An Analysis of a Construct and Debate

The Fear of Crime*

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This article considers the notion of ‘fear of crime’ within criminological research and its surrounding context. The form is an analysis of the debate as seen from a British perspective. In many ways complementing the work of Lee (1999, 2001), this is a history of the emergence of a political and intellectual idea. By examining the construct of fear of crime, by describing and assessing how the concept has emerged and developed, and by evaluating the importance of its theoretical and operational definitions to the wider debate, I analyse how criminology has approached public emotions about crime over the past few decades. Because of the peculiar nature of the subject matter, a fundamental feature of this endeavour is the consideration of the political context of scholarship and debate – particularly how policy concerns have shaped the development of the construct, and how research has fed back into political action and discourse.

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The basis for the narrative is data from in-depth interviews with 28 British-based academic and Home Office criminologists who have researched and written on this subject. In particular, two overlapping propositions are considered. The first is that research instruments have imposed structure and categories onto the social world. Techniques, or theoretical and operational definitions of the construct, have changed and developed, providing different conceptions of the social phenomenon; critically, there has been significant criticism of the validity and reliability of the majority of approaches. At the very least, there is lack of clarity concerning what is being studied: the criminologists who were interviewed provided their views on these issues.

The second proposition is that the policy context – its imperatives and priorities, its focus and attention on particular issues and perspectives, and governmental sponsorship of national surveys – has deleteriously shaped study and debate. Research into the fear of crime has clearly interacted with political discourse and action. But have policy concerns (or more precisely a criminology that has engaged with these) held back a more rigorous and theoretically informed consideration of public responses to the risk of crime? This is particularly with regard to an investment in rather simplistic notions of ‘objective’ and ‘subjective’ risk. Indeed, is the concept a reflection of political and academic discourse, as well as a valid approximation of social reality? Again, these expert-interviews provided a range of views on questions such as these.

So, what is to be gained by this? Well, there are two overlapping contributions. First, by looking at its history, one can place key moments against their social and political context, and examine how theory, method and context have interacted. This analysis traces how fear of crime has been variously formulated, showing the importance of conceptual assumptions and methodological tools in criminological study and political debate and discussion. The motivation is a current degree of scepticism in the literature concerning the methodological and theoretical tools of research: this article considers the key points of dispute.

Second, by asking twenty-eight researchers for their perspectives on such issues, one can produce a more balanced account of events, contexts, studies and arguments than already exists. One can gather convergent and divergent opinions from those who were themselves actors in research and debate. Therefore, in order to inform this balanced but critical history, care was taken to approach scholars who had been powerful voices. A wide
range of perspectives were elicited, and these helped form the narrative’s structure, as well as flesh out key issues of controversy.

And by doing all this, one can assess how criminology can considered this social issue, as well as document where current thinking lies. We will consequently be in a better place to judge the directions empirical study might most fruitfully take.

**The Beginnings: United States of America during the 1960s and 1970s**

There is ample historical evidence that public concerns about dangerous localities and people are not new phenomena (see, amongst others: Curtis, 2001; Pearson, 1983; Shaw, 1931); the consideration of crime has historically formed a part of public consciousness and discourse, a detail often forgotten in contemporary proclamations and diagnoses. For example, Curtis (2001) analyses the newspaper reporting of the famous ‘Jack the Ripper’ murders in late 19th-century London. He describes how the mass media heightened already high public alarm about crime and examines how the murders were linked to debates regarding the inability of the police to protect the public and the growth of a semi-criminal social underclass. This dramatic case reflected (and refracted) a public already fascinated by sensational crimes, and typified how such events are ‘embedded in a matrix of moral and political imperatives about law and order’ (*ibid.*: 15).

Of course, societies create their own characteristic forms of deviance and criminality. The Jack the Ripper case was but one (particularly dramatic) instance. One need not to be reminded that a particular behaviour becomes labelled as criminal according to formally codified legal rules and normatively prescribed codes, and this occurs according to an array of complex social, institutional and cultural processes. At different times, and in different places, some crimes have represented greater threats to individuals, societies and governments than others, and the reasons may be many and shifting.

Particularly relevant to public perceptions of crime is Pearson’s (1983) argument that many generations have had their ‘respectable fears’ about social groups and behaviours, especially regarding young people and youth subcultures perceived to be based around delinquency and criminality. These have often represented a society whose secure, stable moral centre is under threat; bound up in this concern and stigmatisation surrounding par-
ticular groups is the expression of more inchoate anxieties about the direction and character of social change.

But the furthest point back that interviewees traced the genesis of the modern idea of ‘fear of crime’ – the contemporary manifestation of public attitudes and responses to crime, an object of study, a category of description, and a topic of considerable political salience – was the President’s Crime Commission on Law Enforcement and the Administration of Justice (1967) in the United States of America (U.S.). In particular, we turn to the reports of three crime surveys commissioned by this body (Biderman et al., 1967; Ennis, 1967; Reiss, 1967), conducted at the same time as other projects that sought to count unrecorded victimisation. These all partly led to the emergence of National Crime Surveys conducted regularly by the Bureau of Justice Statistics.

Public concerns and emotions were a key motivation behind the President’s Crime Commission itself. Not only was the Government concerned about rising crime rates; it was also concerned about public attitudes and responses to these rising levels. Research would address this anxiety, assess whether it was a realistic response, and begin to uncover what can be done to allay such fears (President’s Commission, 1967: 49).

For the first time, these (pilot) studies included questions about public attitudes towards crime and perceptions of their own safety. The report of the first survey (Biderman et al., 1967) contains a chapter entitled ‘fear of crime’ that reports the combination of five questions to create an ‘index of anxiety’ (ibid.: 121). These included subjective reports on the chances of being beaten up, whether neighbours created disturbances, if respondents would move if they could for reasons of ‘trouble’, and whether safety and moral characteristics were important in their neighbourhood. The measures clearly elicited an unstructured range of attitudes, behavioural intentions, beliefs and evaluations that were directed towards crime, safety, disorder and ‘moral characteristics’.

A number of important findings and arguments were documented in the report of this study. These revolved around the comparison of public perceptions of the crime problem (using the index) to the reported incidence of crime (using police recorded crime statistics, and crime experienced by the survey respondents). Finding that anxiety did not mirror these statistically estimated risk profiles, the authors argued that attitudes towards ‘the gravity of the crime problem and its dangers to themselves’ were primarily based on factors ‘other than their [people’s] own circumstances and experi-
ences’ (*ibid.*: 122). Similarly they argued that ‘fear of personal attack’, where respondents were asked whether violent crime (such as shootings, stabblings or rapes) had increased in Washington during the past five years¹, appeared: ‘... disproportionate to the relatively low objective probabilities of these dangers in comparison with other perils to life and property.’ (*ibid.*: 133-134).

Yet despite arguments that public anxieties were not based on experience (with an implicit suggestion that they were exaggerated and based on a misunderstanding of the reality of the situation), the concluding chapter of this report attempted to contextualise public anxieties by discussing the symbolic nature of crime (*ibid.*: 164). The authors argued that citizens’ concerns were also understandable because of the meanings and resonance that the incidence of crime has for the moral and social consensus and direction of a neighbourhood or society:

‘The special significance of crime is at the social level. The intensity of public reaction to it is understandable in that it reveals weaknesses of the moral order on which not only everyone’s safety depends but also almost everything else that is important and precious in life. Crimes therefore have significance in proportion to the extent to which they affront the moral sensibilities of persons ... Perceptions of changes in the prevalence of crime can be expected to evoke particularly intense public reactions in that these can be taken as signs of threats to the fundamental moral order. This clearly is the case with much of the current public reaction to news of increasing crime’.

Just as this perspective illuminates public anxiety, so it is instructive to take one step back and look at the wider social and political context of this research.

The concept grew out of a particular social and political climate: of rising levels of recorded crime; a new government focus on law and order; the commissioning of a series of victim surveys (and the broader context of a State increasingly gathering information about its citizens); racialised concerns about ‘black rioting’ and ‘black crime’; high-level debate about the extent of police powers; and right-wing White concern about the extension of rights to the poor and the Black (see: Harris, 1969; Furstenburg, 1971; Ditton and Farrall, 2000; Stanko, 2000; and Lee, 1999, 2001).

¹ Treating beliefs about changing crime rates as synonymous with fear of victimisation was not considered problematic or commented on in any way in this report. Similarly, there was no theoretical elaboration of how the five measures that were combined to form the index of fear.
President John F. Kennedy was assassinated in 1963, riots flared up in twenty inner-city ‘ghettos’ in the mid-1960s, the issue of civil rights boiled over in numerous arenas; disorder and unrest had become national anxieties. Race was a hot topic. The Government was concerned about these issues and how they were affecting the general mood of the public. Stanko (2000) describes how the McCone Commission (1966, but quoted in the President’s Commission on Law Enforcement and the Administration of Justice, 1967) examined the cause of unrest in U.S. cities, concluding that the structural conditions of poverty and disadvantage in many predominantly Black areas were leading to anger, hostility and resentment. The President’s Commission report clearly located White anxieties about crime within this context of racial tension and unrest (Stanko, 2000).

Against this backdrop, public anxieties are more explicable. Crime gathered its resonance not just from the meaning of the event itself, but also from wider social changes in society that it connects to, and in a more diffuse way typifies and expresses. People believed crime was a problem; that they themselves were more at risk than previously; and that these issues reflected broader changes and threats in society. Self-reported attitudes in surveys expressed a range of judgements, values and everyday experiences of emotion and perceptions of risk, and articulated responses to and interpretations of a range of connected changes in society that shaped the importance, salience, and cultural meaning of crime.

But the initial focus on the wider context of fear of crime gradually became lost in research and debate. As Stanko (2000: 16) proposes, ‘the social tensions that gave rise to the creation of the crime survey initially – that of white American anxiety about personal safety within a climate of racialised frustration – have been forgotten in the rush to embrace the democratic possibilities of the crime survey’.

The label ‘fear of crime’ was born out of these early studies. It emerged as an object of social scientific investigation against a backdrop of increasing governmental interest in ‘Law and Order’ (cf. Lee, 1999, 2001) and a State in the throes of becoming ever-more a ‘knowledge society’ (see Melanson, 1973; Lee, 2001), accruing increasing amounts of information about its citizens. With growing sophistication of statistical collection and analysis, combined with the political will to understand and intervene in the lives of its population, so a context emerged where national surveys were commissioned.
The debate quickly honed in on the relationship between fear, experience of crime and ‘objective’ risk. Surveys allowed the populace to articulate their feelings, beliefs and behaviours in a rather ill-defined and unstructured manner. The resulting data were ordered and interpreted using a set of restrictive and normative precepts and propositions concerning the rationality or otherwise of public perceptions. Were people too anxious? How did anxiety levels compare to official estimates of the actual threat? Biderman et al.’s (1967) interpretation of the data as an expression of wider concerns about moral and social order suggests that the questions were engaging with more than just public experience of ‘fear’ relating to their perceptions of the immediate threat of crime. But this notion (that fear of crime might not be reducible to actuarial assessments of risk) was quickly lost.

What was the public being asked; how was fear of crime defined within these questionnaires; and are there any problems with the techniques used? It is to these questions that we now turn. For only once we consider what was being measured can we begin to unravel the logic of comparing data from surveys to the prevalence of crime.

**Crime Surveys of the 1960s and 1970s: Conceptual and Methodological Issues**

The survey questions employed in research of this period shaped the measurement tools used in much of the proceeding empirical work; a number of questions have become standard, others only slightly modified. Let us look at another of those influential pilot studies commissioned by the President’s Commission, this time Ennis (1967), which collected data from a nationally representative sample. Measures that were fielded included:

- How safe do you feel walking alone in your neighbourhood after dark?
- How concerned are you about having your home broken into?
- How likely is it a person walking around here at night be held up or attacked?

There is no published discussion about how these survey questions were developed, but there is little doubt that they set the tone for future studies (Baumer, 1978; Hale, 1996).

Discussion about problems with these measures began soon after they were first used. A number of articles were published that were critical of the conceptual and methodological foundation (e.g.: Furstenberg, 1971;
Baumer, 1978; and DuBow et al., 1979). For example, DuBow et al., (ibid.: 1) opined: “fear of crime” refers to a wide variety of subjective and emotional assessments and behavioural reports. There is a serious lack of both consistency and specificity in these reports’. Despite the political importance placed on these surveys and the issue itself, the effect of these doubts was minimal to say the least.

A key problem was that questions vaguely tapped into a broad range of emotions, behaviours and cognitions directed towards crime, safety and the risk of victimisation: it seem clear with hindsight that these are different things (even if they are linked), and studies offered little distinction between concepts and even less theoretical definition.

Over time, certain questions became more regularly used than others. In particular, variants of questions about perceptions of safety out in the street became standard – for example: ‘How safe do you feel or would feel being out alone in your neighbourhood at night’; and, ‘Is there any area right around here – that is within a mile – where you would be afraid to walk alone at night?’ But ironically, these measures attracted the most critical comment. Garofalo and Laub (1978) pointed out that they did not mention crime, failed to provide a specific frame of geographical reference, and specified a situation that may be hypothetical to many of us.

Furthermore, Garofalo and Laub (ibid.: 250) argued that this perception of safety measures tapped into things above and beyond the ‘fear’ of actually becoming a victim of crime. They reflected a broader issue: that crime is tied up with symbolic issues, with a ‘disrupted sense of community ... the fear of actual criminal acts as well as the feeling that one’s social situation is unstable, anxiety about strangers, the belief that one’s moral beliefs are being offended, and so forth’. The Figgie Report (Figgie, 1980) continued the theme, differentiating between ‘formless’ and ‘concrete’ fear, between abstract threats to security and concern about becoming victimised. Note an echo of Biderman et al.’s (1967) contextualisation of fear against the moral and social significance of crime. Yet the key issue is that there was no theoretical or operational explication of the various dimensions.

**Findings and Themes from the Studies of this Period**

Certain themes emerged from the findings of the studies carried out in the 1970s in the United States. Reflecting the focus on the relationship between the prevalence of crime and public attitudes, it was initially assumed that
there would be a strong relationship between fear (however vaguely measured) and actual victimisation, whether it is direct experience of crime, or indirect experience such as hearing of events experienced or recounted by friends and family, or consumption of mass media reports (DuBow et al., 1979). Yet the findings were inconsistent: some studies found an effect of direct experience, others did not.

Two empirical themes were proposed to refute that there was a strong relationship. Firstly, fear was more widespread than victimisation, and more prevalent amongst groups who were least victimised. Three counter-arguments were raised (Skogan and Maxfield, 1981). Firstly, crime figures do not capture all crime. Secondly, some groups may be more fearful because the consequences of victimisation, whether they are physical, psychological or economic, might be more severe than for others. Finally, low victimisation rates of women and the elderly may be partly to do with the greater precautions they take as a result of their anxiety about the possibility of victimisation. However, little empirical research directly addressed all of these issues – particularly the last two.

Additionally, acknowledgements continued that one should broaden out the notion of ‘crime’ as a stimulus to emotions and judgements (e.g.: Garofalo and Laub, 1978; Hunter, 1978). Biderman et al. (1967: 160) suggested that people assess the threat of victimisation from information communicated through interpersonal relationships and the media and through the interpretation of symbols of crime in their immediate surroundings. This was particularly through what Biderman et al. (ibid.: 160) referred to as ‘highly visible signs of what [people] regard as disorderly and disreputable behaviour in their community’. Incivilities, or signs of low-level disorder that included graffiti, abandoned cars and buildings, drunks, and groups of youths, were potential signifiers of crime and the threat of victimisation. Furthermore, Hunter (1978) proposed that the impact of witnessing disorder on fear of crime was partly mediated by inferences that the community and local authorities were unable or unwilling to manage such problems. They can indicate a breakdown in norms of behaviour and informal social control (e.g.: Lewis and Maxfield, 1980).

Yet in a review essay of the criminological literature, Baumer (1978: 254) argued that most of the research had been: ‘… descriptive, seldom multivariate, and distinctly atheoretical. As a result, we know who is afraid but very little about why they are afraid’. Research lacked a broad theoretical framework that allowed one to interpret the processes or mechanisms
that linked key constructs, that explored more directly some of the interpretations of key correlations. Baumer (ibid.: 255) concludes his review by arguing that the: ‘... major task confronting studies of the fear of crime is the development of a conceptual framework which will draw together the results cited ... [investigating] the means by which people come to define a given situation as threatening’.

**Britain during the 1970s and 1980s**

The next period identified by those interviewed as important in the debate was Britain during the 1970s and 1980s. A number of interviewees identified two features of the social scientific literature in the 1970s as salient to this conceptual history (also see: Lee, 1999, 2001). Both were radical positions: the so-called ‘moral panic theorists’ within criminology, and feminist sociologists and criminologists (operating against a backdrop of women’s movements more generally). Although the term ‘fear of crime’ was not used, these analyses increased the salience of the topic of public anxiety in criminology, bringing it forward as an issue to be explained and diagnosed. They created what Lee (2001: 232) describes as ‘a phenomenon that now required criminological explanation’, as well as providing a set of concepts and perspectives that would resurface in later debates.

The notion of a moral panic (Hall *et al.*, 1978) was used to analyse how public concerns about crime and deviance can be stirred up by the mass media, and how the hyping of these issues can serve an ideological purpose. They examined what they identified as a moral panic over young, black and male muggers that developed in the second part of that decade. A central part of their thesis was that mugging became a metaphor for a breakdown of order and cohesion, of declining stability and standards of living. It was also capable of attracting racial tensions amongst the white population.

The other intellectual current involved feminist scholarship on male violence, abuse and harassment of women against a wider critique of patriarchy. Put simply, feminist arguments about violence, victimisation and their effects stressed the pervasive and insidious nature of experience and of fears. Directly and indirectly, male abuse acted as a form of social control. Female concerns were certainly not to be seen as misplaced or exaggerated. Rather, as women’s refuges and rape crisis centres were opening and women’s movements in general were raising public and political awareness
of male abuse, a body of literature was highlighting the inherently gen-
dered nature of such violence and its reality in women’s lives.

**Political Interest in Public Anxieties about Crime**

The late 1970s saw crime and public concerns about crime in Britain be-
come increasingly salient social and political issues. As Rock (1990: 254)
describes, the Home Office, noting the rising crime rates, became more and
more concerned about knock-on effects for the criminal justice system and
the seemingly intractable nature of the crime problem. It ‘… had become
defensive about its performance. It was said to be “locked into a gloomy
cycle”, spending more without apparent effect.’ (*ibid.*: 255).

The public were becoming more vociferous about crime and their con-
cerns, yet there was also a sense in Government that these anxieties were
somehow misplaced – that they were partly driving popular ‘get tough on
crime’ attitudes. The context was a government thinking that its citizens
had begun to feel unprotected by the State. Rock (*ibid.*: 257-258) observes
that:

> ‘It was supposed that public confidence was the foundation upon which
> crimes were reported, co-operation with the police was secured, victims and
> witnesses came forward, vigilantism and anarchy were discouraged, public
> fear was suppressed, and Governments were respected. Without public con-
> fidence, it was argued, the criminal justice system would have to be pre-
> sented in an even more severe guise’.

It was felt that policy and the public needed facts and reassurance to
calm down excessive concern and elevated demands that were being stoked
up by public debate. The British Crime Survey (BCS) series was commis-
sioned by the Government, and would measure the ‘dark figure’ of unre-
ported and unrecorded incidents, but also show that most crime in the coun-
try was trivial, non-violent and mundane. As one interviewee remarked:
‘… the British Crime Survey was doing ideological work as well as pro-
ducing factual information about crime’.

The first sweep (and all subsequent sweeps) contained the measure of
‘fear for personal safety’ (Hough & Mayhew, 1983: 34) replicated from
Ennis (1967): ‘How safe do you feel walking alone in this area after dark?’
Analysis of these data produced findings that mirrored many of those in the
United States. High levels of anxiety, particularly amongst women and the
elderly, gave rise to what became known as the ‘risk-fear paradox’.
Home Office reports quickly deprecated the reality these findings indicated. This reflected orthodoxy that public fears were misplaced and exaggerated; that they were ‘… a serious problem which needs to be tackled separately from the incidence of crime itself’ (Hough & Mayhew, 1983: 26). The authors continued: ‘… excessive anxiety about crime not only impoverishes people’s lives, but also makes it difficult to secure rational discussion of criminal policy’ (ibid.: 33-34). If public fear of crime exceeded the actual reality then re-education and public involvement in community safety became a serious and important objective. To downplay public concern could also be to downplay embarrassing levels of concern by a Government proud of its ‘Law and Order’ image; a number of interviewees argued that it was politically expedient to partly displace the problem of crime onto the fear of crime. But the deprecation was also partly a function of frustration that uninformed public opinion might deleteriously affect more reasoned Home Office policy, coupled with a sense that crime was not as serious a problem as public opinion might have it.

Fear of Crime as a Broader Cultural and Political Theme of 1980s Britain

Meanwhile crime rates continued to rise in Britain. Garland (2001) argues that beginning in the 1970s, crime moved from a problem that afflicted the poor to increasingly become a daily consideration for many. Liberal sensibilities about the seriousness of crime as a problem were dented as victimisation became a prominent fact for the middle-classes. Increasing direct and indirect experience, a mass media raising the salience of crime and ‘institutionalising’ public concern, and the growing visibility of signs of crime – in the form of physical incivilities, such as vandalism, and social incivilities, such as groups of intimidating youths hanging around in the street – all helped to bring crime and the risk of victimisation into people’s everyday lives. As Garland (ibid.: 153) puts it, ‘rising crime rates ceased to be a statistical abstraction and took on a vivid personal meaning in popular consciousness and individual psychology’.

Garland (ibid.: 154) continues: ‘… diffuse middle-class anxieties [became shaped] into a more focused set of attitudes and understandings, identifying the culprits, naming the problem, setting up scapegoats’. Events such as the urban riots of the early 1980s (alongside media reports and commentary) transformed crime as a major issue, linked it to questions of
race and class, and fixed it as a target for more diffuse anxieties about social change. In particular, images of the excluded and disaffected young males of the inner city became resonant as the perception grew of them ‘as a newly dangerous, alien class’ (*ibid.*: 154).

During this decade the issue of fear of crime became infused with two other discourses and policy formations. First, there was a real increase in expenditure on the criminal justice system and crime control in general as ‘Law and Order’ emerged as a politically charged topic. For Garland (*ibid.*: 11): ‘the emotional temperature of policy-making had shifted from cool to hot ... the new discourse of crime policy consistently invokes an angry public, tired of living in fear, demanding strong measures of punishment and protection’. Along with a greater concentration on the victim, some interviewees argued that the empirical ‘discovery’ of fear of crime was invoked to support ‘tougher’ neo-conservative political agendas and policies, exemplified by the vast increase in the funding of the criminal justice system (Lee, 1999). However, there were divergent views on this matter. Other interviewees argued that the Home Office actually pursued relatively liberal policies during this decade, despite the popular punitive rhetoric.

Second, fear of crime became linked to crime prevention. The Government encouraged the public to be more crime literate (Garland, 1996); to be more responsible both for crime and their fears. People should take responsibility for reducing the risk of victimisation became partly focused on the individual. They should act cautiously and sensibly, restricting their own lifestyle if it meant it made them safer and decreased the chances of victimisation. ‘At its most extreme, the discourse of victim carelessness operates as a way of removing responsibility from a failing police service, and poor political tactics’ (Lee, 1999: 240). Paradoxically, the rapid proliferation of CCTV cameras and other aspects of crime prevention may have contributed to public concerns by encouraging: ‘... mutual suspicion and a profoundly anti-communitarian fortress mentality’ (Gilling 1997: 186).

Research, the mass media and political rhetoric and response all had the effect of further sensitising the public to crime and fear once again (cf.: Lee, 1999: 240). Raising the salience of crime and reifying the category of ‘fear of crime’ (feeding back into the social world largely through the media) may have helped frame the topic in an emotional manner. It may have further encouraged the use of the notion of crime to express concerns about related social issues such as poverty, race and social cohesion. Another potential effect was the recognition and classification of certain behaviours as
criminal. Furedi (1998) argues that the public have been encouraged to see a number of interpersonal relations as potentially victimising, and ourselves as vulnerable and susceptible to harm or injury. Thus, a whole range of experiences can be seen in a new light: as disruptive and threatening.

The Rationality Debate

The rationality question in British criminology during the 1980s was partly an artefact of methods that enumerated fear and risk: one could look at so-called ‘disparities’ between these estimates. But the debate also attained a level of polemic because there were real political points to be made and agendas to be played out. As one interviewee put it, it was ‘a question around which positions solidified’, an issue that could be interpreted in divergent ways to serve different agendas.

From 1985 onwards, a branch of criminology named ‘left realist’ came to define itself partly in its differentiated attitude towards the fear of crime (cf.: Sparks, 1992a, 1992b). The concept had become inculcated with the notion of rationality. The focus on why people were concerned – whether this was through experience, reception of mass media reports or perceptions of a disorderly and uncivil environment – became conjoined with the question of whether the causes somehow made the level of concern ‘reasonable’ or ‘appropriate’ to the actual level of threat of victimisation.

‘Left Realism’ attempted to assert the real basis for fearfulness. The position was explicitly in opposition to that of the ‘administrative’ criminology of the Home Office (to use Young’s, 1987, descriptor) – that fear was often exaggerated and misplaced. Young (ibid.) argued that there had been a ‘great denial’ of the impact of crime on contemporary urban social life, diminishing the reality of crimes and its consequences. This perspective also rallied against those left-wing criminologists who played down the harmfulness of conventional crime, who saw fear of crime as a moral panic generated by the mass media, and who emphasised corporate and white-collar crime as the real problem.

Stressing the very real damage that crime can have, the Left Realist research programme tried to push crime onto the Left Wing political agenda and reinstate its seriousness as a criminological topic. Local crime surveys were used to examine the myriad experiences that various victims had which national surveys do not take into account. Commissioned by radical local authorities, hostile to central Government and the police, and commit-
tated to the problems being faced in inner-city areas, many focused on public perceptions of police, and particularly their satisfaction with the service and their opinions on accountability. In one sense then, they operated like consumer surveys seeking to audit police performance (Zedner, 1997).

Researchers used these instruments to argue that harassment, abuse and frightening and stressful events can contribute to general levels of anxiety, but also fall outside the law (Anderson et al., 1990). Indeed, some groups have a greater sensitivity to personal safety as a result of peripherally visible forms of victimisation and other harassments (Crawford et al., 1990; Jones et al., 1986). When you took all this into account, the apparent disparity between risk and fear is entirely dispelled (Young, 1987).

The other intellectual strand that contested that women’s fear was irrational was feminist sociology and criminology. Several studies in the U.S. had documented a large discrepancy between rates of rape and physical assault published in official crime reports and those acknowledged by women during interviews (e.g. Gordon and Riger, 1989). Crime surveys and police statistics were also seen to fail to capture the full nature and extent of victimisation and low-level issues, such as sub-legal harassment. Studies used ethnographic and life-history methods and surveys of women conducted by female researchers, allowing people to talk, uncovering much low-level harassment, abuse and violence that remains ‘hidden’. Feminists listened to women’s accounts and treated their experiences as ‘expert’ knowledge (Stanko, 1990).

Additionally, much victimisation occurs within relationships, by persons known to the recipient. Male abuse can become pervasive reminders of vulnerability, enacted because of the sexual identity of the individual as a woman (Hanmer and Saunders, 1984; Stanko, 1990). As such, sexual danger is at the heart of women’s fear of crime (Stanko, 1990). It constitutes one end of a continuum of experiences (Kelly, 1988) in which women routinely learn to manage their daily lives structured and informed by their relationships with men. Many women learn during their lifetime to deal with harassment, incest, violence, and rape. These learning experiences are not easily separable into a public and private domain; feeling safe in the street, at home or on public transport. Overall, Stanko (1990) argued that diagnosing female fear as irrational completely ignores its gendered and pervasive nature; its roots in structural issues of a patriarchal society.

Finally, crime prevention advice that proceeded to put the responsibility for male violence onto women was ‘... like a red-rag to a bull’ to one inter-
viewee. It was seen as another way in which women are encouraged to self-regulate their behaviour and treated as ‘other’. Thus, behaviour is restricted both by the possibility of harassment and victimisation, and by the fear of unknowingly provoking a tendency to ‘blame the victim’ (Smart, 1977). Fear of sexual assault restricts movement and self-experience and reinforces gender roles (Gordon and Riger, 1989; Stanko, 1990).

Continuing Themes in the Fear of Crime Literature and Debate about Methods

Meanwhile, the research literature continued to grow during the 1980s. Most studies were conducted in the United States, using the survey as the methodological tool, and the central themes were similar to those of the previous decade.

The ‘broken windows’ theory (Wilson & Kelling, 1982) and the notion of incivilities (see Merry, 1981; Maxfield, 1984; and Skogan, 1986) developed the idea that perceptions of the physical and social environment and ‘behavioural improprieties of some individuals, which may not be specifically criminal’ (Maxfield, 1984: 24) affected public perceptions of crime. Scholars widened out the concept of incivility to include an indication of social disorganisation, a lack of social cohesion and trust, and an unstable neighbourhood in decline, as well as a factor in a particular sequential process in a downward spiral of a community. However, these interpretations remained empirically under-specified.

Another key focus was the role of direct and indirect experience of victimisation. Evidence was accruing for a stronger effect of indirect experience of victimisation on perceptions of safety than direct experience. Indirect or vicarious victimisation includes knowing others locally who have been victimised, and hearing information about criminal activity through conversations with others or from the mass media. This perspective interprets a criminal event in a community as sending out ‘shock waves’ via local social networks. People who hear about a crime become indirect victims if their levels of fear increase, and local social contacts can actually serve to amplify the impact by disseminating news.

However, this decade saw continued dissatisfaction with the theoretical and operational definitions of fear of crime. For Maxfield (ibid.: 6): ‘Feelings of safety on neighbourhood streets has come to be a de facto standard [measurement tool], but this reflects as much a desire to conform with prior
usage as it does an uncritical consensus’. The need for comparability was partly because the main studied were government-sponsored, and they needed to track changes over time as an early form of 'performance indicator'.

5 The Rationality of the Rationality Debate

In the late 1980’s, there was a growing conviction within the police force and the ‘liberal middle-classes’ (to quote one interviewee) that public fears were exaggerated, inflamed by the mass media, and disproportionate to the actual threat of serious victimisation. The Home Office report of the Working Group on the Fear of Crime (Home Office, 1989), or Grade Report, was influential in this respect.

Ironically though, this was a time when academics had begun to examine the logic of comparing statistically estimated risk to public attitudes and fears. A number also came to see that the level of empirical detail that surveys had furnished had outstripped conceptual development. The work of Sparks (1992a, 1992b) stands as the exemplar on these matters. As one interviewee described: ‘it had a real ground-clearing effect’. Many echoed this sentiment.

Sparks (1992b) began by stating that the Left Realists had done criminology a service by correcting ‘earlier conventional wisdom’ with respect to exaggerated fears. But he argued that to insist on a real and rational basis for fears is to wield ‘some blunt theoretical instruments’ – it is ‘simply to invert the logic of the moral panic thesis rather than to correct it’ (ibid.: 122).

The critical question is, when and under what circumstances is it rational to be afraid? To describe fear as rational because it is ‘wholly accounted for an antecedent level of objective risk’ (ibid.: 123) begs the question: what are the criteria for proportionality (cf. Reiner, 1988)? To decide the basis of when a fear is ‘wholly accounted for’ involves moral and political choices. Furthermore, the actuarial approach presupposes a theory of risk perception that assumes that people go about their lives actuarially estimating the likelihood of victimisation. Sparks (ibid.: 123) argued that: ‘... this is such a simplification of processes of social cognition as to constitute precisely the kind of derogation of lay knowledge which the realists are concerned to avoid’.
The risk of victimisation experience should really be seen as a product of uncertainty: ‘the resources available to us in making the necessary judgements are both enormously extensive, varied, complex and inherently incomplete’ (ibid.: 132). We have partial information and a range of experiences and beliefs, all of which render some situations, people and places threatening, unsafe or dangerous.

Sparks (ibid.) refers to socio-cultural work that conceives risk perceptions as sophisticated ways of making sense of complex possibilities in the social world. The risk of victimisation denotes individual and cultural meanings and resonance, both in the fact that it exists at all and in the value placed on the magnitude of its outcome. Some risks are more salient than others, and this is related to the salience of their broader cultural meanings (Douglas, 1985).

This broader conceptualisation offers up the possibility that we attend to information about crime because it allows us to frame and interpret our experience, concerns and beliefs? In such a way, fear may be seen more helpfully as a ‘mode of perception’ (Sparks, 1992a: 14), a way of approaching and interpreting the world. It also: ‘... intelligibly summarises a range of more diffuse anxieties about one’s position and identity in the world ... [and] concerns the way in which people understand the fear-inducing environment which they are forced to inhabit.’ (ibid.: 14).

**Britain during the 1990s**

Many interviewees argued that 1992 saw a clear break in governmental policy on Law and Order. Tony Blair became Shadow Home Secretary and, as one interviewee stated, declared an intention ‘to take crime and public concerns about crime seriously’. This precipitated a mirror change in the Conservative Party.

The early 1990s consequently saw a decline in interest amongst policy making in the fear of crime as a topic discrete from crime. The emphasis was less on the management of fear through public education and more on public emotions as an indicator of the impact of crime. The BCS would provide information on where priorities lay in tackling crime levels. In this sense, the instrument became a consumer survey, eliciting levels of public

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2 A theme in the interviews was the attribution of some success to the Left Realists, one of whose remits was to encourage the Labour Party to take these issues more seriously.
satisfaction with the criminal justice system and indicating areas of priority – in a similar way to the local surveys of the 1980s.

The fear of crime remained a salient issue in official Government statements, but it was bound up with the idea that the public were rightly concerned and demanded action. But tension concerning the proportionality of public perceptions bubbled underneath. As Reiner et al. (2000: 107) argues: ‘The media have consistently been seen by policy makers as a major source of the problem, stimulating unrealistic and irrational fears by exaggerating and sensationalising the risks and seriousness of crime’.

From the early 1990s onwards, the Labour Party began to outmanoeuvre the Conservative government with increasingly right-wing policies. This stimulated what one interviewee called an 'arms race' between incumbent and opposition, from Michael Howard to the present day, with parliament regularly being packed with crime bills. During this time, public fear of crime was regularly used in an occasionally grandstanding manner to justify popular-punitive solutions to issues of law and order.

This at a time of a number of changes in criminal justice system policy, partly in response to public demands. The first was increased pressure for police foot patrols. While it is often argued, in Britain at least, that high-visibility patrols are generally not an effective way of preventing or detecting crime, the public generally seems to like them. They may even be important in sustaining police legitimacy. The second change within police and wider has been the proliferation of the installation and use of CCTV cameras, partly as a response to perceived levels of public fear of crime.

Mirroring an increasing emphasis on the role of disorder, and the notion that the public was sick of everyday incivility, policy began to shift towards more strongly linking fear of crime, anti-social behaviour, and the incidence of crime. These issues became fused under the banner of ‘community safety’ (see Crawford, 1998). The Crime and Disorder Act 1998 formulated the concept for the first time within public policy. Giving local authorities and the police joint statutory responsibility for crime, this legislation dictated that local agencies were now responsible for carrying out 'audits' of community safety in their local area, including the measurement of fear of crime and some evaluation of the effect of strategies.

Central elements of the Crime and Disorder Act aimed to improve the ability of multi-agencies to address disorder, particularly relating to young people. These included a number of orders: child safety, anti-social behav-
iour, and parenting. They also include provisions for local child curfews and powers for the police to remove truants.

There was consequently an increasing link between youth, crime and public concerns about both. One interviewee pondered whether this was a response to decreasing margins of tolerance in certain sections of the populace of infringements of privacy, quietness, and the intrusion of signs that the world is not disorderly, out of one’s control. Embodying change, of inter-generational difference, young people can represent unwelcome changes in norms, values and standards. They are both a real cause for concern, and an easy and often misunderstood target. And, as Hall et al. (1978) and Pearson (1983) show, this is not new.

Continuing Themes in the Fear of Crime Literature: Questioning the Definition of the Concept

Many of the interviewees argued that the beginning of the 1990s saw a decline in interest in fear of crime research in British criminology. One interviewee nicely illustrated what was a common theme: ‘A debate that people had come to see as rather stale fizzled out. There was a sense that it had been done and that there was not much more to be gained’.

Yet research continued, particularly in the U.S., but also increasingly in other countries including Germany, Italy and France. Yet again this decade saw more commentary on how the concept was defined using crime surveys. In particular, there was a growing sense that fear of crime was a complex, diffuse ‘catch-all’ phrase, referring to a range of inter-related but theoretically distinct perceptions and responses to crime and the risk of victimisation. It was at once more complex and subtler than studies assumed.

Words have run ahead of actions in this regard, however. Research practice has not integrated key insights, whether it involve the use of a wide range of measures to accommodate a multi-dimensional concept, or the careful investigation of outstanding dilemmas concerning question wording. Perceptions of safety questions continue to dominate, largely for comparability purposes.

This seems to matter. Research by Jason Ditton, Stephen Farrall and colleagues (e.g. Farrall et al., 1997; Farrall et al., under consideration) has suggested that not only do these standard tools exaggerate the prevalence of fear; so too do questions about the intensity of worry – at least in the British context. One key issue is the transitory nature of fear; another is the
way in which measures ask for summaries of these and present them as stable attributes. A further dilemma is whether data reflect something above and beyond everyday experience of emotional responses to the risk of crime – namely, more generalised attitudes about crime and its significance that express underlying values that orientate the cultural meaning and importance of risk (see: Dowds and Ahrendt, 1995; Girling et al., 2000; Far- rall et al., under consideration).

Of course, measurement problems often reflect conceptual issues, and, in this case, the problem of theoretical under-specification. If a construct has not been theoretically defined then it is difficult to define its operational counterpart. But the problem goes deeper. Without a conceptual framework that allows a cohesive interpretation of the data – a systematic basis for the explanation of key processes and mechanisms – one is left with accounts that seem only to scratch the surface; piecemeal findings that lack integration to each other and to a broader framework of explanation (Hale, 1996). The one exception here is Ferraro (1995).

Enter Qualitative Studies

Meanwhile, the mid- to late-1990s saw a series of qualitative research projects building on the earlier work of feminist researchers (e.g. Stanko, 1990), and of Sparks (1992a; 1992b). These were projects to reconceptualise fear of crime, addressing the perceived bluntness of survey tools, and to respond to the lack of theoretical specification in much of the quantitative literature.

A number of studies used innovative methods that underpinned theoretical development. For example, Girling et al. (2000: 17 and 1-2) argued that listening to people talk about crime and the risk of crime, rather than tick boxes, allows:

‘... a more nuanced and contextual approach to understanding the meanings associated with individuals’ perceptions of the threats of criminal victimisation ... [research has] left much unsaid about the meanings-in-use of crime and its attendant concerns, anxieties and conflicts for people in the ordinary settings of their lives’.

Their approach removed ‘fear’ as the ‘central organising principle’ (ibid.: 15). Rather, they listened to people talk about crime, disorder and social order, making connections to the broader cultural significance of crime for individuals. They examined how the interpretative and evaluative
function of stories that individuals told imposed coherence on their perceptions and beliefs concerning crime, social relations and social change. Qualitative methods facilitated the investigation of the cultural meanings of crime – a perspective that goes back to Hall et al.’s (1978) thesis that crime operates as a symbol, expressing or condensing a number of other issues, conflicts, insecurities and anxieties. Girling et al. (2000) found that talk about crime disclosed an array of concerns and perceptions of their neighbourhood, of its social make-up and status, its place in the world, and the sense that problems from outside were creeping in.

Such methods were used in a number of studies (e.g. Taylor et al., 1996; Pain, 1997; Hollway and Jefferson, 1997; Tulloch et al., 1998; Girling et al., 2000) to investigate individual’s descriptions of their perceptions, attitudes, emotions and behaviours, when and why these occur, and how they manage threat and danger. They allowed the investigation of the situations in which they worried or felt at threat, highlighting the extent to which these are specific to certain localities and helped identify particular content and general themes that are relevant in perceptions of safety.

Conclusions: Where Are We Now?

It is sometimes tempting, but always dangerous, to construct history using simple, straight and causal lineages (cf. Osborne and Rose, 1999). The debate surrounding the fear of crime, operating within many arenas, is inevitably more nuanced and multi-faceted than the account offered here. This article is not a definitive account of events as they occurred. Rather, it is a product contingent on its time, its bases, and its purpose, a narrative and a thesis that looks back, with the help of a large number of British-based criminologists, to examine where we are now and how we have got here. Thus, I hoped to sensibly locate the form and impact of future contributions, even if hindsight is a wonderful thing.

In Britain, as in many Western industrialised countries, crime and deviance are not new phenomena. Nor, indeed, are public emotions and fascination towards these topics (see, for example: Curtis, 2001; Pearson, 1983). By its very nature, public perceptions of law and order have been historically bound up with the stability, normative character, and makeup of society; with the ability of the State to ensure power and security; with changing labels of legal and social transgression; and with what signifies a threat to the individual, to communities, to society – to the cohesion and consen-
An Analysis of a Construct and Debate

sus of values, norms and morals. These are questions that are central to social life and governance. And perhaps we can only speculate whether current levels of public anxiety about crime and order are quantitatively or qualitatively different to other historical periods.

But one thing that is new to the previous few decades is the concept of ‘fear of crime’, an idea peculiarly suited to the times. Emerging from a particularly social and political climate – of increasing crime and public awareness of such; of governments concerned about public anxiety, with the tools and will to accumulate information on citizens in order to respond and govern; and of a burgeoning social science increasingly interested in such issues – this construct has been developed and employed over the last few decades by academics, politicians, and journalists. For data from annual crime surveys in the U.S. and Britain have regularly showed that the risk of crime impinges on many people’s consciousness, more indeed than the experience of victimisation.

Crime survey data have consistently thrown up an interesting paradox that quickly became central to the debate. The prevalence of fear, as vaguely defined as it is, does not seem to match estimates of who is most of risk of becoming a victim. It also seems to be more widespread than victimisation experience. These matters, combined with the effects of fear, quickly became wrapped up in policy questions concerning how to respond to public opinion. Issues included: the effect of anxiety on citizens’ quality of life, on communities, and on crime; the role of emotion in driving liberal-conservative attitudes towards criminal justice; demands on and confidence in the State and its law enforcement; and whether one should try to allay anxiety by treating it separately from crime.

Yet it remains plausible that the public may not be as fearful as is often presented. This is not to say that crime and concerns about crime are not salient in the public’s mind. Rather, by interpreting data in a less literal manner, or by using more sensitive research tools, one could conclude that the threat of crime does not live quite so large in many people’s lives (see Farrall et al., under consideration); rather, anxiety expresses a range of values that underpin concerns about society and social change.

For some, growing scepticism about survey instruments has left future quantitative work in a state of flux. A significant majority of those interviewed were more strident, viewing the survey as too crude a method for this field of enquiry. Interview and focus group techniques were seen as the more appropriate ways forward. And it is clear that such methods have
been used to successfully sidestep the self-imposed limitations of standard survey tools.

But there remains a possibility that the failure to develop theoretical and methodological tools is as much to blame for the lack of convincing explanatory accounts of the phenomenon as much as the methodological form of the survey questionnaire itself. Perhaps one should not be hasty to conflate theory with method; careful development and integration may yet help lift quantitative study out its current trough, leaving us with future studies based on a broad range of techniques that healthily complement, contrast and challenge one another.

With these thoughts in mind, this chapter finishes with an analysis of where the interesting theoretical questions lie at this present time.

First, theoretical and empirical work has begun on the psychological nature of emotion in this field (see: Greve, 1998; Jackson, 2002; and Gabriel and Greve, in press). Gabriel and Greve (ibid.) distinguish between the state dimension of affect, or the disposition to interpret situations as threatening and evocative of fear, and the trait dimension, or the situationally specific stimuli and experience of fear. They also highlight the multidimensional nature of emotion that includes cognitive and behavioural features.

Psychological research on worry (a corpus that has traditionally relied on quantitative studies) also stresses the integral role of threat appraisal, its self-perpetuating nature, and its effect on perceptions of risk and interpretations of one’s environment. Theoretical and empirical work indicates feedback loops between worry about crime, risk perceptions, and interpretations of one’s social and physical surroundings (Jackson, 2002).

Second, there has been increasing consideration of the mediating role of risk perception and vulnerability. Ferraro (1995) argued that fear was shaped by subjective assessments of the chances of victimisation, which was itself based on intuitive perceptions of one’s environment and signs of crime and disorder. Other work has stressed individual vulnerability to the effects of crime (see, for example: Killias, 1990 & Warr, 1987; 1994; Pain, 1993), and differential feelings of control over its occurrence and impact (Jackson, 2002).

Third, and further broadening out the notion of risk perception, work by Girling et al. (2000) has shown us how to locate the cultural context. The issue of crime and disorder gathers its symbolic meaning at a range of levels, becoming ways in which people interpret and manage their social and
physical environment. A risk becomes salient because of what it represents (cf. Douglas, 1985; 1992), and crime symbolises the breakdown of moral and social cohesion and consensus, and decreasing predictability and familiarity of interaction, of transgressions of commonly shared values and morals, and of a whole host of low-level behaviours violate these ‘normal appearances’ of Goffman (1971) – signs of danger and normality that we have learned to detect, that we constantly scan for as we negotiate our social world.

For many years, social psychologists have examined the value-expressive function of attitudes. At least in Britain, data may reflect less that people are frequently worried or fearful about becoming a victim. Rather, we have increasingly come to use the language of crime and concern to express daily encounters with anti-social behaviour and the deterioration of social control; with perceived diversity and conflict in the norms and values of individuals and groups; and with a myriad of other related social changes. Our attitudes articulate the importance we place on cohesion and consensus, on civility and predictability of interaction, on the presence or absence of security and safety for ourselves and significant others, and on changing margins of tolerance for certain behaviours. And these are, one can be sure, social psychological features that are at the heart of everyday life. Thus viewed, public attitudes towards crime become embedded in how we understand and orient ourselves in our complex social environment. To remove it from its context is to reduce our appreciation of this diffuse, contingent and polysemic construct.

**Bibliography**


