Book Review

Review of Bader, Christopher D., Joseph O. Baker, L. Edward Day, and Ann Gordon. 2020. *Fear Itself: The Causes and Consequences of Fear in America*. New York: New York University Press.
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In March of 2020, the United States started what felt like a freefall. State governments had just begun locking down cities due to the COVID-19 pandemic; unrest bubbled under the surface as video after video of police officers murdering black and brown people circulated; and the Democratic primaries made it all but certain that Joe Biden would be the party's presidential nominee. Published at just the moment that Americans were most fearful for their health, safety, sanity, and politics, *Fear Itself: The Causes and Consequences of Fear in America* was a timely book based on three years of survey data detailing what Americans are afraid of and why.

Using an original dataset, the Chapman University Survey of American Fears, an annual survey conducted from 2016–2018, the authors explore how various respondent characteristics predict fear of over ninety phenomena. Each chapter details a different set of fears and the potential consequences of those fears. The book explores everything from generalized fear to fear of natural disasters, fear of the paranormal, fear of crime and terrorism, and even fear of insects.

The correlations presented in the book are interesting, though unsurprising. Fear of terrorism and gun control, for example, are highly correlated with how much one watches Fox News. Moreover, generalized levels of fear are *not* partisan: that is, Democrats and Republicans in the United States have the same average level of fear. *What* one fears is heavily shaped by party affiliation. Similarly, those who are less educated, unemployed, from lower-income brackets, nonwhite, or female—that is, those who the authors call *socially vulnerable*—are more fearful in general. A social science twist on the psychological concept of *vulnerability theory*, social vulnerability theory argues that those who are socially vulnerable are more fearful because they are “less able to avoid risky situations or contexts because, on average, they have fewer resources” (28). To date, such a concept has been used within the sociological literature to explain fear of crime, but the authors extend the analysis to all sorts of fears.

The most striking part about this book is its readability. The book is certainly written for wider, public audiences. Each chapter begins with an anecdote about familiar news stories in order to give color to the complicated causes and consequences of fear. Further, there are no regression tables and few graphs. The

data that are presented are written in terms of how much more likely someone is to be more or less fearful. Statistical concepts like curvilinearity are thoroughly explained in plain English.

The greatest benefit of the book, however, also ended up being its main pitfall: in rendering the analysis void of statistical and methodological detail, it became difficult to assess whether the aim of the book—to detail the causes and consequences of fear—was actually achieved. While the authors were interested in the causes and consequences of fear in the US, the book presented survey results as a series of means and correlations. While these pieces of information derived from a regression analysis may *suggest* causal relationships, they do not statistically *prove* them. In the chapter on fear of terrorism, for example, the authors conclude that “this heightened fear leads to social withdrawal, a demonization of out-groups stereotyped as ‘terrorists,’ and a reticence about efforts to reduce gun availability” (90). The results of the survey show that fear of terrorism is *correlated with* fear of gun control and Islamophobia. These results do not confirm causal relationships. A more robust set of statistical tools are necessary to understand the direct causal impacts of any given characteristic on fear and fear’s lasting consequences. The warning all too often heard is salient here: correlation does not mean causation.

Additionally, the book gives little description of the survey methodology employed. The survey instrument is alluded to, though never presented in the book or its appendices. While there is a footnote that gives access to details about the development and administration of the survey, it would have been useful for the authors to explain a bit more about the survey questions and the benefits and pitfalls of using those questions to measure fear. They write that survey respondents were presented with over ninety phenomena with the possible responses “very afraid,” “afraid,” “slightly afraid,” or “not afraid at all” (7). Yet there is no definition of fear throughout the book, making it unclear whether fear was a catch-all term for any amount of concern or if it is a distinct social and psychological concept. These possible responses do not allow the authors to meaningfully distinguish between Americans’ “fear” of gun control, “concern about” gun control, “anxiety” surrounding gun control, or feelings that gun control is an “important political issue.” The lack of methodological clarity leaves the reader with many questions about central components of the analysis.

Ultimately, these authors faced a daunting task: in attempting to understand fear sociologically, they sought to bridge psychology, biology, and social science. While this survey will undoubtedly be of use for future studies, the analysis presented in this book only scratches the surface.