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Author(s): Jocelyn A. Hollander

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VULNERABILITY AND DANGEROUSNESS

The Construction of Gender through Conversation about Violence

JOCELYN A. HOLLANDER
University of Oregon

In this article, the author argues that beliefs about vulnerability and dangerousness are central to conceptions of gender and are constructed and transmitted through conversation. Using data from 13 focus groups, the author demonstrates that ideas about gender and its relationship to vulnerability and danger are pervasive in talk about violence, and that this talk is further marked by ideas about age, race, social class, and sexual identity. These ideas are based, in part, on shared beliefs about human bodies, which reinforce the perceived naturalness (and therefore the invisibility) of these ideas. The article concludes with a discussion of the consequences of these ideas for the daily lives of women and men.

Stacy: I think I'm definitely impacted by violence, or the implied threat of violence, just in the atmosphere. I mean, as a woman, I'm conscious of the possibility of being assaulted whenever I go out. I always am thinking about my safety and whether or not this is a safe area or not, and I'm very conscious about who and what is around me . . . it's kind of that threat hanging over me . . . I've never been physically assaulted, but it's kind of that possibility. I'm always conscious of that.

(Group 5)

Bob: The whole thing kind of hits me as kinda weird in a way. It's like [I] listen to women talk about how they're afraid and . . . I've never had to feel that way. And I guess that's what is hitting me. I've never had to consider, walking down the street, if I'm going to get whooped or not. And I guess that'd be a damn hard feeling to have to take.

(Group 13)

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REPRINT REQUESTS: *Jocelyn A. Hollander, Department of Sociology, 1291 University of Oregon, Eugene, OR 97403-1291; e-mail: jocelynh@darkwing.uoregon.edu.*

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These two quotes summarize one of the most pervasive differences between the lives of women and men in the contemporary United States. As many researchers have found, women tend to report far more fear of violence than do men, in a far wider range of circumstances (Gordon and Riger 1989; Madriz 1997; Warr 1985).

Paradoxically, reported patterns of victimization do not correspond to these patterns of fear (Pain 1997). According to official statistics, men's risk of experiencing violence is much higher than women's, both overall and for every type of violence except sexual assault. Moreover, there is a disjuncture between the situations women report fearing most (assault by a stranger, away from home, at night, and outside) and the situations in which they are most likely to be at risk (in or near the home, with intimates) (Koss 1988; Tjaden and Thoennes 1998).¹ As Valentine (1992, 22) writes, there seems to be "a mismatch between the geography of violence and the geography of fear."²

Why are women so much more afraid than men, even though their reported risk of violence is lower?³ A number of explanations for this seeming paradox have been suggested, including the underreporting of violence against women, especially when committed by intimates (Stanko 1992); the unique nature of sexual assault (Ferraro 1996; Warr 1985); women's experiences of everyday harassment (Brooks Gardner 1995; Sheffield 1987); and mass media depictions of violence against women (Altheide 1997; Heath and Gilbert 1996; Heath, Gordon, and LeBailly 1981).

In this article, I suggest that another, more subtle source of differences in fear has been overlooked. I argue that widely shared conceptions of gender⁴ associate femininity with vulnerability and masculinity with dangerousness. Stanko (1995, 50) writes that "the reality of sexual violence . . . is a core component of being female and is experienced through a wide range of everyday, mundane situations." I make a similar argument, but with respect to potential danger, not actual engagement with violence: Vulnerability to violence is a core component of femininity, but not masculinity. Relatedly, potential dangerousness is associated with masculinity, but not femininity. As I will show below, these ideas are pervasive, widely shared, and constructed through interaction: through routine patterns of behavior and communication that replicate and reinforce existing ideas about gender.

These ideas are based, in part, on shared beliefs about gendered bodies. Female bodies are believed to be inherently vulnerable and not dangerous to others because of their smaller average size, perceived lack of strength, and physical vulnerability to rape. Male bodies, in contrast, are seen as potentially dangerous to others because of their larger size, greater strength, and potential use as a tool of sexual violence. As McCaughey (1997, 37) writes,

Imagistic discourse suggests that men have bodies that will prevail, that are strong and impenetrable. Female bodies are not represented as active agents in this way, but instead as breakable, takeable bodies. Just as such images portray women as prey to men's violence, they allow men to imagine themselves as invulnerable, especially compared to women.

These ideas are so integral to notions of gender that they seem “natural” and thus are largely invisible in daily life. Men’s perceived greater strength and women’s perceived sexual vulnerability are, as I show below, taken for granted in everyday conversation. I suggest here that these beliefs about male and female bodies are as much socially constructed as they are true representations of reality (Lorber 1993). While it is obviously true that men are on average taller than women, other aspects of perceived vulnerability and dangerousness are less clear-cut. For example, women’s lack of strength relative to men is the result not simply of different physiology but of gender expectations that valorize feminine delicacy and thinness and discourage athletic ability, while men’s greater strength and agility are due, in part, to more extensive physical training (Burton Nelson 1994; McCaughey 1997). Similarly, the prevalence of rape among incarcerated men demonstrates that men as well as women are vulnerable to sexual assault (Mezey and King 1992), and the experiences of gay men and men of color with homophobic and racist violence, respectively, show that subordinated groups of men are targeted for violence (Stanko and Hobdell 1993). Despite the reality of violence against men, however, vulnerability is not part of shared cultural conceptions of masculinity. According to McCaughey (1997, 8), “Gender ideology is not a matter of psychology as opposed to biology. Gender ideology affects the way we interpret and experience our bodies.” However, the constructed nature of these beliefs is normally invisible because of the association of physical bodies with essentialism. Since bodies are perceived to be “natural” and therefore inevitable, so too are the gendered differences that are constructed through them.

In this article, I focus on everyday talk about violence—mundane conversations that take place in a wide variety of circumstances and relationships. Through conversation, people construct and transmit particular ways of understanding social phenomena by using a variety of sources of information, including popular wisdom, experience, and media discourse (Gamson 1992; Sasson 1995). Using data from 13 focus groups, I show how everyday discourse paints women as vulnerable and men as potentially dangerous. This may lead women to see themselves as vulnerable to violence and may lead men to see themselves as relatively invulnerable, fostering gender differences in fear (Gordon and Riger 1989; McDaniel 1993). It may also lead women to exaggerate their fear of violence in both everyday interaction and in survey responses, while it may lead men to minimize fear: To appear appropriately feminine or masculine, individuals must meet gender expectations regarding vulnerability. These perceptions and expectations have far-reaching consequences for the daily practices of women and men, in terms of the strategies they use to keep themselves safe, their interactions with others, and their freedom to move through public and private space.

RELATIONSHIP TO PAST THEORY AND RESEARCH

In the sections that follow, I argue that beliefs about dangerousness and vulnerability are central to notions of gender. This argument extends current research in three ways.

The Centrality of Violence

First, it refocuses the attention of gender scholars on violence and, as importantly, on the perceived threat of violence as central features of a gendered world. Feminist scholars have been leaders in bringing attention to men's violence against women (and against other men) and the relationship of this violence to power, inequality, and social structure (Bart and O'Brien 1985; Brownmiller 1975; Russell 1975).⁵ Yet both actual violence and perceived vulnerability are curiously absent from most sociological theory about gender. For example, Lorber's (1994) widely acclaimed volume on the "paradoxes of gender" briefly mentions wife beating, sexual harassment, and rape, but it does not identify violence or the fear of it as a central component of the institution of gender. Similarly, England's (1993) edited volume on gender includes 10 essays explaining gender differentiation and inequality from a broad range of theoretical frameworks. None of these essays mention male violence against women as a cause—or even a symptom—of gender inequality. The new volume *Revisioning Gender* (Marx Ferree, Lorber, and Hess 1999), which takes as its goal "explain[ing] the meaning of gender itself" (p. xiii), contains only one chapter that discusses violence, and this only in the context of sexuality. These and other important theoretical works on gender published in recent years neglect the centrality of violence—either actual violence or the potential of perpetration or victimization—in the lives of women and men. While there are a few writers who have put violence at the center of their theorizing about gender (e.g., Connell 1987; MacKinnon 1989; Sheffield 1987), their insights have been largely ignored: sometimes dismissed, other times acknowledged but not integrated into mainstream thinking. In this article, I suggest that violence and the fear of violence are pervasive (although often invisible) aspects of gendered social life and as such deserve a more central place in theorizing about gender.

Perceptions of Vulnerability and Dangerousness

Second, I propose two new concepts—*perceived vulnerability* and *perceived dangerousness*—to represent shared understandings of the relationship between gender and violence, understandings that may foster gender differences in fear. These concepts too build on, but extend, the work of other scholars. For example, there has been considerable attention to the relationship between aggression, passivity, and gender (e.g., Eagly and Steffen 1986). However, aggression and passivity have typically been understood either as personality traits or as patterns of behavior. In contrast, the terms *perceived vulnerability* and *perceived*

dangerousness, as I use them here, refer to shared beliefs about the perceived openness of particular social groups to violent victimization on one hand and their perceived potential for perpetrating violence on the other. Both of these are commonly attributed to the seemingly innate qualities of physical bodies—their size, strength, vulnerability to rape, and ability to defend themselves against attack.

These concepts capture a different dimension of the experience of danger in everyday life than do aggression and passivity. Although aggression (actual violence) does occur, it is relatively infrequent. What is more frequently experienced in daily life is men's presumed potential for aggression, which I term *perceived dangerousness*. Even if men do not actually behave aggressively—and, in fact, many men do not regularly act out aggression—they are seen by others as having the capacity to do so. In everyday life, it is often impossible to tell from outside appearances whether an unknown (or even a known) man may be aggressive. What is important to others around him—for example, to the woman walking past him on the street—is the cultural equation of masculinity with dangerousness. Similarly, the concept of passivity (lack of resistance in the face of aggression) does not entirely capture the daily experiences many women have with violence. Rather, they perceive themselves—and are perceived by others—as vulnerable to violence, regardless of whether they might respond passively or actively to it. Indeed, in the research I report below, I found no evidence that women perceived themselves to be passive, and many participants indicated that they would respond vigorously if attacked. What was salient, however, was women's widespread lack of faith in their ability to defend themselves against men and their pervasive association of masculinity with danger. These beliefs, I suggest, contribute to the gendered distribution of fear in American society.

Intersecting Systems of Social Hierarchy

Third, I discuss the relationship of vulnerability and dangerousness not simply to gender but also to other social hierarchies, including age, race, social class, and sexual identity. These intersections have been a notable gap not only in research on gender, as many scholars have pointed out (Connell 1987; Spelman 1988), but also in research on fear of violence. While there have been studies on gender and fear (Gordon and Riger 1989; Stanko 1995; Warr 1985), race and fear (Skogan 1995; St. John and Heald-Moore 1996), and age and fear (Warr 1984; Yin 1982), few studies have examined the intersections. Notable exceptions include Madriz (1997), whose work on women and fear focuses on the differences and similarities between women of different racial groups, and Pain (1995), who has looked at the intersections of gender and age. In this article, I explore connections of vulnerability and dangerousness not only with gender but also with race, social class, age, and sexual identity. As the discussion below makes clear, these social positions are not separable in shared beliefs about vulnerability and dangerousness. While gender remains the focus of this article (because it was discussed by the participants at far greater length than any other social position), the results below demonstrate that gender's

relationship to vulnerability and dangerousness cannot be analyzed in isolation from other systems of social hierarchy.

In sum, although scholars have attended to the reality of violence and have explored aggression and passivity, they have largely overlooked the centrality of beliefs about vulnerability and dangerousness. As I demonstrate below, these ideas are closely intertwined with contemporary notions of gender. In overlooking these associations, scholars have neglected one of the most important insights of early feminist work: The body and its perceived relationship to violence are fundamental to the meaning and practice of gender.

METHOD

The analysis below is based on data from 13 focus groups conducted between April 1994 and March 1997 in Seattle, Washington. Sample selection is a complex problem for focus group research. Morgan (1988, 44-45) argues that because the small number of participants used in a typical focus group study "are never going to be representative of a large population," researchers should concentrate instead on selecting "theoretically chosen subgroups from the total population," focusing on those subgroups expected to provide the richest information. For this study, I selected subgroups that past research suggested would differ in their exposure to, or fear of, violence. Because the most consistent difference found in fear is based on gender, and because women and men report different experiences of violence, in terms of both quantity and type, I recruited approximately equal numbers of women and men. Other factors that have been found to affect exposure to violence, or the fear of it, include race, social class, sexual identity, and age. I thus made an effort to maximize the diversity on these dimensions among the sample population by recruiting participants from a variety of different locations, as described below. However, I retained as much homogeneity as possible within each focus group to facilitate disclosure and discussion (Morgan 1988).

Participants were recruited through churches, community centers, workplaces, clubs, apartment buildings, university classes, community service organizations, and other preexisting groups in the Seattle area, chosen from the Seattle phone book and my own and my colleagues' connections in the community. The final sample included 76 adult participants. Groups ranged in size from 4 to 8 participants. Table 1 describes the gender, race, sexual identity, age, income range, and source of recruitment of each group.

Each group met once, for approximately two hours. Facilitators⁶ followed Morgan's (1988) strategy of "self-managed groups" in which, after an initial introduction to the general themes and ground rules of the discussion, the participants themselves help to facilitate the group discussion while the facilitator says very little. This strategy was crucial because the goal of the focus groups was to explore the participants' understandings of violence rather than their reactions to the facilitator's ideas. All discussions began with the following question:

TABLE 1: Demographic Characteristics of Focus Groups

Group	Gender	Race ^a	Age Range	Sexual Identity	Household Income Range (in thousands)	Source
1	Female and male	W, L, A	21-53	Heterosexual	\$10-\$25	University evening class
2	Male	W	31-63	Gay	\$10-\$100+	Athletic club
3	Female and male	W	33-59	Heterosexual	<\$10-\$75	Outdoors club
4	Female and male	W	30-38	Heterosexual and lesbian	\$25-\$100	Workplace
5	Female	W, L, N	30-41	Lesbian	\$25-\$100	Athletic club
6	Male	W, N	35-60	Heterosexual	<\$10	Low-income hotel
7	Male	W	18-19	Heterosexual	Unknown (students)	Fraternity
8	Female	W, N, B	44-71	Heterosexual	<\$10-\$25	Low-income apartment
9	Male	B, W	31-70	Heterosexual	<\$10-\$25	Low-income apartment
10	Female and male	W	65-88	Heterosexual	<\$10-\$25	Apartment for elderly
11	Female	B	30-44	Heterosexual	\$10-\$50	Church group
12	Female	W, A	18-22	Heterosexual	<\$10-\$50	University day class
13	Female and male	W, L, N	21-40	Heterosexual ^b	<\$10-\$50	University day class

a. The order in which the racial categories are listed in the table indicates the relative number of participants from each category: W = white, B = Black, N = Native American, A = Asian or Pacific Islander, L = Latino/a.

b. Members of this group were not asked about their sexual identity.

1. Do you feel that the issue of violence affects you personally or affects your friends and relatives?

The groups varied widely in terms of the quantity of discussion of this question: Some groups discussed the question for the full two hours, while in others conversation lagged after half an hour. Follow-up questions were used as needed and included the following:

2. When do other people give you warnings about dangerous situations or people? What kinds of warnings do you give others? (Groups 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 9)
3. In what situations do you feel most vulnerable? (Groups 2, 3, 5, 6, 10, 11)
4. In what situations do you feel most safe? (Groups 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 10, 11)

The discussions were audiotaped with the participants' consent, transcribed, and coded for analysis.

I used a number of strategies to increase the external validity of the findings. I compared the demographic composition of my sample with that of the city of Seattle to assess the degree to which the participants in this study were representative of other populations. In general, the demographic characteristics of the focus group participants approximated those of Seattle residents. However, there were more women, more young adults, more people with a very low yearly income, and fewer Asian Americans than in the general Seattle population. I also compared participants' responses on a number of survey questions⁷ with the responses of nationally representative samples in other surveys; here too, study participants were not greatly different from the larger populations. Finally, to ensure uniformity among groups, facilitators were provided with a detailed script for the focus group, which they read essentially verbatim to the participants.

Despite these efforts, I do not claim that the participants in this study are representative of any larger population, and therefore caution is warranted in generalizing from these results. I see no reason to assume, however, that these participants differ from the larger populations from which they are drawn in ways that detract from the conclusions of this study. Moreover, the focus of this analysis is not the participants' individual experiences or behaviors but their shared ideas about vulnerability and dangerousness—ideas that, because they are shared among such a diverse group of participants, are also likely to be shared in the wider social context. Thus, while it would be inappropriate to generalize from this sample, I do suggest that the findings that are described here provide clues about more generally held social ideas.

I now turn to an analysis of these focus group conversations. First, I discuss patterns in the participants' characterizations of vulnerability and then explore their ideas about dangerousness.

VULNERABILITY

Gender and Vulnerability

Vulnerability was deeply associated with gender in the focus group discussions. Participants made many more comments about women's vulnerability than about men's. In the 13 discussions, 69 comments identified individuals (other than the speaker's self) or groups as vulnerable to violence. Of these, only 19 percent (13 statements) referred to men, while 81 percent (56 statements) referred to women.

These statements differed in quality as well as quantity. Virtually all the comments that identified men as vulnerable focused on particular individuals and located the source of their vulnerability in specific characteristics or behaviors. For example, one speaker perceived her teenage sons to be vulnerable because "they're out late a lot"; another speaker noted that he felt vulnerable because of his below-average height. In contrast, most of the comments about women's vulnerability were quite different. They identified not simply specific women but women as a group as inherently vulnerable to violence. Of the 56 references to women's vulnerability, 24 (43 percent) were of this type; an additional 8 (14 percent) identified large subgroups of women (e.g., lesbians or older women) as particularly at risk. Thus, more than half of the references to women's vulnerability identified women, or some subgroup thereof, as being by their nature vulnerable to violence.

Many of these references stated in a taken-for-granted way that women are vulnerable (all participants are identified by pseudonyms in this article):

Eric: I think that men are, on average, men are physically stronger, in most cases, and you know, if I was a woman, damn, I—

Bill: Would you feel vulnerable?

Eric: I'm sure I'd feel vulnerable. Very vulnerable. Yes. . . . (Group 2)

Richard: But as far as like a sexual type assault or a violent crime, I don't hear too much about men being assaulted sexually in the street or in a parking garage or something, where you think of a woman, that happening more often.

Nora: Yeah, I think women are much more vulnerable to that type of crime than men are. I go jogging at night too, but [I go with] my two roommates. . . . I was really hesitant to jog at night when they started this . . . I was like, "Yeah, I'm with the two of them, but still, we're only girls. . . ." (Group 1)

Only once was a general statement like this made about men, in a brief discussion among seven young women about how women might respond to an assault by a man:

Marcia: But you never know, because if you get in that situation [being attacked by a man] your adrenaline is going. . . . You're not fully aware of what you probably could

do. I always had this plan in my head, if anything were to happen like that, because men do have a weak spot, and if you know where it's at. . . . (Group 12)

This comment, however, occurred in the context of an extended discussion of women's vulnerability and weakness relative to men. Usually, these kinds of generalizations were made exclusively about women. More frequent were comments that explicitly associated men with invulnerability, as in this quote from a young man:

Richard: One point . . . is like my mom would tell me, "Oh Richard, you shouldn't go jogging at night," and I said, "Oh mom, don't worry. I'm a guy, no one's going to bother me." (Group 1)

Whereas for men the unmarked case is invulnerability (i.e., men are generally perceived to be invulnerable, and only exceptions are vulnerable), for women the default is vulnerability. Valentine (1997) reports similar findings from interviews with children: Children of both sexes viewed girls, but not boys, as vulnerable to danger.

Another way to assess cultural ideas about vulnerability is to examine which groups are perceived to be capable of protecting others and which groups are perceived to need protection. Presumably, only those believed to be relatively invulnerable would be seen as protectors, while those who are believed to be vulnerable would be seen as especially in need of protection.

There were 98 statements made during the focus groups that identified specific types of people as protectors or as in need of protection. Table 2 categorizes these statements according to the relationship between protectors and those they protect.

Forty-one of these 98 statements identified men as protectors of others; women were identified as protectors less than half as often. Gender differences were even more notable in statements about people perceived to need protection: 63 statements identified women as needing protection, but only 17 identified men. Equally telling is the relationship between the protector and the protected. The single most frequent type of comment, representing more than 30 percent of all comments, involved men's protecting women. In contrast, women were never discussed as protectors of men. Men in the focus groups tended to make statements like the following:

Bob [in response to a woman's description of harassment by an ex-boyfriend]: I keep thinking in my mind listening to you, what anybody I know would say. They'd say, well get your brothers, your old man, go over there, haul him up like that, go over pay him a visit and bust him up a bit. You'll be surprised, he'll shut up real good. (Group 13)

Tony: Just the other night, Jane here, she has a parking spot up here, and at eight o'clock at night she says, "Tony, would you watch me when I go to park my truck?" And I said, "Jane, I'm not going to *watch* you. I'm going to go *with* you." (Group 10)

TABLE 2: Relationship between Protectors and Those in Need of Protection in Comments by Focus Group Participants

<i>Type of People Described as Receiving or Needing Protection</i>	<i>Types of People Described as Protectors</i>						<i>Total</i>
	<i>Men</i>	<i>Women</i>	<i>General</i>	<i>Unspecified</i>	<i>Police</i>	<i>Parents</i>	
<i>Men</i>	6	0	9	1	1	0	17
<i>Women</i>	30	10	15	5	1	2	63
<i>Children</i>	0	2	0	0	0	0	2
<i>General</i>	5	3	4	1	0	0	13
<i>Unspecified</i>	1	2	0	0	0	0	3
<i>Total</i>	42	17	28	7	2	2	98

The first quote demonstrates that men, not women, are perceived as capable of protecting others. The speaker suggests that the woman should depend on her male relatives for protection, not take action herself. The second quote shows succinctly that both women and men see men as protectors. Jane requests protection from Tony; Tony's response confirms Jane's perceptions of herself as vulnerable and of him as a source of protection.

In contrast, only a few comments referred to women's protecting others. All of these comments referred to women's protection of other women, children, or unspecified "other people"; no comments referred to women's protecting men. These findings are consistent with Warr's (1992) study of "altruistic fear" (i.e., fear for others), which found that women are more likely than men to fear for their children, whereas men are more likely than women to fear for their spouses.

Moreover, with the exception of protecting children, women are not perceived to have the same responsibility for protecting others as men:

Linda: I've seen guys on the bus, it's always on the bus, some guy's hassling a woman. And I traded seats with her cause she was really shy and couldn't get away from him, and I'm like, "You wanna trade seats?" and she's like "No," and I'm like, "You wanna trade seats!" [laughter] And she's like "Oh! Oh!" [laughter] and so I'm standing there glaring at this guy the whole bus ride to keep him from bothering her, and the minute he gets off, three guys go, "Are you okay?" to her, and it's like, "Where were you when he was bothering her?" (Group 13)

This speaker clearly feels that the role of protector she has stepped into should have been occupied by one of the men on the bus.

Although women's perceived inability to protect others was usually implicit, at times, women were also explicitly identified as being ineffective protectors, as in this conversation about the dangers of international travel among three young women:

Sarah: Even with another girlfriend somewhere in a foreign land or something, it's still not [safe] though.

Katrina: And even if you're like 10 girls, you're still [not safe].

Jill: No, you're not. (Group 12)

Even 10 women together are not perceived to be capable of defending themselves or each other from men's violence. Thus, comments about protection, like the more general comments about vulnerability discussed in the previous section, tended to identify women as vulnerable and men as the sources of both danger and protection.

Age

Age was also associated with perceived vulnerability in the focus group discussions. However, this relationship varied depending on gender. Although discussion

participants identified young children of both sexes as vulnerable, gender was not particularly salient in these comments. Rather, both young girls and young boys were believed to be vulnerable principally because of their physical and/or mental immaturity.

As they grow older, however, the perceived vulnerability of boys and girls diverges. Boys become larger and stronger and are consequently seen as less vulnerable:

Barbara: I know that one thing that's really changed. My son's 14 now, and I . . . was concerned about [him going] outside until my son got old enough. . . . He's not [a] real huge towering person but just the fact that he's male and is taller. (Group 13)

As boys grow older, they become identified with stereotypes of masculinity, which center on strength and invulnerability (Goodey 1995; Valentine 1997).

While girls also become larger and stronger as they age, these changes are interpreted quite differently. Girls and women are seen as weak, regardless of their actual strength and abilities. Moreover, young women are seen as being at a peak of sexual desirability. Given the widespread misconception that sexual assaults are motivated by the victim's attractiveness, girls and young women are perceived to be at risk because of this intersection of gender, age, and sexuality. In this example, a 44-year-old woman describes the difference she sees between her own and her college-age daughter's vulnerability:

Angela: [When] I'm walking, I'm not worried about people attacking me. . . . [But] young people, I have a feeling for young girls, when they're running, and they wear this little provocative stuff. And I make [my daughter] cover up, but you know what I'm saying? . . . I am always wanting to make sure that they are equipped when they leave because they're a lot younger than I am and people are looking at them, and I'm aware of that, too, because I was young. (Group 11)

Thus, at the same moment that young men are seen as least vulnerable, young women are seen as most vulnerable.

As women grow older, however, they move past this peak of perceived vulnerability. As the quotes above and below illustrate, middle-aged women are perceived to be less vulnerable than young women:

Barbara: Being older, I have the advantage of not having to put up with the crap from a 22-year-old that an 18- or 19-year-old would have to. It doesn't bother me to play kinda mother to people [and] say, "Don't worry," "Back off!" . . . By being older and assuming a matronly attitude that I'm just not going to mess with any of this macho stuff. . . . It's like, they'll just kind of fold their tents and they'll go away. And it is an advantage being older, I think that's given me a lot of security. (Group 13)

Finally, as individuals grow into old age, women's and men's perceived vulnerability converges again. For example, this speaker identifies her elderly father as vulnerable:

Barbara: . . . My dad's 70. I could beat my dad up. [laughter] (Group 13)

The group's laughter confirms the perceived absurdity of a woman's being seen as capable of victimizing a man. Note, however, that this quote refers to a *particular* old man. Although specific old men like her father are perceived to be vulnerable, older women as a group are seen as especially vulnerable, as in this statement by a 71-year-old woman:

Meg: . . . I've noticed since I got older, particularly, that I'm much more of a target. You think as a woman you're a target, but as an older woman, you really become much more of a target. (Group 8)

Even though men's vulnerability increases in old age, women are still believed to be more vulnerable than men (Pain 1995). Aging makes women seem more vulnerable, while men move from being perceived as invulnerable to being seen as vulnerable.

Thus, while women are seen as more vulnerable than men at every age, the size and shape of this difference vary. These shifting differences provide excellent examples of how gender and age intersect in both experience and perception.

Race and Ethnicity

A number of participants made comments that associated race or ethnicity with vulnerability. Most of these comments were made by white participants who associated whiteness with vulnerability and people of color with potential danger:

Janet: My children were raised in [a racially diverse neighborhood] where I lived for 20 years, so their friends are multiethnic. And my oldest son is actually a rap DJ. And so they get into a lot of situations that are fairly unusual for white kids. And I try to warn my older son, particularly, about being in situations where late at night or someone has too much to drink, they might be angry just because of his appearance. (Group 1)

David: I have to say that I think that race is a relevant factor . . . in that I think that one of the things that allows somebody to perpetrate violence against another person is if they believe that they're not like them, that they're different. If I'm travelling in a neighborhood that I clearly don't live in, because it's an Asian neighborhood, or a Black neighborhood, and I see somebody walking down the street and they belong, they live there, and I don't, and I know that right away because they're Black and I'm not, I'm going to feel more threatened. (Group 4)

These participants clearly see their vulnerability as stemming from their whiteness.

Interestingly, only one participant of color noted that she believed her race made her more vulnerable. This 30-year-old African American woman commented that her race became a liability after moving from a large city to an all-white suburb:

Alissa: I know my dad moved to [the suburbs] because of the violence here [in the city] . . . he didn't want us to grow up that way. But then this opened up a whole another set of issues, you know, when you don't realize that you're different and you suddenly move somewhere else and they let you know you're different. . . . There was only one other Black family. . . . And so I would go to school and I'd get beat up—I mean, I'd never even had to fight before. (Group 11)

The effects of race are contextual: Both white and Black participants felt vulnerable only in a context that highlighted their racial identity (Covington and Taylor 1991).

Social Class

Only a few participants explicitly commented that social class affected perceived vulnerability, perhaps because of the relative invisibility of issues of class in the United States. Most of these comments were made by middle- and upper-middle-class participants who felt that their apparent wealth made them attractive targets for violence. For example, this exchange took place in a conversation between two white, middle-class men about how they might react when encountering dangerous-looking people on the street:

Eric: Now some of my Asian friends . . . would respond totally different to that. "Nobody bothers me. I look like hell, and they [potential assailants] don't give me two looks," you know? But this guy, this Caucasian white guy, he dresses in a Gap shirt or whatever casual stuff, "Oh, he's got money, let's get him."

Rick: Yeah, [I could be] going for a job interview, [and] just because I have a suit on, [pan-handlers] assume I have money. (Group 2)

As these quotes illustrate, it is not so much actual wealth as the appearance of wealth that makes one vulnerable. And in many cases, simply being white is perceived to be associated with wealth; race and class are not separable in these comments.

Only one participant, a wealthy white man, noted that poverty might increase one's vulnerability. It is notable that no poor or working-class participants made such comments, especially in light of the fact that other research has found that income is inversely correlated with risk (Newhart Smith and Hill 1991). However, a number of oblique comments, generally about the perceived danger level of the communities in which the participants resided, provide evidence that social class does affect perceptions of vulnerability in this way. For example, in these comments, two poor white men living in a high-crime area discussed their neighborhood:

Ernie: It's still bad out there, and they've still got a lot of dealers out there. . . . I tell everybody, they shouldn't go out there alone. They should always have a friend with them.

Henry: Yeah, it's a high-risk area. (Group 6)

In contrast, this middle-class white man discussed his mother's neighborhood:

Tom: But I think that [when] you get into my mom's neighborhood, which is a middle-class neighborhood, all of a sudden you have block watch programs, single dwelling homes. You've got police who know the people who live there. And you also have a place where . . . everyone knows each other, and knows . . . who belongs and who doesn't. (Group 2)

Thus, social class does make a difference in perceived vulnerability, although these comments were more implicit than those about race or gender.

Sexual Identity

Although sexual identity was not a major topic of conversation in the focus groups, several comments associated homosexuality with vulnerability. For example, one lesbian woman said,

Joyce: If I'm in a group of gay people, I feel safe because I know they're not going to beat me up. But anywhere else, that's where I've experienced the most violence, where I've been assaulted. . . . And I expect most people to be violent towards me. That's sort of my feeling. And I feel like I have a double whammy because my partner, not only is she a woman but she's Jewish, and we make these little jokes like, "okay, we're going to this town, act as married, and as Christian as you can, and maybe they won't notice." [laughter] . . . Yeah, you know, get out the big crucifix. Because, you know, we are targets. We are targeted people, and we know that. And we're not stupid. We read the reports, and we see things. (Group 4)

In this case, gender interacts with sexual identity, ethnicity, and religion to multiply the women's perceived vulnerability. Although Joyce's proposed strategies to avoid violence ("act as married and as Christian as you can") are offered in jest, they illustrate the self-regulation that is perceived to be necessary for avoiding victimization: She and her partner attempt to appear heterosexual to prevent being targeted. However, "this self-regulation normalizes not only homophobia but gendered violence as well. Attention is displaced from the root of the problem, the workings of (hetero)normativity" (Stanko and Curry 1997, 525).

Being gay is also perceived to increase men's vulnerability. For example, this gay man notes that he perceives one of his friends to be vulnerable because he frequents a park known for anonymous sexual encounters:

Eric: This guy, good friend of mine, he likes to go to Volunteer Park at night. And I try to impress upon the fellow [that] it's not the safest thing to do, there's a lot of crazies out there. . . . And [the warning is] not particularly well accepted. I mean, "I am a man. Who are you telling me what I can and can't do?" . . . I mean yes, I've gone to Volunteer Park, but usually it's with a team, you know, [laughs] we've got our defenses. (Group 2)

The friend's perceived vulnerability is in part due to his sexual identity and the consequent risk of gay bashing (Connell 1987; Stanko and Hobdell 1993). However, note again that this speaker is identifying a specific man as vulnerable for a specific reason: It is by going to Volunteer Park alone that his vulnerability is magnified. In contrast, going with a "team" of other men, as the speaker himself does, offers protection.

This speaker's comment highlights the way in which vulnerability based on sexual identity is conditioned by gender. Eric suggests that men can protect themselves and each other from the danger of homophobic violence. Indeed, his friend's reaction highlights the perceived self-sufficiency of masculinity. Joyce's quote, above, offers no such sense of confidence; her vulnerability as a woman and as a lesbian magnify each other. Thus, homophobic violence cannot be conceptualized as a single phenomenon but must incorporate "a gendered understanding of violence against gay *men* and lesbian *women*" (Jeness and Broad 1994, 419).

One need not identify oneself as gay, lesbian, or bisexual to be perceived as vulnerable. Simply not meeting expectations for heterosexual appearance can be enough to increase perceived risk. This was made clear in comments by a straight man who felt that he had been threatened because other men had believed him to be gay:

Jack: It really was a hazard, I felt shit scared, I should not walk close to those people at all. Because someone will have something to show to someone else. Some macho thing, where they'll want to show that they can, you know, say "fuck you" to the faggot and what's he going to do, because I'm such a stud. (Group 4)

In sum, gender interacts with a variety of social positions in the construction of vulnerability. Masculinity is perceived to protect men from danger, whereas femininity is perceived to be a sign of inherent vulnerability. However, race, class, sexuality, and age interact with gender in particular social contexts to increase or decrease vulnerability. Despite these interactions, gender was mentioned far more frequently than other systems of social hierarchy with respect to vulnerability. Unless there are specific extenuating circumstances, such as old age, youth, racial salience, or a proclivity to engage in behaviors perceived as risky, men are not understood to be as vulnerable to violence as women.

DANGEROUSNESS

Vulnerability does not occur in a vacuum; one is vulnerable to other people and to particular kinds of harm. In this section, I turn to the concept of perceived dangerousness: What types of people are considered dangerous?

There were 159 mentions of dangerous people during the focus group discussions, of which 121 specified the gender of the people identified as dangerous. Of these, 115 (or 95 percent) identified men as potentially dangerous, either individually or as a group:

Janet: The most threatened I've felt in the last year is on campus when I'm going to my car after a night class, and there's nobody in sight except one guy. (Group 1)

Joyce: I see a bunch of guys, any age, any group, more than two and I'm scared. I don't care what color they are, what age they are, even if they're like 12. It's like, uh oh, trouble. It's either going to be verbal assault, or it might be physical assault, or whatever. (Group 4)

In some cases, male family members and other male intimates were described as potential dangers:

Anita: A lot of times violent crimes happen as a result from your boyfriend, your husband . . . rather than just some stranger. (Group 1)

However, the vast majority of the comments about dangerous people referred not to intimates but to strangers—despite the fact that violence is at least as likely to occur between people who know each other (Tjaden and Thoennes 1998).

Only six comments identified women as dangerous. Moreover, of these six comments, two were meant (and received) as jokes, highlighting the perceived absurdity of a woman being seen as dangerous. Two comments involved the danger not of physical violence but of a woman's falsely accusing a man of rape. For example, a 30-year-old man described his reactions after he picked up a female hitchhiker who subsequently threatened him:

Harold: I felt that there was a risk of harm to myself, but not so much that she was going to physically injure me, more than scratching me or something like that. It was more the fact that I could end up in the newspaper. I could have harm to my reputation, people could become aware . . . that I was accused of rape by this woman. (Group 4)

This is a very different kind of danger than that believed to be posed by men.

Of the two remaining cases of women perceived as dangerous, one involved a woman wielding a gun, and the other referred to groups of young Black women encountered in an area the speaker believed to be the most dangerous in Seattle. Thus, women are seen as dangerous only in extraordinary circumstances: when they are armed or when they are both members of groups perceived to be dangerous and in a context perceived as especially risky.

Race was also seen as a potent marker of dangerousness, although to a much lesser extent than gender. Of the 159 comments about dangerousness, 27 associated race or particular racial groups with danger in some way. Sixteen of these identified African Americans, 2 identified whites, 2 referred to Asians or Latinos, and 7 referred to "race," a "mixed group," "other cultures," or "immigration" as potentially dangerous. For example, this conversation took place between three young white men:

Sean: Like if I drove through one of the really, darker-skinned areas of Seattle, then I get a lot of looks. I've been through there and everyone's looking at you, and they don't look like they're happy to see you.

Rob: "Whitey, get out of here." That's what I heard.

Andrew: They either think you're a chump, or they think you're such a badass that you can afford to go through there. (Group 7)

These men's projections of what people of color think about them say a great deal about their ideas about race and dangerousness, and are consistent with Madriz's (1997) findings that images of criminals are deeply racialized.

Poverty is another marker of danger. In 15 of the 159 comments, poor people were perceived to be particularly dangerous; in contrast, danger was never associated with wealth:

Tom: I think if you look at who you're getting the locks to lock out . . . you're not putting locks on your doors to keep out your neighbor down the street or the neighbor two blocks away. It's the person from the lesser income bracket who lives two miles away. (Group 2)

Meg: I have a car, so basically I have to be in my parking lot by eight o'clock because if I am not, I have to go in the back door, and that is just a parking lot that is filled with a lot of homeless, sleeping in the trash barrels and the dumpsters and things like that, and I am not crazy about that . . . (Group 8)

Thus, gender, race, and class were frequently invoked when describing people perceived as dangerous. Moreover, in 22 percent of these descriptions (35 of the 159), the participants identified dangerous people by reference to some combination of these social statuses. Gender was mentioned in all of these combinations, and all but one case mentioned men. In addition, half of these comments (17) referred to men of color, especially Black men, and 15 comments referred to young men. Social class, however, was rarely mentioned in combination with other social positions, suggesting that being poor, like being male, is sufficient to be seen as dangerous. In contrast, race and age require a combination with other social positions to produce perceptions of danger.

The combination of race, gender, and age was particularly potent in the focus group discussions. In particular, young Black men were most frequently identified as dangerous. For example, this conversation between two white women took place in response to a facilitator's question about when they feel most vulnerable:

Becky: That one's easy. [laughter] I think when I'm alone, and I walk by a group of . . . probably young Black men, I would say, that would—and I know it's a stereotypical prejudiced scenario, but it still happens. It's still the first instinct, is, heart starts to go a

little faster. And the second would be young punky males of any race, but those are the two. . . .

Liz: I'd like to think that they were equal, but in the questionnaire, I had the same reaction and I thought, oh God, I really feel prejudiced, and I didn't like it, but it's young Black males. (Group 3)

The white participants' self-consciousness about talking about race was clear in the discussions—as was the tenacity of their associations between people of color, especially Black men, and dangerousness. This identification of poor men and men of color as more dangerous than white and wealthy men parallels findings from Brooks Gardner's (1995) study of public harassment of women. She found that women reacted much more positively to harassment when it came from high-status, attractive men than when it came from low-status men and explains this pattern in terms of the heterosexual romanticization of harassment. Women were likely to interpret harassment from high-status men as suggesting romantic interest; this interpretation served to rationalize the harassment.

DISCUSSION

Thus, in dramatic contrast to representations of vulnerability, representations of danger in the focus group conversations identified men as the main source of potential violence. In some cases, maleness is identified along with other social positions, especially race, class, and age; in the majority of cases, however, simply being a man is enough to render a person potentially dangerous in others' eyes. Women, in comparison, were only identified as dangerous in very few, particular cases and situations; the default category for women is vulnerability.

The salience of gender and other systems of social hierarchy in the talk described above is particularly remarkable in light of the fact that the focus group participants were never asked about specific social positions. This suggests that the participants' marked and consistent association of vulnerability with femininity and other social positions represents their actual beliefs, rather than their assumptions about what the facilitator hoped to hear.

Disjunctions between Perceived and Actual Vulnerability

The strong association between gender and vulnerability in everyday discourse is particularly fascinating in light of the wealth of contradictory empirical evidence. Table 3 compares victimization data from the National Crime Survey with focus group references to victims and to people perceived as vulnerable.

According to the National Crime Survey, men are more likely than women to be victimized: In 1995, men were the targets in 58 percent of all reported violent victimizations. Qualitative research on victimization has also found that men experience a great deal of violence (e.g., Stanko and Hobdell 1993). Even the focus group

TABLE 3: Comparison of Victimization Data and Focus Group References to Victimization and Vulnerability (in percentages)

<i>Data Source</i>	<i>Gender of Victims or People Perceived as Vulnerable</i>	
	<i>Men</i>	<i>Women</i>
Violent crime victimizations ^a	58	42
Focus group references to victims	41	59
Focus group references to vulnerable people	19	81

a. Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics (1995, 231, Table 3.2).

participants themselves discussed incidents where men were victimized nearly as often as incidents in which women were victims: 41 percent of victims mentioned by the participants were male. Nonetheless, participants still perceived men to be relatively invulnerable: Only 19 percent of the focus group comments about people perceived to be vulnerable referred to men. Thus, ideas about vulnerability do not derive directly from actual experiences of violence.

A similar observation can be made for the relationship between race and vulnerability. In the focus group discussions, whiteness was perceived as a source of vulnerability (especially when in mixed-race environments) far more often than other racial positions, but crime and victimization reports show that people of color—and especially men of color—are at greater risk of victimization than whites (Bureau of Justice Statistics 1995) and, indeed, tend to report more fear of crime in large surveys (see Skogan 1995).

The greater emphasis on gender than on race in the focus group discussions—especially the lack of comments about the vulnerability of men of color—may stem from several factors. First, the fact that the participants were drawn from the Seattle area may have resulted in less talk about race than might occur in other areas. Seattle has a relatively small number of African Americans and Latinos (10.0 percent and 3.3 percent of the city's population, respectively [U.S. Bureau of the Census 1992]) and less visible interracial conflict than many other large cities. It does have a larger Asian and Pacific Islander population (11.9 percent) than most cities, but men from these groups are not perceived to be as dangerous as other men of color. Moreover, like many other big cities, Seattle has a relatively high degree of racial segregation: African Americans, Latinos, and to a lesser extent Asians and Asian Americans, tend to live in distinct neighborhoods. This means that individuals (especially whites) may have very limited contact with members of other racial categories and spend most of their time in racially homogeneous contexts. In contrast, because gender is not a basis for spatial segregation, individuals are much more frequently in mixed-gender contexts. Thus, racial difference may have been less salient than gender difference as a marker of danger for these participants. Finally, Americans tend to talk about gender, more than race, in terms of broadly shared

personality characteristics. While sensitivity to issues of racism has made it less acceptable to make generalizations about racial groups (at least in public discourse), the same is not true for gender. Thus, participants' lack of discussion about race may have stemmed from their reluctance to make comments that could be perceived as racist.

Together, this evidence shows that vulnerability is socially constructed quite independently from actual experiences (or knowledge of others' experiences) with violence. Ideas about women's vulnerability and men's invulnerability persist even when men's victimization is discussed. The focus group discussions provide a useful window on this process of construction. The talk of the participants shows how women become and remain identified with vulnerability and men with invulnerability and dangerousness. These kinds of associations, I argue, help to explain the gendered patterns of fear and vulnerability discussed above.

Vulnerability, Dangerousness, and the Body

One theme that ran throughout the focus group conversations was the relationship of vulnerability and dangerousness to human bodies. Women's vulnerability is perceived to stem from physical factors: their generally smaller size, lesser strength, and physical vulnerability to rape. These differences are believed to be natural even though, as many scholars have argued, these seemingly physiological differences are themselves socially constructed (Kessler and McKenna 1978; Lorber 1994).

The other social positions discussed above are also located at least partly in bodies. The process of aging is manifested in bodily changes: Young children and the elderly are perceived as physically less able to defend themselves against attack. In a different way, race and ethnicity are translated into vulnerability through the body, because they are a source of danger only insofar as they are visible to others. As discussed above, racial salience was perceived to increase vulnerability. Both people of color and whites reported feeling at risk in contexts where they were in the racial minority. But physical appearance mediates this effect: If a person of color can pass as white in an all-white context, he or she is perceived as less vulnerable than those who are obviously people of color. The same can be said for sexual identity: Those whose appearance signals that they are lesbian or gay are perceived to be more vulnerable than those who can pass as straight. Social class is in some cases signaled through appearance, such as dress, regardless of actual class position. Moreover, even those who are not members of targeted groups may be at risk because their appearance suggests mistakenly that they are members.

Other physical aspects of bodies are also associated with vulnerability and dangerousness. Bodily size and strength are believed to increase dangerousness and decrease vulnerability, as was evident in the focus group discussions:

Tina: If you're 5 foot 1 and 110 pounds, you can be sized up and you're a decent target.
(Group 5)

Linda: I have a friend who's a really big guy. I don't think he's ever been in a fight, I think I've been in more fights than he has, and he's really gentle, but because of how he looks people never mess with him. (Group 13)

Note that smallness and weakness (and therefore vulnerability) are considered normative for women but the exception for men; women are believed to be inherently weak and vulnerable. Interestingly, a number of comments emphasized a man's small size, as in this quote:

Stacy: I had a male friend that was, it's not a politically correct term, but he was a midget, he was about 4'8", 4'6". And we were wrestling around, and I was about the same height and weight as I am now, and he pinned me. . . . It definitely gave me a start, and something to think about. . . . He was much smaller, weighed a lot less, but he still had some strength that, even at his size, he was able to pin me. (Group 5)

These kinds of comments served to emphasize the association of masculinity with danger: Even small men are perceived to be dangerous to women.

Although perceptions of vulnerability stem from socially constructed ideas—about gender, race, age, and so on—the markers that convey vulnerability are located in physical bodies. This fact reinforces the perceived essentialism of these differences. Because bodies are perceived to be “natural,” any patterns associated with them are perceived to be inherent and therefore not changeable. This perception significantly lowers the possibility of resistance.⁸

Vulnerability, Fear, and Daily Life

These patterns of perceived vulnerability and dangerousness are not simply cognitive constructs; they have concrete consequences for the everyday lives of women and men. Many of the quotes used above illustrate these effects. Women report constantly monitoring their environment for signs of danger, hesitating to venture outside at night alone or even in the company of other women, asking men for protection, modifying their clothes and other aspects of their appearance, and restricting their activities to reduce their perceived risk of violence, thus limiting their use of public space. These strategies are simply part of daily life as a woman:

Christine: I think most women have . . . a checklist of 10 things they always do that's just in their heads. They always lock their door, they always check behind the seat when you get in the car, you always have the lights on, you always have the automatic timers set for the lights, you always have the doors locked, you always have the windows locked. (Group 4)

Men in the focus groups, however, rarely mentioned using such elaborate strategies. Stanko (1997, 489) discusses women's ongoing “safekeeping” as the “process of assessing risk as an ongoing accomplishment.” This process, she argues, “is

'performative' . . . of respectable femininities." Similarly, men's lack of fear, and accompanying failure to use many safety strategies, can be seen as performative of normative masculinities. This too may have negative consequences for men. It allows them to live without the restrictions imposed by safety strategies, but it may also increase their risk of violence and may make it more difficult for them to cope with any victimization that does occur (Stanko and Hobdell 1993).

CONCLUSIONS

Ideas about gender, vulnerability, and dangerousness have consequences for both individuals and social life. These ideas affect not only those who experience violence but nonvictims (and nonperpetrators) as well. Shared ideas about bodies, in other words, affect material realities, in pervasive and far-reaching ways.

I began by posing the paradox of fear and violence: Why is there a disjunction between women's and men's reported fear of violence and their apparent risk of victimization? Others have argued that fear is imposed from the outside—from experiences of victimization, media representations, and everyday harassment. I have suggested that in addition to these external forces, people themselves construct women's vulnerability and men's dangerousness through everyday talk about violence and danger. These mundane conversations identify women as inherently open to attack and men as inherently able to both protect themselves from danger and menace others. I have also argued that these are often conversations about physical bodies—most often about what it means to have a male body or a female body, but also other types of bodies (small bodies, old bodies, bodies marked by race or sexual identity or disability). The fact that these constructions of vulnerability and dangerousness are framed in the language of physical bodies makes them appear natural, inevitable, and, as a result, virtually invisible. Although pervasive and consequential, they are rarely salient, instead forming the taken-for-granted backdrop for everyday life.

An incident from one of the focus groups illustrates this point. The group was a mixed-sex, all-white group that took place on the campus of a large company near Seattle. When the discussion ended at about 9:00 P.M., it was quite dark outside. The participants were chatting as they prepared to leave when one of the men in the group turned to me and said, "Need a walk out to your car?" (Group 4) This well-meaning offer encapsulates the ideas discussed in this article. In just a few, indirect words, this speaker suggested that women are vulnerable and unable to take care of themselves, and that therefore they need protection by men (and that men, in turn, are capable of protecting women and have a responsibility to do so). His simple question reproduces shared ideas about vulnerability and danger, and reaffirms the perceived reality of a world in which women's fear is rational and expected; only in such a reality does the statement make sense. Through everyday talk such as this, ideas about gender, vulnerability, and dangerousness are transmitted and reaffirmed. The fact that these beliefs are maintained in the face of empirical evidence

to the contrary speaks to the powerful role of discourse in constructing and reproducing gender.

NOTES

1. It should be noted that women's fear does parallel their victimization in one important respect: Overwhelmingly, women are both victimized by and report fearing men.

2. I do not mean to suggest that women's fears are baseless. Violence against women, especially sexual violence, is widespread. Noting the discrepancy between risk and fear does not imply that women are unnecessarily afraid; rather, it suggests that fear is created by factors other than a purely "rational" calculation of risk.

3. It is important to note that although on average women report substantially more fear than men do, this does not mean that all women are afraid (Burton 1998). The question of why some women have substantially greater fear than others is a separate question deserving of further research.

4. Gender operates at multiple, mutually reinforcing levels, including as a characteristic of individuals, an interactional activity and expectation, a social institution and ideology, and a system of hierarchy (Lorber 1994). In this article, I use the term *gender* to refer to all of these levels. I focus, however, on the conceptual and ideological level of gender, what Lorber calls "gender imagery."

5. It should be noted, however, that in calling attention to this violence, some early feminist writers themselves inscribed vulnerability as an inherent condition of the female body and dangerousness as an inherent condition of the male body (Burton 1998).

6. The sex of the facilitator matched that of the group participants: Female facilitators conducted the all-female groups, and male facilitators conducted the all-male groups. Mixed-sex groups were also conducted by female facilitators. When possible, the facilitator also matched the participants on other salient social characteristics such as race and sexual identity.

7. All participants completed a detailed written survey before attending the focus group discussion. The survey included questions on the participants' experiences with violence, fear of violence, media exposure, and demographic characteristics. Because responses to survey questions are not analyzed in this article, I have not described the survey in great detail. See Hollander (1997) for a much fuller discussion of the survey and its administration.

8. The fact that vulnerability and dangerousness are perceived to be located in physical bodies does suggest, however, that changing beliefs about bodies may provide a way to change ideas about gender and vulnerability. For example, participation in sports and learning self-defense techniques may change women's perceptions of their physical abilities and, as a result, decrease their perceived vulnerability. This possibility is supported by other research (McCaughy 1997; McDaniel 1993) but deserves further investigation.

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Jocelyn A. Hollander is an assistant professor of sociology at the University of Oregon. She is the author, with Judith Howard, of Gendered Situations, Gendered Selves: A Gender Lens on Social Psychology. Her current research focuses on the construction of alternate conceptions of gender in women's self-defense courses.