Fear of crime, security perception and preventive behavior

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Abstract:
The presented study analyses the social and personal predictors of the perception of safety, as a cognitive-emotional image of safety conditions in a defined living space of an individual. There is no consensus on the definition and measurement of security as a dependent variable. Particular tools are used to monitor the risk of victimization, fear of crime and preventive behavior. The aim of the study is to analyse the effect of vulnerability, victimization and contextual variables (ethnic threat, neighborhood issues) on the security perception, fear of crime, and preventive behavior in Slovakia. The second goal was to verify the impact of other psychological constructs – the need for structure, self-control, and conservatism – on these dependent variables. The sample consists of 1,447 respondents from Slovakia. The research design of the study consists of the 6 regression models. For each dependent variable (3) 2 models were created – with and without the presence of psychological factors. In all the models, the same variables were used to compare the predictor power. The presented results show that the variables of Vulnerability and previous Direct Victimization had a significant impact on the security perception. Ethnic Threats was also significant. From the psychological predictors, the Self-Control and Conservatism were significant. However, in relation to security perception, Age, Neighborhood Problems and Need for Structure have been demonstrated as not significant. The regression analysis results of the Fear of crime brought a different structure of significant predictors compared to the security perception. In relation to Fear of crime, the predictors of Age, Victimization, and Ethnic Threats were not significant. However, Neighborhood Problems were highly significant. All the psychological predictors monitored contributed to the explanation of the Fear of crime. Preventive behavior was most predicted by previous victimization as well as Age and Gender. Predictors of preventive behavior are more personality characteristics of respondents than contextual ones. Despite the low explanatory value of both models, there is a completely different structure of predictors of preventive behavior compared to safety perceptions and fear of crime. While gender is a universal predictor of all models, age was only relevant for preventive behavior. The predominant predictor of preventive behavior as well as perceived safety is the previous victimization of the respondent, which does not apply to fear of crime. The results of the study confirmed a different structure of the predictors of security perception, fear of crime, as well as preventive behavior. Almost all the traditionally studied predictors were significant for the security perception. It has been confirmed that vulnerable groups, particularly women, the elderly, respondents from larger cities, and the victimized are more likely to have a lower level of security perception; which corresponds to a number of findings that repeatedly confirm the significant impact of the vulnerability factors on the security perception. Also, problems in the neighborhood, such as vandalism, graffiti and rubbish, were a significant predictor on an individual level. For the respondents, areas with an increased concentration of neighborhood issues are an indicator of the absence of social control. Similarly, the negative perception of immigrants may be caused by a tendency to associate the members of immigrant groups with the specific forms of violent crimes, but also with economic threats, such as competition in the labor market, housing, or burden on social security systems. Although the impact of the psychological variables on the security perception was significant, their total contribution to the amount of the variance explained was negligible (2.4%). However, using the same predictors for the fear of crime, their value reached 10.2%. Fear of crime was explained more by the individual’s characteristics than the contextual variables. Exceptions were Age and Victimization. While age is known to have no linear relation to the perception of security,
the experience with crime produces contradictory findings. It is therefore clear that the security perception and the fear of crime are closely related and are saturated with similar predictors, but they are not identical constructs. In the case of preventive behavior, we have noticed a very small proportion of the explained variance, indicating the causality of non-traditional predictors. Preventive behavior in this context appears to be a significantly different construct as compared to the security perception and fear of crime. The question of the impact of other psychological constructs on the preventive behavior remains open.

Keywords: Fear of crime. Security perception. Preventive behavior.

Introduction

Individual security assessments are most often conceptualized as a fear of crime, the risk of victimization, or as perception or feeling of (in) security. So far there is no consensus on the definition and measurement of security as a dependent variable. Particular tools are used to monitor the risk of victimization, fear of crime and preventive behavior. Research on the risk of victimization is dominated by the cognitive approach; emotional research is more typical for fear of crime. However, in the two cases, both constructs are interdependent and the difference between them has been empirically impossible to verify (Kentoš, 2014). The behavioral approach should overcome the limitations of the previous practices as it focuses on the real behavior rather than the hypothetical alternatives of responses (Warr, 2000). On the mentioned assumption, empirical evidence is still missing, and it is completely absent in Slovak conditions. Mainstream research is aimed at identifying independent variables that explain these concerns. The previous research on security perception predictors has focused on individual factors. Research on security most often contains vulnerability variables as the most common predictors. They are based on the assumption that certain groups are more vulnerable to threats and do not have as much control over the situation as other groups (Hale, 1996). Specifically, women, seniors, minority members and people with a lower social status tend to worry more in terms of their social or physical vulnerability, although their victimization is less likely (Nieuwbeerta, 2002, Pantazis 2000). Victimization includes victims who were directly at risk of attack by the perpetrator or experienced some loss related to victimization (Clark, 2003; Mesch, 2000). According to the above findings, following a direct victimization incident, the risk sensitivity increases, and therefore the victims become accustomed to defining situations as dangerous (Mesch, 2000).

In addition to the personal experience of crime, generated representations can also be a source of concern. These are the concerns produced by the media and individuals about the causes, connections and consequences of security incidents. Overall, however, the impact of previous victimization has not been clearly confirmed by research. Part of the studies confirmed the given assumption; other studies documented the relationship of victimization and fear of threats only partially, or they did not confirm the assumed relationship at all (Hale, 1996). In addition to the above, contextual factors such as crime rate, economic problems, settlement size, and ethnic heterogeneity that stimulate the fear of crime (Rountree, Land, 1996) also contribute to the security perception.

The research of psychological constructs in relation to security perception was limited to a few predictors. In the area of coping, the dominance of the avoidance strategy (Fyhri, Backer-Grondahl, 2012), an increased level of anxiety (Vitteli, Endler, 1993) and neuroticism (Sjöberg, 2003) were identified. Overall, however, these psychological predictors did not reach the explanatory power of individual factors.
Objective

The aim of the study was to identify the impact of vulnerability, victimization and contextual variables (ethnic threat, neighborhood issues) on the security perception, fear of crime, and preventive behavior in Slovakia. Our objective was not to compare the constructs with each other but to identify the variables they are saturated with through the same process. A particular goal was to verify the impact of other psychological constructs, which brought the Eurojustis data – the need for structure, self-control, and conservatism – on these dependent variables.

Research sample

The research sample consisted of 1,447 respondents from Slovakia, aged between 15 and 91. It was a stratified random sampling and, in parallel, the basic population parameters – gender, age and education – were monitored. The mean age of respondents was 49.28 years (SD = 16.53). Of the total number of respondents, 46.4% were men and 53.6% were women.

Research method

Research design

For the analysis purpose, we created 6 models where we verified the explanatory power of each predictor by means of regression analysis. For each dependent variable (3) we created 2 models – with and without the presence of psychological factors. In all the models, we used the same variables to compare the predictor power.

Dependent variables

The Security Perception variable was represented by the item: How safe do you feel walking alone in this area after dark? (calculated from the scale of 1 to 4, where 1 means “very safe” and 4 “not safe at all”). The variable of Fear of crime was made up of 4 items: To what extent are you afraid that 1. Someone would shout at you or harass you on the street?, 2. You would be assaulted or robbed on the street?, 3. You would be physically attacked on the street?, 4. Someone would break into your home and steal something? (calculated from the scale of 1 to 4, where 1 means “I'm really not afraid”, and 4 means “I'm very afraid”; Cronbach's alpha = 0.892). Preventive Behavior was examined by means of 4 items: 1. Avoid using public transport; 2. Avoid certain streets or areas; 3. Avoid certain people in certain streets or areas; 4. Adopt a „streetwise” and confident persona (calculated from the scale of 1 to 4, where 1 represents “never” and 4 represents “most of the time”; Cronbach's alpha = 0.821)

Independent variables

The first group was made up of variables of individual level: gender, age, size of residence, ethnic threats, neighborhood problems, and victimization. The scale of Ethnic Threats included the following items: To what extent do you think Slovakia should allow people of the same race or ethnic group as most Slovaks to come and live here? Would you say that it is generally bad or good for the Slovak economy that people come to live here from other countries Is Slovakia made a worse or a better place to live by people coming to live here from other countries? (Cronbach's alpha = 0.858). The scale of Neighborhood Problems: Vandalism rate and the amount of graffiti in the immediate vicinity. The amount of rubbish and mess in the immediate vicinity. Cronbach's alpha = 0.738. Victimization: Have you or someone in your household
been the victim of burglary or physical assault in the last 5 years? The second group consisted of the selected psychological constructs that replicated the scales used in the Eurojustis research. The Self-Control Scale – consists of 8 items: 1. When I am really angry, other people better stay away from me. 2. I often act on the spur of the moment without stopping to think. 3. I sometimes find it exciting to do things that may be dangerous. 4. Don’t devote much thought and effort preparing for the future. 5. Sometimes I will take a risk just for the fun of it. 6. I often try to avoid things that I know will be difficult. 7. I never think about what will happen to me in the future. 8. I lose my temper pretty easily. (Cronbach's alpha = 0.746). The scale of Conservatism – consists of 10 items: 1. We live in a dangerous society in which good, decent, and moral people’s values and way of life are threatened by bad people. 2. We live in a society that is unsafe, unstable, and insecure where good and decent people are the exception rather than the rule. 3. People don’t know the difference between right and wrong anymore. 4. I’m worried about where morality is headed in society. 5. Obedience and respect for authority are the most important values children should learn. 6. The authorities should be obeyed because they are in the best position to know what is good for our country. 7. Traditions are the foundation of a healthy society and should be respected. 8. It is important that we preserve our traditional values and moral standards. 9. It is necessary to use force against people who are a threat to authority. 10. Our society needs tougher government and stricter laws. (Cronbach's alpha = 0.896). The Need for Structure scale consists of 5 items: 1. I enjoy having a clear and structured mode of life. 2. I don’t like to go into a situation without knowing what I can expect from it. 3. I usually make important decisions quickly and confidently. 4. I don't like situations that are uncertain. 5. I dislike questions which could be answered in many different ways. (Cronbach's alpha = 0.866).

Results

Security perception

Model 1. presents the impact of the predictors of vulnerability, victimization, contextual variables, and psychological constructs on the security perception. Model 2. includes the same predictors without psychological constructs.

Table 1: Regression analysis of predictors of security perception

| Variables                    | Model 1 |          |          | Model 2 |          |          |
|------------------------------|---------|----------|----------|---------|----------|----------|
|                              | B       | SE B     | Sig.     | B       | SE B     | Sig.     |
| Constant                     | 1.405   | .189     | .000***  | 1.258   | .145     | .000***  |
| Gender (M=0, F=1)            | .193    | .034     | .000***  | .236    | .033     | .000***  |
| Age                          | .002    | .001     | .086     | .005    | .001     | .000***  |
| Size of Residence            | -.153   | .015     | .000***  | -.147   | .014     | .000***  |
| Satisfaction with Income     | .221    | .021     | .000***  | .221    | .020     | .000***  |
| Direct Victimization         | .551    | .064     | .000***  | .538    | .062     | .000***  |
| Ethnic Threats               | -.011   | .003     | .000***  | -.010   | .003     | .000***  |
| Neighborhood Problems        | .017    | .017     | .303     | .034    | .016     | .032*    |
The presented results show that the variables of Vulnerability and previous Direct Victimization had a significant impact on the security perception. Ethnic Threats was also significant. From the psychological predictors, Self-Control and Conservatism were significant. However, in relation to the security perception, Age, Neighborhood Problems and Need for Structure have been demonstrated as not significant. Overall, the model explained 25.2% of the variance, which is the usual value in this area. Consequently, we focused on explaining the differences in security perception among individuals without the influence of the psychological predictors. The resulting model showed similar relationships, explaining 22.8% of the scattering, and all the predictors had a significant relationship to security perception.

Fear of crime

Model 3. presents the impact of the predictors of vulnerability, victimization, contextual variables as well as psychological constructs on fear of crime.

Table 2: Regression analysis of predictors of fear of crime

| Variables                | Model 3 |           | Model 4 |           |
|--------------------------|---------|-----------|---------|-----------|
|                          | B       | SE B      | Sig.    | B         | SE B     | Sig.    |
| Constant                 | -1.092  | .862      | .205    | -2.950    | .705     | .000*** |
| Gender (M=0, F=1)        | 2.095   | .155      | .000*** | 2.704     | .159     | .000*** |
| Age                      | -.003   | .005      | .567    | .030      | .005     | .000*** |
| Size of Residence        | -.649   | .068      | .000*** | -.613     | .071     | .000*** |
| Satisfaction with Income | .805    | .097      | .000*** | .961      | .100     | .000*** |
| Direct Victimization     | -.107   | .290      | .712    | -.077     | .302     | .799    |
| Ethnic Threats           | -.003   | .012      | .784    | -.010     | .013     | .432*** |
| Neighborhood Problems    | .615    | .076      | .000*** | .807      | .078     | .000*** |
| Need for Structure       | .190    | .026      | .000*** |           |          |         |
| Self-Control             | -.165   | .016      | .000*** |           |          |         |
| Conservatism             | -.177   | .016      | .000*** |           |          |         |

The regression analysis results brought a different structure of significant predictors compared to the security perception. In relation to Fear of crime, the predictors of Age, Victimization, and Ethnic Threats were not significant. However, Neighborhood Problems were highly significant. All the psychological predictors monitored contributed to the explanation of the Fear of crime. The model explained 40% of the variance. As illustrated in Table 2, the model replicated the same structure as the previous model, with its explanatory value reaching 29.8%.
Preventive behavior

Table 3: Regression analysis of predictors of preventive behavior

| Variables                  | Model 5          |          | Model 6          |          |
|----------------------------|------------------|----------|------------------|----------|
|                            | B    | SE B | Sig. | B    | SE B | Sig. |
| Constant                   | 7.127 | .954 | .000*** | 4.143 | .733 | .000*** |
| Gender (M=0, F=1)          | .619  | .171 | .000*** | .515  | .165 | .002** |
| Age                        | .021  | .006 | .000*** | .025  | .005 | .000*** |
| Size of Residence          | -.056 | .075 | .456 | -.093 | .074 | .204 |
| Satisfaction with Income   | .187  | .106 | .079 | .420  | .104 | .000*** |
| Direct Victimization       | 1.267 | .321 | .000*** | 1.224 | .315 | .000*** |
| Ethnic Threats             | .001  | .013 | .944 | -.005 | .013 | .710 |
| Neighborhood Problems      | .152  | .084 | .070 | .191  | .081 | .018* |
| Need for Structure         | .167  | .028 | .000*** |          |        |        |
| Self-Control               | -.084 | .018 | .000*** |          |        |        |
| Conservatism               | -.073 | .018 | .000*** |          |        |        |

Using identical predictors for the construct of preventive behavior, the value of the explained variance dropped to the level of 9% (Model 5) and 5% (Model 6). Preventive behavior was most predicted by previous victimization as well as Age and Gender. Predictors of preventive behavior are more personality characteristics of respondents than contextual ones. Despite the low explanatory value of both models, there is a completely different structure of predictors of preventive behavior compared to safety perceptions and fear of crime. While the gender is a universal predictor of all models, age was only relevant for preventive behavior. The predominant predictor of preventive behavior as well as perceived safety is the previous victimization of the respondent, which does not apply to fear of crime.

Discussion

The results of the study confirmed a different structure of the predictors of security perception, fear of crime, as well as preventive behavior. Almost all the traditionally studied predictors were significant for the security perception. It has been confirmed that vulnerable groups, particularly women, elderly, respondents from larger cities, and the victimized are more likely to have a lower level of security perception, which corresponds to a number of findings that repeatedly confirm the significant impact of the vulnerability factors on the security perception (Will, McGrath, 1995). Also, problems in the neighborhood, such as vandalism, graffiti and rubbish were a significant predictor on an individual level. For the respondents, areas with an increased concentration of neighborhood issues are an indicator of the absence of social control. Similarly, the negative perception of immigrants may be caused by a tendency to associate the members of immigrant groups with the specific forms of violent crimes, but also with economic threats such as competition in the labor market, housing, or the burden on social security systems (Schlueter, Scheepers, 2010). Although, the impact of the psychological variables on
the security perception was significant, their total contribution to the amount of the variance explained was negligible (2.4%). However, using the same predictors for the fear of crime, their value reached 10.2%. Fear of crime was explained more by the individual’s characteristics than the contextual variables. Exceptions were Age and Victimization. While age is known to have no linear relation to the perception of security, the experience with crime produces contradictory findings.

It is therefore clear that the security perception and the fear of crime are closely related and are saturated with similar predictors, but they are not identical constructs. Visser, Scholte and Scheepers (2013), who analyzed both constructs in an international context separately, using the same predictors, also found partial differences. Many of the predictors were either not significant, e.g. education and income, or they had the same effect. Chiricos, McEntire and Gertz, M. (2001), in their study of fear of crime and security perception, also identified several differences in the saturation of both constructs; with the most important factor being the perceived proximity of ethnic minorities to the place of residence which predicted the fear of crime but not the security. Other studies have focused on the relationship between the two constructs in terms of their mutual conditionality. In this context, LaGrange, Ferraro and Supancic (1992) found that security perception is one of the predictors of fear of crime. However, this assumption can also be reversed, i.e. that the fear of crime precedes the security perception (Gabriel, Greve, 2003). From this viewpoint it is clear that there is still no consensus among the authors about the definition of both constructs, and these inconsistencies are also projected into their measurement. In the case of preventive behavior, we have noticed a very small proportion of the explained variance, indicating the causality of non-traditional predictors. Preventive behavior in this context appears to be a significantly different construct as compared to the security perception and fear of crime. The question of the impact of other psychological constructs on the preventive behavior remains open. A benefit of the study is simultaneous comparison of all three dependent variables, which is currently absent in Slovak conditions. The limitation of the study was in particular the selection of psychological predictors that were determined by available dataset.
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