Black (1976) suggests that socio-economic status should impact self-help. Therefore, victims who frequently move and/or are of lower socio-economic/education status may be more likely to utilize some self-protective measures.

With regard to non-sexual assault, research suggests that younger victims may be more likely to use physical resistance (Block and Skogan, 1984; Skogan and Block, 1983). This parallels the findings of a few studies in the sexual assault literature (McDermott, 1979; Scott and Beaman, 2004). Likewise, Clay-Warner (2003) found that victims of sexual assault more frequently used physical resistance against younger assailants. However, Siegel et al. (1989) and Atkeson et al. (1989) failed to establish a relationship between the age of the victim and self-protective behaviors in sexual assault. The findings

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