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## Fear of crime in natural environments from a gender perspective: the case of the “Camino de Santiago”

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### Abstract

The main objective of this study was to analyse the nature and magnitude of the fear of being a victim of crime among pilgrims during the “Camino de Santiago”. Specifically, this study explored the gender differences that can be observed with regard to the emotion experienced in a journey that, apart from the spiritual transcendence that it may pose to the pilgrims, is characterised by the act of entering natural spaces with very little human presence. The aim of this work was to address an underdeveloped research area in the scope of criminology and environmental psychology that, in the last two decades, has been mostly focused on analysing the fear of crime in urban spaces. The sample was constituted by 1,084 pilgrims (58.9% women and 41.1% men) aged between 18 and 75 years. The results show that women perceive the “Camino de Santiago” as more dangerous compared to men ( $M = 2$ ;  $SD = 0.67$ ) ( $t(1078) = -2.769$ ;  $p = .006$ ), and self-perceive as more vulnerable when walking it alone ( $\chi^2 = 202.816$ ;  $df = 2$ ;  $p < .001$ ). The results also highlight the importance of physical characteristics in terms of perspective, shelter and potential escape routes, and the influence of these variables on how the pilgrims perceive and experience the natural environment. However, both sexes showed low fear thresholds, which indicates that the “Camino de Santiago” is generally perceived as a safe journey.

**Keywords:** *fear of crime, natural environment, Jacobean routes, women.*

## **Introduction**

The perception of insecurity and, therefore, fear of crime, with respect to the improvement of quality of life, has led researchers worldwide to theoretically explain the factors that cause certain people to feel more vulnerable than others in the face of offense and crime.

From the scope of social sciences, the relevance of studying fear of crime lies in the fact that this subjective perception of insecurity may have negative consequences in the population, both individually and socially. In this sense, fear of crime forces individuals to change their lifestyles (Medina, 2003) and may affect their quality of life by “generating anxiety, change of habits (...), fracture of the sense of community and lower engagement in community activities, isolation, attitudes that favour more punitive policies...” (Vozmediano et al., 2010, p.2), which implies negative consequences for the quality of life of societies, posing a barrier to their development in this type of environments and thereby hindering the entire potential that is offered, in this case, by the “Camino de Santiago”. Fear of crime triggers the modification of routines and behaviours toward its avoidance and the search for conditions that allow the individual to feel safe, which frequently entails seeking the company of other people, thereby excluding, in its most extreme version, the possible enjoyment of a specific space. Thus, the perception of fear of crime manifests

as a social and political problem that is sufficiently important to be subject to analysis and treatment (Jackson, 2010).

The scientific literature has often approached the differences between men and women in this respect, with the latter feeling more affected by this phenomenon (Barker et al., 2022; Byun & Ha, 2023; Navarrete et al., 2023; Vasiljević et al., 2023). Some of these studies about fear of crime and gender have been focused on the relationship between fear and ways of living, and its influence on the loss of collective roots, especially in urban environments (Dammert, 2007), which can even inhibit the capacity of women to enjoy their rights and freedom on equal conditions, thereby preventing their full and meaningful inclusion in public spaces and thus limiting their opportunities to effectively leveraging the benefits for well-being derived from the access to these spaces (Nateras & Valencia, 2020; Thynell, 2016). Other authors have focused on the relevance of the perception of security of places, as it could lead women to modify or completely avoid trips to places perceived as dangerous (Gargiulo et al., 2020). According to Valencia et al. (2023), women's behaviours generate responses in terms of self-exclusion from the public space that even lead to their deconstruction as political subjects. Other studies have analysed the design of these spaces from gender perspective. For instance, Soraganvi (2017) asserted that women avoid public urban spaces that are poorly designed, such as those with little lighting, a lack of public restrooms, inadequate signaling..., etc. As has been reported by Chen and Marzbali (2024), women

perceive parks as less secure compared to men due to fears related to crime, despite the fact that they spend more time in this type of environment. Although men generally perceive greater security in urban parks, women are more aware of the quality of the scenery (Polko & Kimic, 2022). Gender differences in perceived safety derive from the different levels of fear and psychological vulnerability perceived with regard to the risk of crime (Lathabhavan, 2023).

As was previously described, all these studies have emphasised the perception of safety in urban or natural urban spaces, highlighting the importance of urban policies and the planning processes associated with security matters from a gender perspective (Wrigley-Asante et al., 2022), leaving a literature gap in regard with natural environments. The current study aims to fill this gap by analysing the perception of fear that may be generated by the “Camino de Santiago” in pilgrims who walk this path, with this work being among the first investigations to address this topic.

Throughout the “Camino de Santiago”, there are both groups of pilgrims and solitary walkers of any type and condition, who intermingle under a common premise: no pilgrim will refuse to offer assistance to another pilgrim who needs or requests it. However, the different Jacobean routes are not exempt from dangers and crime. Since the first known case, over one hundred pilgrims have died in the “Camino de Santiago”, with the cases of missing

people and violent deaths representing the highest percentages. In the last years, episodes of sexual predators have been reported throughout this route, and theft, robbery and false pilgrims are present since the beginning of the “Camino de Santiago”. Nevertheless, the official data show that the crime rate of either offenses or felonies that take place in the Way is much lower than that of any other route, including those that are completed on foot or using any type of vehicle (Magaz, 2015). In contrast, as was previously pointed out, little research has been conducted on the perception of safety in natural spaces beyond urban and/or simulated natural spaces, and no studies were found in the literature regarding the environment of the “Camino de Santiago”. Therefore, the fundamental objectives of this work were to determine the perception of fear of crime among pilgrims of the “Camino de Santiago”, attending to the characteristics of its natural environment and the possible differences as a function of gender.

## **Method**

### ***Sample***

The sample consisted of 1,080 pilgrims (52.8% women, 47.2% men). In terms of age, 6.7% were between 18 and 30 years old, 20.5% between 30 and 45 years old, 47.3% between 45 and 60 years old, 24.3% between 60 and 75 years old, and the remaining 1.3% were over 75 years old. In terms of educational attainment, 5.7% had primary education, 12.4% had secondary education,

26.9% had a high school diploma, 49.8% had a university degree, and 5.2% had postgraduate studies.

### ***Procedure***

A questionnaire was designed, adapting some scales developed by other authors such as Andrews and Gatersleben (2010) and San Juan et al. (2005), whose studies, although focused on fear of crime in urban or simulated natural spaces, are a good reference for the construction of our scales in this type of environment. All scales were designed to gather not only the perception of fear but also its intensity, concern and probability.

Each item was drafted and presented in a clear and precise manner, in order to ensure that the participants could issue a value judgement, thereby providing different and opposing alternatives, from most to least favourable, as a function of different categories or response options. In these scales, each participant responds to both Likert scales (1-5) and semantic differential scales. To analyse the obtained results, a numerical value was assigned to these categories, maintaining at all times the internal coherence of the trait to be measured.

With the aim of avoiding stereotypical responses, the different items were combined among them, in order to separate the statements related to positive or favourable perceptions from those associated with negative or unfavourable perceptions.

The questionnaire was created using *Google Forms* and distributed on-line through social media, reaching different organisations and groups of interest. Participation was voluntary and anonymous.

### ***Instrument***

Sociodemographic variables of sex and age. To measure fear of crime, the following scales were employed: *perceived danger* (adapted from Andrews and Gatersleben, 2010) was measured using 3 items with response options that ranged from 1 (not at all) to 5 (very frequently) and were drafted without referring to a specific source of danger; *social danger* (adapted from Andrews and Gatersleben, 2010) was measured using 3 items, with 2 additional *ad hoc* items (sociophysical danger) related to crimes that have already been reported in different Jacobean routes (sexual assault and murder); *physical danger* (adapted from Andrews and Gatersleben, 2010) was measured using 4 items that had previously been used, although some of them were redrafted and others were added, in order to provide more realistic probabilities rather than very remote and even invisible barriers offered by the reference authors. This study includes a series of new variables that should significantly contribute to explaining and better understanding the behaviour related to perceived fear, with the aim of improving the proposition offered by previous studies focused on fear of crime in urban or urbanised natural spaces (parks, etc.). Thus, following the works of San Juan, Vergara and Germán *et al.* (2005), the current study includes 10 more

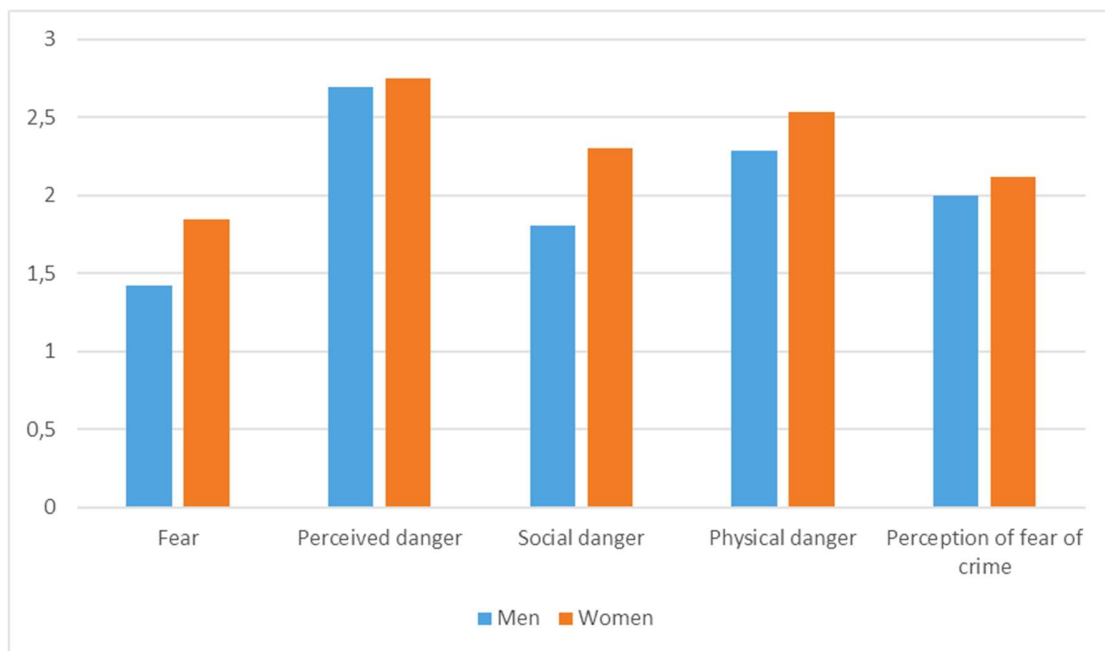
items related to the *perception of fear of crime* and *emotion (fear)*, which was measured using a single item, in which the participant may value the intensity of fear in a scale between 1 (no fear) and 5 (great fear) within the emotions measurement scale used in the environment of the “Camino de Santiago” (Durán & San Juan, 2021).

## **Results**

To analyse the role of gender in regard with fear of crime, the groups of men and women were compared in the different variables (Figure 1). With respect to emotion, it was observed that the women ( $M = 1.85$ ;  $SD = 1$ ) felt this emotion to a greater extent than the men ( $M = 1.42$ ;  $SD = 0.82$ ) ( $t(1390) = -8.495$ ;  $p < .001$ ). Regarding the perception of danger, once again, greater scores were obtained by the women. In the dimension of social danger ( $t(1390) = -10.793$ ;  $p < .001$ ), women and men presented a mean of 2.30 ( $SD = 0.88$ ) and 1.82 ( $SD = 0.71$ ), respectively. In regard with physical danger ( $t(1390) = -5.155$ ;  $p < .001$ ), women and men showed a mean of 2.53 ( $SD = 0.88$ ) and 2.29 ( $SD = 0.81$ ), respectively. However, no statistically significant differences were found in relation to perceived danger ( $t(1390) = -1.696$ ;  $p = .09$ ). Similarly, in the perception of fear of crime based on the characteristics of the environment, the women ( $M = 2.12$ ;  $SD = 0.74$ ) obtained greater scores than the men ( $M = 2$ ;  $SD = 0.67$ ) ( $t(1078) = -2.769$ ;  $p = .006$ ).



Lastly, with regard to vulnerability, a relationship was identified between gender and the willingness to walk the “Camino de Santiago” alone ( $\chi^2=202.816$ ;  $df=2$ ;  $p<.001$ ), with men showing greater predisposition than women.



**Figure 1.** Comparison as a function of gender in fear of crime.

## Discussion

In view of the obtained results, it can be inferred that there is no perception of fear of crime in the environment of the “Camino de Santiago”. Although, as a

function of gender, this study supports the findings of previous studies with regard to women suffering greater fear of crime than men (Navarrete et al., 2023), it is worth highlighting that, despite these differences, both women and men show low fear thresholds, which indicates that the “Camino de Santiago” is perceived as a safe route. In an environment dominated by solidarity, fraternity and empathy, the perception of safety tends to be greater than in similar spaces that lack these traits.

In relation to vulnerability, and understanding this construct as a state of great exposure to certain risks and uncertainties, combined with the possibility of a lower capacity to defend oneself from danger and face its negative consequences (MFE, 2010), criminological syntheses highlight feeling of insecurity, perception of vulnerability, concern about crime, and experience of victimisation as basic elements that may derive from a reaction or response to the perceived environment (Ochoa-Ramírez & Guzmán-Ramírez, 2020).

The findings of the present work about perceived fear show the need to incorporate this variable to this line of research. The importance of the physical characteristics in terms of perspective, shelter and potential escape influence the way in which an individual perceives and experiences a natural environment. Thus, future studies should focus on the modification of these physical characteristics, to ensure good visibility (perspective) and the absence of barriers that prevent potential escape routes, which is where the female

participants found the greatest level of perceived fear. This would contribute to reducing the perception of danger and fear, by making the environment more pleasant with regard to its level of perceived safety. This type of characteristic in a natural environment, that is, a physical structure that we can approach and, therefore, “control”, will also help to reduce the perceived probability of encountering a physical danger (trunk, branches, slope, etc.) and/or getting lost.

Consequently, and in line with Hale (1996), any theoretical model that aims to explain fear of crime must include some notion of vulnerability related to the perception of a person’s inability to defend him/herself. Ultimately, it seems evident that “people who are more vulnerable also feel more insecure and, to the best of their ability, take more safety measures, thereby reducing their exposure to risk and, therefore, their victimisation” (Gondra, 2008, p. 12).

The results obtained in the current study strengthen the need and interest to continue in this research line, with the aim of relating the different psychosocial aspects that influence the well-being and quality of life of individuals. In addition to the temporal limitations, the methodological problems must also be pointed out, since the measurement of fear of crime is hindered by the basic issue of its conceptualisation, due to the lack of consensus in the scientific literature, which makes it difficult to generalise the results or compare them with those of other studies. Moreover, there are no similar studies in this type of environment, as all research studies conducted to date on

this topic have been carried out in urbanised or simulated natural spaces. The incorporation of a cross-sectional view is fundamental to better understand the complexity of psychosocial well-being and its relationship with fear of crime.

In view of these results, although fear of crime is present, most pilgrims enjoy their experience in the “Camino de Santiago” without significant issues. As in any trip, taking precautions may help to make the experience safer, more attractive and more satisfactory, guaranteeing, in addition, inclusion and equitable access for everyone who wishes to walk this route.

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