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Perceived community disorder moderates the relation between victimization and fear of crime

Michele Roccato, Silvia Russo, and Alessio Vieno

Authors notes

Michele Roccato, Department of Psychology, University of Torino, Via Verdi 10, 10124 Torino, Italy. Telephone: +390116702015, Fax: +390116702061, E-mail: michele.roccato@unito.it (corresponding author)

Silvia Russo, Department of Psychology, University of Torino, Via Verdi 10, 10124 Torino, Italy. Telephone: +390116702055, Fax: +390116702061, E-mail: silvia.russo@unito.it

Alessio Vieno, Department of Developmental and social psychology, University of Padova, Via Belzoni 80, 35131 Padova, Italy. Telephone +390498278479, Fax: +390498278451, E-mail: alessio.vieno@unipd.it

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Abstract

In a representative sample of the Italian population (N = 2,002), surveyed in January 2008, we studied the direct and interactive effects exerted on fear of crime by direct and indirect victimization on the one hand and perceived level of disorder of participants' community on the other hand. Indirect victimization fostered fear of crime among participants reporting high levels of social disorder in their community. However, direct and indirect victimization did not influence fear of crime among participants reporting not to live in a disordered community. Implications and limitations of this work and possible further research directions are discussed.

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Researchers are intrigued by the weak and often inconsistent links between victimization and fear of crime (Tseloni & Zarafonitou, 2008). Some of them have even found the most fearful social categories—women and the elderly—to be the least victimized ones (Balkin, 1979). This "victimization-fear paradox" (LaGrange, Ferraro, & Supancic, 1992) has been tackled based on three main lines of reasoning. Some researchers (e.g. Rountree, 1998) argued that when measuring victimization analytically and fear of crime as a multidimensional construct, combining a cognitive and an affective dimension, the paradox tends to disappear. Other authors (e.g. Farrall, Bannister, Ditton, & Gilchrist, 2000) have pointed out that when respondents' vulnerability is statistically controlled for, a strong relationship between victimization and fear of crime can be detected. Finally, some scholars argued that direct victimization triggers the search for urgent coping strategies to a greater extent than indirect victimization does. Thus, indirect victimization should more powerfully influence fear of crime than direct victimization (e.g. Gomme, 1988).

However, results obtained using such approaches have often been mixed, and the "victimization-fear paradox" has not yet been fully explained. In this article we suggest a new possible explanation for it. We have based our reasoning on Schultz and Tabanico (2009), who experimentally showed that Neighborhood Watch (NW) schemes were only effective in affluent communities, and that they sometimes heightened residents' fear of crime in disadvantaged communities. Based on Cialdini, Kallgren, and Reno's (1991) Focus Theory of Normative Conduct, Schultz and Tabanico interpreted these results arguing that NW signs push residents to deeply explore their community and thus to make focal its contextual cues, either increasing or decreasing perceptions of the crime rate. In other words, publicly posted NW signs "make salient the contextual aspects of the community and serve to exacerbate pre-existing differences" (p. 1216): Signs posed in low crime communities increase feeling of safety and reduce worries of being victimized, and signs posed in high crime communities do the opposite.

Building on this evidence, we hypothesized that similar results would be found when analyzing the victimization-fear of crime link. Victimization experiences, pushing residents to focus

on the contextual cues of the environment they live in, should foster their fear of crime if their exploration brings them to see many signs of decay, in that urban blight—suggesting residents that in their community social order is wavering—is one of the most effective predictors of fear of crime (Lagrange et al., 1992). On the contrary, the exploration of a non-disordered community following a victimization experience should not foster people's fear of crime, as they would not find in the environment relevant signs of threat. Thus, in methodological terms, perceived community disadvantage should moderate the relation between victimization and fear of crime: Such a link should be much stronger in disadvantaged than in advantaged communities. Based on LaGrange and colleagues (1992), we conceived community disadvantage in terms of social incivilities (such as loiterers, unruly teenagers, begging, prostitution, and public drug use or sales) and physical incivilities (such as abandoned cars, vandalized property, litter, and graffiti). Based on previous research, we postulated social incivilities to exert stronger effects than physical incivilities (Russo, Vieno, & Roccato, 2010).

Method

We performed a secondary analysis on the data collected in January 2008 by the Observatory of the North-West, a research institution of the University of Torino. The sample (N = 2,002) was representative of the Italian population over 18 years of age according to gender, age, geopolitical area of residence and size of area of residence.

We used as proxy variable for fear of crime the four-category item "Think of micro-criminality. How would you define the situation regarding this problem in your area of residence?", and predicted it by performing a two-step hierarchic regression. In Step 1 we used gender (1 = man, 0 = woman), age, years of education, number of sons/daughters (which in Italy may be considered as a proxy of enjoying favorable economic conditions: see Bichi, 2005), and size of area of residence to control for participants' vulnerability. Moreover, we used four variables assessing victimization and perceived disorder. Based on Hale (1996), we computed direct and indirect victimization indexes respectively aggregating offenses involving the participant

him/herself or his/her social network in the 12 months preceding the survey. The victimization experiences we took into consideration were car theft, burglary in one's own home, pick-pocketing, robbery, violent assault, and sexual assault. We computed the perception of social disorder as the sum of the frequency of seeing, in one's own area of residence, people on drugs, prostitutes, homeless and drunk people, loiterers, beggars, and people working illegally in the streets (α = .751). Finally, we computed the perception of physical disorder through four items assessing the presence in participants' area of residence of abandoned houses and signs of vandalism such as burnt out garbage bins, abandoned cars and broken telephone boxes (α = .583). We computed these disorder indexes based on Taylor (1999). We considered the alpha of the physical disorder items to be sufficiently high, given the small number of items and their reasonable mean correlation ($\bar{r}$ = .26). In Step 2 we included the four interactions between direct and indirect victimization and physical and social disorder.

Results

Table 1 displays the results of our hierarchic regression. In Step 1, vulnerability (assessed in terms of being a woman, a young person, a poorly educated person, and an urban dweller) was positively associated with fear of crime, even if the number of sons and daughters and unsatisfactory health did not influence it. Perceived social and physical disorder fostered fear of crime while, consistent with the "victimization-fear paradox", direct and indirect victimization did not directly influence it. However, the interaction between indirect victimization and perceived social disorder, entered in Step 2, did directly influence fear of crime. A simple slope analysis (see Figure 1) showed that indirect victimization fostered fear of crime when participants perceived their community as characterized by a high degree of social disorder, simple slope = .086, $t(2000)$ = 4.165, $p < .001$, while it did not influence it when one's own community was not perceived as being particularly disordered, simple slope = .-.038, $t(2000)$ = -1.340, p = .180. The other three victimization-perceived disorder interactions did not influence fear of crime.

Discussion

Our analyses showed that research on fear of crime can be fine-tuned by analyzing the moderator effect exerted by perceived community disorder on the link between victimization and fear of crime. Indeed, victimization influenced fear of crime only when a high degree of social disorder was perceived in participants' community. Consistent with Gomme (1988), indirect victimization played a more relevant role than direct victimization, implicitly confirming that it is somewhat more difficult to cope with indirect than with direct victimization. As concerns disorder, we showed that social incivilities concur to predict fear of crime both directly and moderating the victimization-fear link, while physical incivilities fostered it only directly. This result suggests that "zero tolerance" policies would be better focused on combating social rather than physical disorder.

This research has three limitations. First, our fear of crime measure was not fully satisfactory. Even though it has a fairly long tradition in Italian research and has produced fairly consistent results (see for instance Russo & Roccato, 2010), it should only be considered as a proxy variable for fear of crime, in that it plausibly assesses a mix of fear of crime and crime risk perception. Moreover, the indirect effect we detected was very small. The weakness of this effect may be attributed, at least in part, to methodological rather than theoretical reasons. Indeed, as we used secondary analysis, we were able to use plausibly suboptimal items. New research performed using more satisfactory scales will likely produce stronger results. Furthermore, our disorder indexes measured individual perceptions and not actual community features. Perkins and Taylor (1996) showed that self-report measures and on-site assessments of disorder strongly correlate. However, it would be desirable to conduct new research using a multilevel approach to model the effects exerted on fear of crime by resident and community characteristics.

In spite of these limitations, we believe that our results are relevant from two different points of view. From the theoretical point of view, they could be the basis for a new explanation of the "victimization-fear paradox". From the point of view of policy making, they may be considered as the basis for fine-tuning the approaches aimed at combating fear of crime by adapting them to the characteristics of the communities in which people live (e.g. Robert, 1991).

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Table 1.

Prediction of Fear of Crime

	Step 1			Step 2		
	B	*S.E.*	Beta	*B*	*S.E.*	Beta
Constant	2.309***	.090		2.316***	.090	
Man	-.095**	.034	-.059	-.097**	.034	-.060
Age	.003*	.001	.056	.003*	.001	.053
Education	-.012*	.005	-.057	-.012*	.005	-.055
Number of sons/daughters	-.002	.016	-.003	-.004	.016	-.006
Size of area of residence	.388***	.043	.195	.386***	.043	.194
Health	-.001	.041	.000	.005	.041	.003
Direct victimization	.076	.042	.038	.064	.044	.032
Indirect victimization	.033	.018	.040	.019	.019	.023
Social incivilities	.055***	.005	.235	.054***	.005	.231
Physical incivilities	.086***	.015	.129	.084***	.015	.126

Direct victimization*social incivilities				.012	.010	.027
Direct victimization*social incivilities				-.021	.035	-.013
Indirect victimization*physical incivilities				.019***	.005	.087
Indirect victimization*physical incivilities				-.017	.014	-.029
Improvement of the fit of the model					$\Delta(F(4)) = 3.706.\ p < .01$	

Note. *** $p < .001$. ** $p < .01$. * $p < .05$.

Figure caption

Figure 1. Moderating Effect of Community Perceived Disorder on the Relation between Indirect Victimization and Fear of Crime.

Figure 1.