Factors Affecting Gender Differences in Anxiety About Finding One's Way

Candace Geiger
Indiana University - Purdue University Fort Wayne

Jenifer Inman
Indiana University - Purdue University Fort Wayne

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Women typically report higher levels of disorientation and anxiety about finding their way in new environments than do men. The purpose of the current research was to see if scenarios that varied in presumed safety of an environment would have different effects on reports of disorientation and anxiety in men and women. Participants (introductory psychology students) were asked to imagine that they were lost in one of three different settings. In one scenario, it was evening in a bar district of a city, with young men hanging around; in a second scenario, it was afternoon in an upscale neighborhood, with women and children present; in the third scenario, no information was given about time of day, type of neighborhood, or presence of people. The hypothesis was that men would report low levels of anxiety and disorientation in all three scenarios, but that women would show higher levels of anxiety in the evening/bar district scenario than in the other two scenarios. Questionnaires measuring disorientation and anxiety were given to participants after they had read one of the scenarios. Contrary to the hypothesis, results showed that men reported higher anxiety and disorientation in the scenario with the least information about the setting, whereas women showed high levels of anxiety and disorientation in all three. This finding may be interpreted to mean that men are more affected than are women by the amount of information given about an environment. Further research is required to determine which aspects of the environmental information (e.g., details about physical setting, presence or absence of people) are critical in producing differences in feelings of disorientation and anxiety in men and women.