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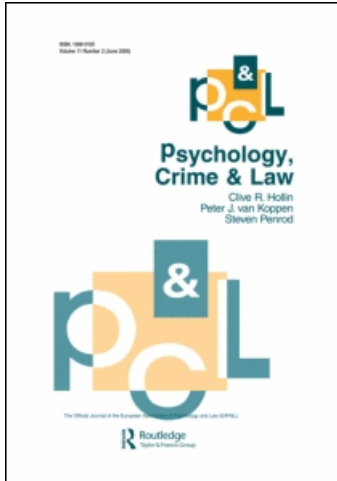
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### Victim precipitation: Some fresh evidence on nonverbally mediated perceptions of vulnerability

Frans Willem Winkel<sup>a</sup>; Robert J. McCormack<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Social Psychology, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, Amsterdam, BT, The Netherlands <sup>b</sup> Trenton State College, New Jersey, USA

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## VICTIM PRECIPITATION: SOME FRESH EVIDENCE ON NONVERBALLY MEDIATED PERCEPTIONS OF VULNERABILITY

FRANS WILLEM WINKEL<sup>a\*</sup> and ROBERT J. MCCORMACK<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>*Department of Social Psychology, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam,  
Van der Boechorststraat 1, 1081 BT Amsterdam, The Netherlands*

<sup>b</sup>*Trenton State College, New Jersey, USA*

Precipitators are personal attributes enhancing a person's likelihood of becoming criminally victimized. The present experiment focuses on walking style synchrony as a nonverbal determinant of differential perceptions. Findings suggest that walking styles associated with a lack of interactional synchrony – a lack of organized movement, a lack of 'wholeness', a lack of flowing motion – result in higher ratings of robbery potential and in lower ratings of perceived self-confidence of a target relative to more synchronous walking styles. Analyses also suggest that high criminal involvement is associated with more easily construing situations as 'opportunistic'. Some implications for assertiveness and self-defense training programs are discussed.

Snap judgments of strangers passing by are typically based on pieces of nonverbal information. Overall appearance, hair style, clothing, gestures, posture, style of walking, etc. is the only available basis for making positive or negative inferences about that person's mental state, psychological or physical condition, or character (Hinton, 1994). In the context of instrumental crime (Berkowitz, 1993), offenders do this in the form of rapid cost-benefit-analyses, balancing a target's attractiveness (in terms of potential profit or gain) against his or her 'hardiness' (Thio, 1983). Brewer (1994; 1951), for example suggests that a common technique for choosing an assault or robbery victim ('we are looking for quick and easy') is 'to take a look at that individual and rapidly assess that person's vulnerability, deciding whether he or she is a hard or soft target'. It is very likely that offenders will use the same inferential basis as 'we all do'.

In a victimological context vulnerability is usually considered under the heading of 'victim precipitation', referring to any personal (more

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\* Author for Correspondence. Dr. Winkel is coordinator of the 'Quality of Victim Assistance' – project, which is subsidised by the *Achmea* Foundation 'Victim and Society' (Stichting *Achmea* Slachtoffer en Samenleving).

or less static, transient, or dynamic) feature or attribute enhancing an individual's likelihood of becoming victimized. Behavioral precipitation however tends to have a rather narrow focus: behavioral aspects examined relate particularly to an 'outgoing' lifestyle (proximity to opportunity; Cohen and Felson, 1979), or form part of an 'action-reaction-action' - sequence between victim and offender (for example in 'victim precipitated homicide, Wolfgang, 1958). Nonverbally mediated behavioral precipitation was a fully ignored component until Grayson and Stein (1981) in their pioneering analysis creatively underlined its potential importance.

Their analysis suggests that victims and nonvictims may be differentiated on the basis of their walking style. Potential victims may be signalling their vulnerability to would-be assailants through exaggerated movements. Videotapes were made of persons selected at random while they were walking in one of New York City's highest assault areas. A selection of tapes (controlling for sex and presumed age of the target, namely appearing to be under 35 or over 40 years of age) were discussed with 12 prison inmates. These discussions resulted in establishing a nominal 10-point rating scale for assault potential of the target.<sup>1</sup> Tapes were rated again utilising this scale and then divided in two sets of targets representing 'potentially easy victims' and 'nonvictims'. These two sets of videos were further 'Laban analysed' on the basis of a comprehensive and fine-grained coding scheme representing 21 different movement categories. The latter analysis revealed significant differences between 'easy' and 'nonvictims' on 5 movement codes, particularly on 'stride length', 'type of weight shift', 'body movement', 'type of walk', and 'swung or lifted feet'.<sup>2</sup> A combination of these codes suggests a victim-specific movement profile characterised by a lack of 'interactional synchrony' or 'wholeness'.

<sup>1</sup> The rating scale for assault potential consists of the following descriptions: (1) a very easy rip-off; (2) an easy dude to corner; (3) you would take that one out; (4) looks like a fairly easy hit; (5) you could stand the problem; (6) could give you a little static; (7) would be a problem, could give you a hard time; (8) hard dude to knock off. Wouldn't mess with him; (9) would be heavy. Would give you a hard time; and (10) would avoid it, too big a situation. Too heavy.

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed discussion of the movement coding scheme developed by R. Laban (*The Mastery of Movement*. Boston: Plays Inc, 1972) we refer to Grayson and Stein. For clarification some examples of code-definitions are given here: (5) 'TYPE OF PHRASE': A movement that has an exertion - recuperating rhythm which tends to organize itself into phrases that initiate, make a main statement and conclude. A series of movements comprising a section of a pattern. Scoring indicates where in phrase emphasis occurs: Explosive: beginning, Swing: middle, Impacted: end. (7) BODY MOVEMENT: The shift that occurs shifting weight from one foot to the other while walking. Movement usually starts at the pelvis. Primary lateral: weight shifted from side to side. Three-dimensional: pelvis operated in a spiral and achieves a three-dimensional quality. Primarily up and

Although the empirical evidence offered is clearly suggestive, there are some methodological unclaritys, justifying expanded research efforts in further examining the perceptual impact of various walking styles. For example, in only 5 of the 21 possible (movement) comparisons significant differences emerged. Besides being low, this may represent a 'capitalization on chance'. In performing 10 separate comparisons, each at a conventional level of  $p < 0.05$ , the multivariate  $p$ -level already climbs to 0.40. A very crude measure of correction in multiple comparisons is to only accept 'reliable' differences at a stricter level of significance, for example at  $p < 0.02$  (which equals  $0.05/21$  or a conventional  $p$ -level divided by the number of comparisons). In this case only one of the reported differences ('type of walk';  $p < 0.001$ ) is reliable, which does not make a very convincing case for a perceptual impact of walking style differences. A second unclarity relates to the 'cut-off'-point in the scale for rated assault potential, which served to divide 'potentially easy victims' (those scoring 1, 2, or 3 in a majority of ratings) and nonvictims (those scoring 4 up to 10). There are no reasons offered for choosing this particular point. Upon, closer examination, this point appears to be rather arbitrary. In view of the labels chosen (see Footnote †) a more obvious categorization would have been those targets scoring 6 or lower, and a set of targets scoring 7 or higher. The reported differences are thus partly spurious, as far as they actually represent differences between those scoring 1, 2, or 3 and those scoring 4, 5, and 6, who may be considered 'similar' (relatively easy) targets. Finally, a 'third variable' (some other piece of nonverbal information) may have slipped into the videos selected for exposure. Explicit controls were only made for sex and age of the targets. Obviously a random selection of pedestrians are not similar in all respects: these dissimilarities – e.g., in terms of radiated wealth through clothing, or body shape – may of course also cause variance.

Main hypothesis tested in the present experiment is that perceptions of a target's robbery potential and a target's perceived self-confidence are mediated by that person's style of walking. Specifically walking styles associated with a lack of interactional synchrony are expected to result in higher ratings of robbery potential and in lower ratings of perceived self-confidence relative to more synchronous styles. Our second hypothesis is that persons who are more strongly

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down: weight shift causes a bounce because body goes up and down. Primarily forward/backward: a sagittal movement. (12) BODY MOVEMENT: Unilateral: one side of body or one limb used. Contralateral: two sides of body move in counterpoint: right arm, left leg then left arm, right leg.

prepared to commit crime (Stephenson, 1992), thus exhibiting a higher criminal involvement (Cornish and Clarke, 1986) will more easily construe situations as 'opportunistic'. Thus, high criminal involvement results in higher ratings of robbery potential and lower ratings of perceived self-confidence. Finally, exploring the 'involvement by walking style' – interaction addresses the issue whether these perceptual processes are more 'basically human' (no interaction) or more specifically reflecting a 'criminal perspective' (e.g., high scores on robbery potential mainly emerge in highly criminally involved persons).

## METHOD

### *Sample*

Subjects were 128 students of Trenton State College in Trenton, New Jersey, who volunteered to participate in the study. The sample consisted of 66 males, with an average age of 22.4 years, and 58 females, with an average age of 20.8 years. Most subjects were white (83.1%), 11% were black, and 5.9% represented 'another' category.

### *Materials*

Videos were made of 28 pedestrians walking in a particular section of the Free University Amsterdam campus. They were requested to participate in a study on movement analysis and to walk in three different postures (thereby controlling for differences in appearance). Walking synchrony was thus manipulated at a low, medium, and high level in the videos. In the low synchrony condition targets were given the following instructions: To walk with their head down, have stooped shoulders, take big steps, just move one arm, try to walk tense and stiff, to try with every step to put their feet flat on the ground, rather than putting first the heel and then the toes on the ground, try to look unsure, but, within these constraints, to walk as naturally as possible. In the medium synchrony condition targets were instructed to take big steps, move just one arm, to walk tensed and stiff, to keep their shoulders and their back straight, to look slightly nervous and to put their heel down first with every step, but to walk as naturally as possible. Given the same constraint, high synchrony instructions were to take medium steps, to keep shoulders and back straight, to look straight ahead, to move both arms, to put the heel down first, and to look relaxed and self-confident.

### Measures

Subjects were requested, after short-interval exposures, to rate each target's robbery potential ('do you think this is somebody who would be easy to rob?') and each target's self-confidence (do you think this person looks self-confident?). Answers were in terms of 7-point rating scales, ranging from 'absolutely not' to 'absolutely yes'. The Siegel and Rathus 'Self-Reporting Scale of Criminal Behavior' was administered to measure criminal involvement. Subjects were here requested to indicate the frequency at which, during the last 12 months, they were involved in various criminal behaviors.

### RESULTS

Data were multivariately analysed using a 2 (low/high criminal involvement based on a median split) by 3 (walking style synchrony: low, medium, high) – design, in which the latter was represented as a within-subjects factor. Only main effects emerged. The analysis revealed a significant main effect (see Table 1) for criminal involvement ( $F_{1,118} = 14.36, p < 0.001$ ) and for walking style synchrony ( $F_{2,236} = 209.92, p < 0.001$ ).

Table 1 suggests that high and low criminal involvement were associated with differential perceptions of both robbery potential and self-confidence. Subjects more strongly engaged in criminal behavior considered a target's robbery potential to be higher than subjects having low criminal involvement. Targets in the videotapes were perceived as being more easy to rob if criminal involvement is high. Moreover, targets were here more strongly perceived as lacking self-confidence. These findings are thus consistent with Hypothesis 2.

In view of the other significant main effect Table 2 suggests that walking style synchrony also resulted in differential perceptions of a target's robbery potential and self-confidence. Targets exhibiting

**Table 1** Means and standard deviations for target's perceived victimization potential and self-confidence by criminal involvement

Ratings	Criminal involvement			
	Low		High	
	M	SD	M	SD
Robbery potential	4.30	0.66	4.73	0.80
Self-confidence	3.31	0.48	3.07	0.41

**Table 2** Means and standard deviations for target's perceived victimization potential and self-confidence by movement synchrony

Ratings	Walking style synchrony					
	Low		Medium		High	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Robbery potential	5.22	0.80	4.17	0.98	4.17	0.98
Self-confidence	2.93	0.82	3.83	0.71	3.76	0.75

medium or high synchrony were perceived as persons being less easy to rob. High ratings of robbery potential typically occurred with targets demonstrating low walking style synchrony. Moreover, these latter targets were also perceived as lacking self-confidence; medium and high synchrony resulting in more or less similar self-confidence perceptions. These findings support our first hypothesis.

## DISCUSSION

The present results generally underscore the utility of the notion of Grayson and Stein, that victims' nonverbal cues may function as signals of vulnerability to would-be assailants. Walking style synchrony appears to be an important mediator of these perceptions. In particular, a lack of assertion, a lack of flowing motion, a lack of organized movement, coming from the body center, and a lack of 'wholeness' may be considered precipitators, which enhance a person's vulnerability to criminal victimization. These nonverbal aspects of walking style do not necessarily indicate a more or less lasting vulnerability to crime. As part of assertiveness training programs persons may learn to exhibit more synchrony in their styles of walking (Brewer, 1994). Self-defense training programs may profit from more explicitly considering the 'communicative' aspects of particular walking styles, and from incorporating 'synchrony-training' components. Previous studies suggest (Janoff-Bulman and Frieze, 1983; Kidder *et al.*, 1983; Plancherel-Spicher and Villettaz, 1994; Riger *et al.*, 1978) that training in self-defense and assertiveness decreased women's feelings of helplessness and fear. Participating women felt stronger, braver, more in control and able to defend themselves. As walking style may be considered a 'leaking channel', through which internal states become public, the present findings suggest that these programs may not only contribute to reducing a person's subjective vulnerability, but also to his or her 'objective' vulnerability to crime.



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