THINK PIECE

Interdisciplinary Tension and the Importance of Method in Fear of Crime Research: A Discussion Piece

Dr Jonathan Jacksonᵃ Dr Stephen Farrallᵇ and Emily Grayᵇ

ᵃ London School of Economics
ᵇUniversity of Keele

A plethora of research points towards widespread public anxiety about falling victim of crime (Hale, 1996). These anxieties damage individual well-being, they erode mutual trust and neighbourhood ties, and such is the divergence between anxiety and the reality of crime, so-called fear of crime has gained the status of social problem in its own right. Fear has even come to influence policing priorities and activities, encouraging a focus on reassurance perhaps at the expense of actual risk reduction.

The fear of crime has attracted a great deal of social scientific interest. Yet a range of technical problems has also dogged much of the research. Some criminologists believe that methodological limitations have posed serious implications for the validity of the body of knowledge that public policy relies upon (e.g. Fattah, 1993; Ferraro & LaGrange, 1987; Farrall et al. 1997; Farrall & Gadd, 2004; see also Lee, 1999 & 2001). Others believe theoretical under-specification has restricted the breadth and depth of definition and explanation, leaving us with a contested and congested concept – narrowly focused yet vaguely formed (e.g. Girling et al. 2000). Certainly, public concerns and perceptions seem messier and more multi-faceted than current methods and concepts disclose. The fear of crime has social and psychological dimensions that require interdisciplinary analysis and innovative methodologies – yet the vast majority of research in this area has lacked such ambition.

This ‘discussion-piece’ considers some of the areas of concern in the building blocks of fear of crime research and looks to other disciplines and methodologies for help. While we imagine our discussion will be of particular interest to criminologists, we also hope it will be of interest to anyone alive to the methodological trials and tribulations often encountered in social research, especially on topics that call for interdisciplinary dialogue.
Some conceptual and methodological problems

Most fear of crime research is best characterized as macro-sociological. Large-scale representative sample surveys ask respondents: ‘How worried are you about being burgled/mugged/raped/physically attacked by a stranger/etc? Very worried/fairly worried/A bit worried/Not at all worried.’ At first glance all seems straightforward. Some people feel uneasy, anxious, concerned and worried about their chances of falling victim. Surveys ask for a brief summary of respondent’s worries. Researchers estimate the distribution in a given population, generating a social indicator of (a) the (assumed negative) impact of the threat of crime on people’s everyday lives, and (b) some kind of collective consciousness of crime above and beyond the personal experience of victimization.

Yet greater precision may clarify the nature and impact of fear of crime in people’s everyday lives. How often do people worry, feel fearful or anxious? The answer could be: less often than we think; standard measures imply a greater prevalence than frequency measures commonly find (Farrall et al. 1997; Farrall & Gadd, 2004; Jackson et al., in press). Surveys rarely, if ever, ask how often people worry, only how worried they are overall. Moreover, which thoughts, feelings and behaviour best characterize public responses? Anger may be more frequent than fear (Ditton et al., 1999), unease more common than corrosive fear. Yet survey measures only specify ‘worry’.

More questions arise. First, how can we compare the answers of different people if they variously interpret the meaning of ‘worry’ differently – some as ‘fear’, others as ‘thinking occasionally about the possibility.’ Second, how do these emotions shape behaviour and well-being? Surveys rarely enquire into the impact of worry on people’s everyday lives, so we simply do not know. Third, might some level of emotion be a natural defense to crime rather than a contribution to a social problem? Why do we always assume worry is negative (Jackson, 2006a)?

The significance of fear of crime ultimately rests on its status as a social problem – as a social indicator of the indirect impact of crime. People have anxieties about all sorts of things – their family, their job situation, their health. The reason why the fear of crime has attracted such interest – aside from the political significance of public opinion about crime – is the (assumed) negative impact of widespread anxiety. Yet surveys may not adequately capture the nature, prevalence and effect of socio-emotional responses to crime. They may even misrepresent the extent to which people worry about falling victim in their daily lives.

Perhaps we can clarify by looking toward other disciplines and methods for inspiration. On the one hand, psychological and sociological work on researching everyday emotion sheds light on the conceptualization and measurement of ‘fear’. On the other hand, psychological and sociological work on risk and social perception sheds light on the conceptualization and measurement of ‘crime’.

What is ‘fear’?

Consider first, social psychological work on emotional self-report. Robinson & Clore (2002a, 2002b) distinguish between momentary experiences of emotion and generalised beliefs about emotion. Experiential knowledge is that experienced when one is actually feeling an emotion. Retrieving recent memories is episodic memory. What one imagines one would feel in a given situation is a situation-specific belief. Beliefs about emotions in general are identity-related beliefs.

Now, it is unlikely that respondents are feeling anxious about crime while they are being interviewed. So fear of crime measures may rarely tap into experiential knowledge. Instead, fear of crime measures may most open capture episodic memories, situation-specific beliefs or identity-related beliefs. Robinson & Clore (2002a, 2002b) argue that such self-reports often diverge – for example, beliefs do not neatly map onto experience because different processes are involved in different forms of knowledge and knowledge retrieval. Crime survey respondents may sift through past experiences and take an average of the intensity of each mental event. Or they may count the occurrences. Or they may summarise a diffuse mental state. Or they may lean on their beliefs about how they feel in certain situations or their identity as someone who worries or does not
worry. We simply do not know. And each has the potential to distort the intensity and frequency of individual experience.

Consider for example evidence that more memorable moments of emotions (i.e. the more intense episodes) disproportionately affect retrospective estimates of emotion (Kahneman, 1999). Someone answering the question ‘How worried are you about being burgled?’ might think back to the last occasion they worried and use this as an anchor for their summary. Yet this last occasion is likely to be the most accessible and therefore the most vivid and intense. The most memorable comes to be representative of their everyday emotions and as such serves to exaggerate fear.

Summaries may under-estimate everyday reality as well as over-estimate. There is evidence that men suppress their levels of fear (Sutton & Farrall, 2005) because to admit to vulnerability might be to damage a macho identity. Questions about worries about crime may tap into identity-related beliefs – ‘I am the sort of person/not the sort of person who worries about this sort of thing.’ Again, the point is that this self-report may not map neatly onto everyday emotional experiences.

To more accurately access such daily experience, perhaps one might fruitfully adopt a naturalistic and micro-sociological approach. Katz (2004, p. 611) argues that formalised survey research ‘... functions as a surgical courier service for distant intellectual audiences, hastily cutting out and neatly packaging experiences that have taken subjects a messy lifetime to form.’ He describes how social phenomena can be approached in four alternative ways: ethnographically, interactionally, diachronically, and with attention to corporeal practices. Naturalistic studies of everyday emotions might involve interviews and inspections of videotapes (Katz, 2004). They would produce people’s thick-descriptions of the intricacies, context and causes of feelings, thoughts and behaviours. They would identify what ‘fear’ and ‘crime’ means in practice. They would not impose a schema of existing assumptions; not produce a decontextualised snapshot of everyday practices.

What is ‘crime’?

What ‘fear’ constitutes is less than clear; but there is more to fear of crime than ‘fear.’ What ‘crime’ contributes is also less than clear. People may attach different weights of consequence, likelihood, control and affect to different forms of criminal victimization. Two individuals may associate burglary, for example, with very different effects – one person with physical assault or rape, another with the loss of trivial goods. Perhaps over time people generate a structured and personal sense of the risk of crime (picking up circulating images of risk from the mass media, for example). It may be that they mull over its impact, generate images of the immediate and long-term effects, and ruminate on the imagery of the event. When surveys ask people about their worries, perhaps they tap into these personalized images of risk which vary from individual to individual according to resonance and relevance. For insights into such issues, fear of crime researchers might turn to work on the psychology of risk (see Jackson 2006b; Jackson et al. 2006).

The risk of ‘crime’ might mean different things to different people; but crime is also a nebulous and culturally resonant category, a slippery class of events that we try to make sense of, to account for. We delve into its causes, its nature, its effects and implications and its control. Crime may operate as a vivid marker of the breakdown of social organization: things seen to be hostile to social order may become associated with crime. Concerns about crime would consequently express concerns about the conditions conducive to crime. And as Girling et al. (2000, p. 16) suggest, ‘... crime may be one of those forms of “danger on the borders” which gives form to a community’s sense of itself...’ Perhaps fear of crime acts as a kind of lay seismograph of social cohesion and moral consensus. Fear of crime may be best displayed not as a singular fear but as a comprehensive pattern of interpretation of the surrounding social world – a way of seeing and a way of feeling (Jackson, 2004; Jackson, 2005b). In this spirit, some excellent qualitative fear of crime studies have provided important correctives to survey research (e.g. Girling et al., 2000; Innes, 2004; Tulloch et al. 1998; Evans et al., 1996; Taylor et al., 1996).
Where next?

The fear of crime is a topical issue of social and political relevance. It has attracted a great deal of research. But much of this work seems hampered by a lack of clarity and ambition. It is even possible that standard approaches inadvertently exaggerate the extent of the fear of crime problem (Lee, 1999). In this ‘discussion-piece’ we have argued that socio-emotional responses to crime show psychological and social dimensions and a certain resistance to measurement. One way forward is to look for innovative methodologies and draw upon work on the psychology of emotional self-report and risk, and the sociology of everyday emotions and sensibilities to crime. The fear of crime is a fascinating social phenomenon that has no respect for disciplinary boundaries; research is badly needed that shows a similar lack of respect.

References

Ditton, J., Bannister, J., Gilchrist, E. and Farrall, S. (1999). Afraid or angry? Recalibrating the ‘fear’ of crime. International Review of Victimology, 6, 83-99.

Evans, K., Fraser, P. and Walklate, S. (1996). Whom can you trust? The politics of ‘grassing’ on an inner city housing Estate. Sociological Review, 44, 3, 361-380.

Farrall, S. and Gadd, D. (2004) The frequency of the fear of Crime. British Journal of Criminology, 44, 127-32.

Farrall, S., Bannister, J., Ditton, J. and Gilchrist, E. (1997). Questioning the measurement of the fear of crime: Findings from a major methodological study. British Journal of Criminology, 37, 657-78.

Fattah, E. A. (1993) Research on fear of crime: Some common conceptual and measurement problems. In W. Bilsky, C. Pfeiffer, and P. Wetzels (eds) Fear of crime and criminal victimisation (Stuttgart: Ferdinand Enke Verlag).

Ferraro, K. F. and LaGrange, R. L. (1987). The measurement of fear of crime. Sociological Inquiry, 57, 70-101.

Girling, E., Loader, I. and Sparks, R. (2000). Crime and Social Control in Middle England: Questions of Order in an English Town. London: Routledge.

Hale, C. (1996). Fear of crime: A review of the literature. International Review of Victimology, 4, 79-150.

Innes, M. (2004). Signal crimes and signal disorders: Notes on deviance as communicative action. British Journal of Sociology, 55, 317-334.

Jackson, J. (2006a). Functional fear: Questioning the Social-Problem Status of the Fear of Crime. Unpublished manuscript: London School of Economics.

Jackson, J. (2006b). Introducing fear of crime to risk research. Risk Analysis, 26, 1.

Jackson, J., Allum, N. and Gaskell, G. (2006). ‘Bridging Levels of Analysis in Risk Perception Research: The Case of the Fear of Crime’ [84 paragraphs]. Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research [On-line Journal], 7(1), Art. 20. Available at: http://www.qualitative-research.net/fqs-texte/1-06/06-1-20-e.htm [Date of Access: December 2, 2005].

Jackson, J., Farrall, S. and Gadd, D. (in press). Filtering fear: On the use of filter and frequency questions in crime surveys. Journal of Quantitative Criminology.

Kahneman, D. (1999). Objective happiness. In D. Kahneman, E. Diener, & N. Schwarz (Eds.), Well-being: The foundations of Hedonic psychology (pp. 85–105). New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
Katz, J. (2004). Everyday lives and extraordinary research methods. Social Science Information, 43, 609-619.

Lee, M. (1999). The fear of crime and self-governance: Towards a genealogy. The Australian and New Zealand Journal of Criminology, 32, 3, 227-246.

Lee, M. (2001) The genesis of ‘fear of crime’, Theoretical Criminology, 5, 467-485.

Robinson, M. D., and Clore, G. L. (2002a). Belief and feeling: Evidence for an accessibility model of emotional self report. Psychological Bulletin, 128, 934-960.

Robinson, M. D., and Clore, G. L. (2002b). Episodic and semantic knowledge in emotional self-report: Evidence for two judgment processes. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 83, 198-215.

Sutton, R. M., and Farrall, S. (2005). Gender, socially desirable responding and the fear of crime: Are women really more anxious about crime? British Journal of Criminology, 45, 212-224.

Taylor, I., Evans, K. and Fraser, P. (1996), A Tale of Two Cities: Global Change, Local Feeling and Everyday Life in the North of England. London: Routledge.

Tulloch, J., Lupton, D., Blood, W., Tulloch, M., Jennett, C. and Enders, M. (1998). Fear of Crime. Canberra: Centre for Cultural Risk Research for the NCAVAC Unit for the NCAVAC, Attorney-General’s Department.