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Abstract

Using the Linguistic Category Model as framework, in two studies we analysed the relations between the level of abstractness of the descriptions of rapists, the nationality of the rapists, and participants' fear of crime. In Study 1 we preliminarily analysed how Italian newspapers describe the perpetrators of rapes as a function of their nationality. We took into account the 254 articles which had in their title or in their main corpus the Italian equivalents for "sexual abuse", "rape", or "sexual assault" published in 2010 by three national Italian newspapers—*La Repubblica*, *Il Corriere della Sera*, and *Il Giornale* (which, differently from the other two, is mainly read by an audience very biased against immigrants). A 2X3 ANOVA showed that, consistent with our hypotheses, when describing a rape perpetrated by an immigrant vs. an Italian, *Il Giornale* gave a significantly more abstract account of the assaulter. In Study 2 (performed on 80 undergraduates), we experimentally analysed the consequences of being exposed to an abstract vs. concrete description of a crime perpetrated by an immigrant vs. by a native. A moderated hierarchic regression showed that the abstractness of the account fostered participants' fear of crime irrespective of the nationality of the rapist. Moreover, this relation held only among participants reporting living in a physically disordered community. Strengths, limitations, and future developments of this research are discussed.

The link between immigration and fear of crime has widely attracted the attention of social researchers. However, whether the presence of immigrants can be considered a proximal cause of citizens' fear of crime is still a matter of debate. Some authors argued that immigrants are usually involved in crimes more than native people due to their disadvantaged economic and social conditions: Not being able to earn money through the mean of legal working activities, they have to resort to illegal means (Bankston, 1998; Lee, Martinez, & Rosenfeld, 2001; Martinez, 2002; Martinez & Lee, 2000). In this view, the presence of immigrants should lead to higher crime rates with a subsequent increase of fear of crime in the general population. However, other authors pointed out that the causal process might go in the opposite direction: The immigration process could influence and shape the demographic and economic structure of native residents' surroundings in a way that leads them to increase their own involvement in criminal actions, and thus the neighbourhood crime rate (Reid, Weiss, Adelman, & Jaret, 2005).

Whether or not the presence of immigrants is directly associated with crime rates, people usually associate immigrants with criminals (Roccato & Russo, 2012). Tajfel and Forgas (1988) provided an explanation for this immigrant-criminal association based on the social categorization process that leads people to select and modify information in order to confirm inter-group differences and one's own group superiority over the out-group. In this light, people tend to over-represent out-groups' negative behaviours and to minimise or even to forget their positive behaviours (Polano, Cervai, & Borelli, 2007). This intergroup bias can be further exacerbated by the representation of immigrants in the mass media. Indeed, empirical studies showed that news media tend to over-represent immigrants as criminals or suspected when compared to their actual crime rates (Dixon & Linz, 2000; Entman, 1992; Gilliam, Iyengar, Simon, & Wright, 1996; Romer, Jamieson, & de Coteau, 1998). Since exposure to news media has the potential to shape and distort people's believes about the society (Dixon, 2006a, 2006b; Gilliam & Iyengar, 2000), the biased representation of immigrants as criminals in the news can plausibly lead to a vicious circle through which the association between immigrants and criminals becomes stronger and stronger.

In this chapter we contributed to this debate by exploring the representation of immigrants committing serious crimes in Italian newspapers and by examining whether exposure to different type of news affects people's fear of crime. To this end, we adopted the Linguistic Category Model (LCM, Semin & Fielder, 1988) as a main theoretical framework. This model is especially suited for studying media representation of immigrants, because it relies on the idea that language – far from being simply and only a neutral and unbiased vehicle to provide information – is used, either consciously or unconsciously, to evoke and prompt assumptions and interpretations of events. The LCM is indeed useful to analyse the meta-semantic features of the language and to connect linguistic choices to the involved cognitive processes. More specifically, the LCM provides a taxonomy to categorize linguistic materials into four levels representing a continuum that goes from the minimum to the maximum level of abstractness.

First, d*escriptive action verbs* provide a neutral description and – not having a specific positive or negative valence – they do not imply an interpretation of the action; they make concrete reference to a specific behaviour through un-contentious statements that can be easily verified (e.g., A is talking to B). Second, *interpretive action verbs*, beyond involving the description and classification of the behaviour, also imply its interpretation through their positive or negative valence (e.g., A is helping B). Third, *state verbs* refer to the psychological (cognitive or emotional) state of the subject. Indeed, state verbs do not contain a specific reference to behaviours, but rather an abstract statement that cannot be objectively verified. Thus, they have a hypothetical interpretive status (e.g., A likes B). Fourth, *adjectives* serve to discriminate one person from the others; they are abstract terms and have only a mediate reference to the observed behaviour. Adjectives usually imply a positive or negative meaning and strongly suggest interpretations on the subject they refer to by evoking his/her general characteristics (e.g., A is an extraverted person) (Semin & Fielder, 1988).

Depending on the level of abstractness of the linguistic category used to describe an event, different inferences about the event will be evoked (Wigboldus, & Douglas, 2007). Indeed, moving

from the concrete to the abstract pole of the continuum, information regarding the subject of the action increases while information regarding the action itself decreases. High levels of abstractness suggest that the characteristics of the *subject* in question are stable over time and contextually-independent. For instance, describing a person who helps an unknown pedestrian who fell to the ground as altruist will foster the idea that s/he will likely engage him/herself in prosocial behaviours even in other setting, situations, and moment. Thus, it is likely that the use of abstract categories – especially adjectives – will produce *dispositional* inferences. On the contrary, the use of concrete verbs – such as descriptive action verbs: in our example, describing the person as helping the pedestrian– will likely generate *situational* inferences, since they refer to specific features of the *action*, thus implying that characteristics of the subject are contextually-dependent and temporary (Wigboldus, Semin, & Spears, 2006).

Maass and colleagues (Maass, Corvino, & Arcuri, 1994; Maass, Salvi, Arcuri, & Semin, 1989) applied the LCM to the study of intergroup relationships and of stereotypes' transmission. They provided empirical evidence showing that people use abstract linguistic categories – that cannot easily be discounted – to describe in-group members adopting positive behaviours and out-group members adopting negative behaviours, whereas concrete linguistic categories – much easier to be disconfirmed – are used in negative statements about in-group members and positive statements about out-group members. They labelled this phenomenon as the Linguistic Intergroup Bias (LIB), highlighting its connection to the widely documented pattern of behaviours that people tend to engage in to favour members of their own in-group over out-group members.

In this chapter we focussed on two main goals. The first was to explore the extent to which Italian newspapers use a biased language when describing immigrants vs. natives committing crimes. To fulfil this goal we analysed the immigrants-criminals association in Italian newspapers using the LCM linguistic categories (Study 1). The second one was to determine whether the exposure to a biased description of an immigrant vs. a native involved in a crime had any effect on participants' fear of crime. Adopting an experimental approach, we randomly assigned participants

to read a newspaper article containing an abstract vs. concrete description of either an Italian or immigrant criminal, and analysed the effects of these stimuli on participant's fear of crime (Study 2).

Study 1: Italian newspapers and biased descriptions of rapes

The aim of this study was to investigate the extent to which Italian newspapers use a biased language when describing immigrants and Italians involved in rapes. We chose such crime because it has a wide spread in Western countries and because of the severe consequences it has for its victims (Hickman & Muehlenhard, 1997). To achieve this goal we analysed how three widely spread Italian newspapers (*La Repubblica*, *Il Corriere della Sera*, and *Il Giornale*) describe rapists as a function of their nationality and of the newspaper's editorial line. Based on the literature on the LIB, we tested two hypotheses. First, we hypothesised that Italian newspapers would adopt a higher level of linguistic abstractness when describing an immigrant vs. an Italian committing a rape (Hp1). Second, since *Il Giornale* has a particular leaning to publish articles characterised by an ethnocentric and intolerant approach (Riva, 2009), we anticipated that this newspaper would use a more abstract vs. concrete language when describing immigrant vs. native criminals than traditional newspapers (Hp2).

To test these hypotheses we analysed news reporting episodes of rapes published during 2010. We retrieved the data in March 2011. We took into account three of the main Italian newspapers – *La Repubblica*, *Il Corriere della Sera*, and *Il Giornale. La Repubblica* and *Il Corriere della Sera* are the most read Italian newspapers. From their foundations (respectively in 1976 and in 1876) the former has been traditionally leaning toward the political left, while the latter has been leaning toward the political centre. *Il Giornale* has been founded in 1972 by Indro Montanelli. Since the first 1990s the journal had a conservative approach, and was the newspaper of the Italian bourgeoisie. However, in 1994, after the new owner of the newspaper, Silvio Berlusconi, started his political career, Montanelli voluntary resigned, and the newspaper become a sort of house organ of Forza Italia, Berlusconi's political party (Sorice, 2009). Since then, *Il Giornale*'s news have an

intolerant outlook, and at present is exclusively read by an ethnocentric and biased audience (Riva, 2009).[1]

As a first step, we selected from the newspapers' file archives all of the articles containing the Italian equivalents for "sexual abuse", "rape", or "sexual assault" in their title or main corpus. We then proceeded with a second selection by retaining only the articles with a clear description of the perpetrator; among them, only news in which the perpetrator was identified as either an Italian or an immigrant were considered. Through this selection process we identified and analysed 254 articles; 39 published in *Il Corriere della Sera,* 151 in *La Repubblica,* and 64 in *Il Giornale.*

We then built a 992*15 data matrix. In the rows we placed each sentence related to the perpetrators. Thus, each article could have generated more than one row; in fact, the sentence per article we took into account ranged from 1 to 44. In the columns, we placed a set of characteristics related to the rapists, the newspapers, and the victims. For the purpose of this study, we focus here on three of them. First, the level of abstractness used in describing the criminal, computed using the standard approach to the LCM (see Coenen, Hedebow, & Semin, 2006). Each sentence was scored using a four-category scale: we scored with 1 the descriptive action verbs, 2 the interpretative action verbs, 3 the state verbs, and 4 the adjectives. Thus, high scores indicated high abstractness. Second, we classified the perpetrator's nationality (1 = immigrant, 0 = Italian). Third, we classified the newspaper that published the article (1 = *Il Corriere della sera*, 2 = *La Repubblica*, and 3 = *Il Giornale*).

We tested our hypotheses through a 2 (perpetrator's nationality: immigrant vs. Italian) X 3 (newspaper: *Il Corriere della Sera* vs. *La Repubblica vs. Il Giornale*) ANOVA. We used the level of abstractness used to describe the rapist as dependent variable. We tested Hp1 by focussing on the main effect exerted by the rapist's nationality, and Hp2 by focussing on the interaction between perpetrator's nationality and the newspaper that published the account. Neither the direct effect of the rapists' nationality, $F(1, 966) = .260$, $p = .610$, nor the direct effect of newspaper, $F(2, 966) = 1.181$, $p = .380$, exerted a significant effect on our dependent variable. Thus, our first hypothesis

was not confirmed: In general, the level of abstractness used to describe immigrants committing a rape was not higher compared to the level of abstractness characterizing Italian rapists.

However, the two-way interactions between criminals' nationality and the newspaper that published the article was statistically significant, $F(2, 966) = 6.468$, $p < .01$, $\eta_p^2 = .013$. To better understand this interactive effect we examined the effect of rapists' nationality on the level of abstractness within the three newspapers. As concerns *La Repubblica* and *Il Corriere della Sera*, no differences emerged in the level of abstractness in the descriptions of immigrant vs. Italian rapists, $t(503) = 1.678$, $p = .094$ and $t(124) = .532$, $p = .596$ respectively. On the contrary, the level of abstractness was significantly different when comparing articles with immigrant vs. Italian rapists published in *Il Giornale*, $t(339) = -3.210$, $p < .01$, $d = .35$. In line with Hp2, descriptions of immigrant rapists were characterized by higher levels of abstractness ($M = 1.87$) compared to descriptions of Italian rapists ($M = 1.66$).

Thus, results from this study partially confirmed our hypotheses. Indeed, considering all of the newspapers together, we did not find any difference in the level of abstractness used to describe immigrant and Italians rapists. However, we found this difference to be significant for the news published by *Il Giornale*, a newspaper characterized by an ethnocentric and intolerant editorial line. Thus, as a whole, our findings did not support the idea that a Linguistic Intergroup Bias (Maass et al., 1994; Maass et al., 1989) marks all newspapers' linguistic choices, but they indicated that this bias affects only news published by the ethnocentric source we used in our analyses.

To conclude, the results we obtained were in line with previous research emphasizing the role played by newspapers political leaning in guiding their strategies of publication and in interacting with their audience's worldviews (Oxman-Martinez, Marinescu, & Bohard, 2009). In Study 2 we made a step further by investigating whether biased descriptions in newspapers have any influence on readers' fear of crime.

Study 2: The influences of newspapers' bias descriptions on fear of crime

As mentioned above, the main goal of this study was to determine whether the exposure to abstract vs. concrete descriptions of an immigrant vs. native committing a rape has any effect on participants' fear of crime. Before presenting the specific hypotheses that guided this study, a brief description of the literature on the influence of exposure to news media on fear of crime is needed. In the 1970s, Gerbner and Gross (1976) developed and tested their cultivation theory, based on the idea that media channels (especially television), given their ubiquity and wide diffusion, have become a fundamental source of information about the social world. Accordingly, the indirect experience of events seen on the media could substitute the direct experience in the development of beliefs related to the social world (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1994). In this light, media channels should be considered as relevant sources of indirect victimization (i.e., of offences involving people in one's social environment: see Skogan & Maxfield, 1981). According to this perspective, exposure to threatening media should significantly boost fear of crime: The higher the frequency of exposure to media news, the higher the audience's fear of crime.

However, the effect of exposure to media news on fear of crime seems to be much more complex that it was originally hypothesised in the first version of the cultivation theory (Gerbner & Gross, 1976). Thus, in a subsequent revision of their theory, Gerbner and colleagues (1980) specified two alternative processes through which the media can cultivate specific attitudes and beliefs in the audience. The first one, the mainstream hypothesis, relies on the idea that people use the information delivered by media channel to integrate the information that they have developed based on their own personal and direct experiences. In this case, media exposure should foster fear of crime especially among people who have not direct experience with crime, such as those who have never been victimized or who live in neighbourhoods with low crime and disorder rates. The second, the resonance hypothesis, is based on the idea that direct experiences with crime should moderate the link between media exposure and fear of crime in the opposite direction, with people who had direct experience with crime being more susceptible to information delivered by the media. The rationale behind this hypothesis is that when personal experiences match media

information, the latter act as a reminder, and both contribute to make criminal episodes more accessible to the recipient.

Working on perceived risk of crime, Shrum and Bischak (2001) tested these competing hypotheses and provided empirical evidence in support to the idea of resonance.[2] Indeed, in their study, respondents' level of television viewing was related to their estimates of societal and personal crime risk especially for those who had direct experiences with crime. Even if the resonance hypothesis has been tested mainly in relation to direct experiences of victimization, some findings suggest that such hypothesis could apply also to characteristics of the context where people live. For example, Doob and Macdonald (1979) highlighted that media exposure is related to fear of crime only among people who live in urban context with high crime rates; O'Keefe and Reid-Nash's (1987) longitudinal study subsequently led to analogous results.

However, according to the literature, fear of crime is much more spread than crime itself (Miceli, Roccato, & Rosato, 2004), and the degree of disadvantage of people's community is sometimes more predictive of residents' fear of crime than its crime rate (e.g., Vieno, Roccato, & Russo, 2013). Among the ecological predictors that foster people's fear of crime, the degree of disorder of people's area of residence showed to be pivotal (LaGrange, Ferraro, & Supancic, 1992). Social disorder refers to disruptive behaviours such as loiterers, unruly and rowdy teenagers, gangs, begging, public drunkenness, prostitution, and public drug use or sales. Physical disorder refers to disorderly inanimate environments such as those in which there are abandoned cars, vandalized property, litter, graffiti, vacant houses, and dilapidated homes.

In the literature, there are two main complementary interpretations of the positive link between disorder and fear of crime. According to the first interpretation, disorder worries residents in that it is considered both as a sign of the incapacity of people living in their community to manage their neighbourhood, and as the incapability of law agencies to preserve order (Hunter, 1978). According to the second interpretation, social and physical disorder makes residents fearful and/or worried because they conclude that social control has broken down (Kelling & Coles, 1996;

Skogan, 1990). Given its relevance, in this study we took into account the disadvantage of participants' area of residence in terms of perceived disorder, and – consistent with Gerbner and colleagues' (1980) resonance hypothesis – we used it as a moderator of the conditional relation between abstractness of the language used to describe a rape and the nationality of the rapist.

Thus, based on the literature above, in this study we tested three hypotheses. First, based on the Linguistic Category Model (Semin & Fielder, 1988) we expected exposure to abstract descriptions of criminals to enhance fear of crime (Hp1). The rationale behind this idea is that, since abstract language conveys dispositional attributions concerning the subject of the action, using such language should emphasize the stability of the perpetrator's negative intentions to cause harm, thus jeopardizing one of the assumptions that lay at the core of people's sense of security, that is belief in the benevolence of the world and of other people (Janoff-Bulman, 1989). Second, given the strong association between immigrants and fear of crime, we expected the effect of the level of abstractness to be stronger when the criminal is an immigrant compared to when is an Italian (Hp2). Finally, given that the effect of exposure to media news on fear of crime is likely to be moderated by personal experience and contextual cues (Shrum & Bischak, 2001), in accordance with the resonance hypothesis we also expected being exposed to a newspaper article describing in abstract terms an immigrant committing a crime to foster fear of crime especially among people who live in contexts characterized by high disorder (Hp3).

Eighty Italian students (60% women; M_{age}= 24.67 years, SD = 4.41), recruited through a snowball procedure, participated in this paper-and pencil experiment. Their participation was voluntary and they completed the task (presented as a paper-and-pencil questionnaire) individually. The data have been collected in 2012. They responded to a questionnaire structured into three sections.

In the first, participants were asked some questions about their media exposure and the three four-category -items (ranging from 1 = never to 4 = always) previously used by Roccato, Russo, and Vieno (2011) to assess perceived signs of disorder in their area of residence (e.g., abandoned

cars, vandalized property, and graffiti). Based on α = .65, we computed a mean index of perception of disorder.[3]

In the second section, participants were asked to read a newspaper article. The article described an episode of rape and was created based on an article we analysed in Study 1, randomly chosen among those published in *La Repubblica*. We then modified the baseline story by manipulating both the level of abstractness of the description and the nationality of the rapists. This manipulation produced four different versions of the article, according to a 2 (abstractness: high vs. low) X 2 (nationality: immigrant vs. Italian) between-subject design. Participants have been randomly assigned to read one of the four versions. In order to test the effects of being exposed to an abstract vs. concrete article with an immigrant vs. Italian rapist, we coded our experimental factors with an unweighted-effects coding: 1 "abstract description", - 1 "concrete description"; 1 "immigrant criminal", -1 "Italian criminal".

In the last section, participants have been asked questions related to their fear of crime and some standard socio-demographic questions (in our analyses, we used age and gender as control variables). After completing the questionnaire, participants were thanked and debriefed.

Based on Warr and Stafford (1983), we operationalized fear of crime as a multiplicative function of crime risk perception and the perceived seriousness of victimization consequences. Participants were presented a list of six crimes (e.g., rape and pickpocketing). They had to indicate whether they perceived a high or low possibility to be victim of each crime (responses ranged from -2 "very unlikely" to 2 "very likely") and the extent to which the consequences of being a victim would be serious (responses ranged from -2 "not serious at all" to 2 "very serious"). For each crime we computed a score of fear by multiplying the answers related to risk perception and perception of seriousness; these scores were then averaged into a general score of fear of crime (α = .73). The scale ranged from 1.83 to 3.30 (*M* = .57, *SD* = .83).

To test our hypotheses we ran a moderated regression analysis aimed at predicting fear of crime. In the first step we entered the control variables, the main effects of the experimental factors

(abstractness and criminal's nationality), and the perception of disorder (mean centred). In the second step, we entered all the two-way interactions between these three variables, and in the third step we entered the three-way interaction among them.

TABLE 1 AROUND HERE

Results of the analysis are reported in Table 1. None of the main effects was statistically significant. Thus, contrary to Hp1, exposure to an abstract vs. concrete description of the criminal did not foster fear of crime. We could not confirm Hp2 either. Indeed, the interaction term between the abstractness and criminal's nationality did not reach statistical significance. However, we found a significant interactive effect between the abstractness of the description of the criminal and the perception of disorder in participants' area of residence.

FIGURE 1 AROUND HERE

Simple slopes analysis showed that, in line with Hp3, exposure to an abstract description of a criminal fostered fear of crime for participants who perceived many signs of disorder in their area of residence (+ 1 *SD*), *simple slope* = .32, $t(70) = 2.17$, $p < .05$, but not for people with a low perception of disorder (-1 *SD*), *simple slope* = -.10, $t(70) = -.67$, $p = .50$ (see Figure 1). The three-way interaction term was not statistically significant.

General Discussion

Using the Linguistic Category Model as framework, in this chapter we analysed the representations of Italian and immigrant rapists in three national Italian newspapers and the effects exerted by exposure to different type of news on people's fear of crime. By definition, interlocutors activate the Linguistic Intergroup Bias when talking about the in-group and the out-group in an actual or symbolic intergroup context. Moreover, people use a more abstract vs. concrete language when describing stereotype-congruent behaviours (Gorham, 2006).

In the wake of the literature above, results from Study 1 showed that the ethnocentric and biased *Il Giornale* described immigrant vs. Italian rapists using a more abstract language, while *La Repubblica* and *Il Corriere della Sera* did not. According to the literature (Douglas & McGarty,

2001), the use of the LIB corresponds to a normative behaviour in intergroup contexts, that is., a cue to attribute social value to the speaker. Consistent with this, speakers wishing to be considered good in-group members tend to resort to the LIB, and speakers using the LIB tend to be considered good in-group members (Assilaméhou & Testé, 2013). In this light, results from Study 1 indirectly suggested that in the Italian nonbiased media, being a rapist, but not an immigrant, is sufficient to be categorized in a derogated out-group, while in the biased media being an immigrant boosts the probability to put a rapist in a derogated out-group. This result is consistent with those from the classic study by Maas and colleagues (1994) on the way newspapers with different religious overviews presented the clashes occurred during a basket match between neo-Nazi supporters of the Italian Ignis Varese and the supporters of the Maccabi Tel Aviv.

Results from Study 2 showed that the level of abstractness of the description of the rapist, but not that of his nationality, fostered participants' fear of crime, but only among people living in disordered environments. Thus, this portion of the sample showed to be frightened by a generalizable description of a rapist, independently from his nationality. This evaluative strategy sounds substantially rational, both because rape is a dramatic event, independent from its perpetrator, and because – at least in Italy – the probability of being victimized by an immigrant is not higher than that of being victimized by a native (Barbagli, 2008). To the best of our knowledge, this was the first time this issue was studies. Thus, future research aimed at deepening our understanding of this result would be interesting. The use of the Implicit Approach-Avoidance Task (IAAT: see Castelli, Zogmaister, Smith, & Arcuri, 2004) could be particularly promising to do so. In brief, the IAAT is a computer test that allows the researcher to measure participants' spontaneous tendencies to approach or to avoid specific targets by analysing how fast and accurate people are when it comes to recognize liked or disliked targets. As a fruitful development of this study, this instrument could be used to evaluate approach and avoidance behaviours towards Italians vs. immigrants, offenders vs. non-offenders, and their combinations.

Moreover, Study 2 results also provided empirical evidence in support to the resonance hypothesis (Gerbner et al., 1980), according to which exposure to media foster fear of crime only when the news resound with people's experience with crime. Interestingly, our findings complemented those from previous research focussed on the moderating effect of direct victimization (e.g., Shrum & Bischak, 2001) by addressing the moderating effect of subjective perceptions of the surrounding environment.

Our research allowed us to draw some relevant conclusions on fear of crime even outside its relations with the LIB. Some years ago, based on Schultz and Tabanico (2009), who experimentally showed that Neighbourhood Watch schemes were only effective in affluent communities, Roccato, Russo, and Vieno (2011) showed that indirect victimization fostered fear of crime only among people reporting to live in disordered environments. In their view, this plausibly happens because victimization experiences, pushing residents to focus on the contextual cues of the environment they live in, foster their fear of crime if their exploration brings them to see many signs of decay, in that urban blight – suggesting that social order is wavering – is one of the most effective predictors of fear of crime (La Grange 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 residents would not find in their environment relevant signs of threat. The present research led us to make a step further, allowing us to extend the role of "traditional" indirect victimization to that of victimization stemming from mass media accounts. More in general, our results spoke in favour of a "situated" nature of fear of crime, which turns out to be built on the relation between people's direct and indirect experiences with victimization and the features of the environments in which they spend their everyday life.

Our research had some strong points. To start with, having used Warr and Stafford's (1983) approach, we could assess fear of crime using a multidimensional approach. This is particularly valuable, in that the literature systematically shows that the "victimization-fear paradox", according to which the most fearful people are often the least victimized ones (Balkin, 1979), often disappears

when, just like we have done in this research, measuring the dependent variable using complex operationalizations that integrate its cognitive and its emotive dimensions (e.g., Rountree, 1998). Future research aimed at testing the robustness of our results using alternative multidimensional operationalizations of the dependent variable could be interesting. For instance, Rader (2004; Rader, May, & Goodrum, 2007) recently developed an integrated model focussed on "threat of victimization", a variable composed of three dimensions: (a) crime risk perception, which is the cognitive dimension of the construct; (b) fear of crime, which is its emotional dimension; and (c) constrained behaviours, which is its behavioural dimension. Rader's approach has been often quoted (e.g., Carro, Valera, & Vidal, 2010; Randa & Wilcox, 2010) but seldom used. An experimental study aimed at predicting this variable as a function of the interaction between exposure to threatening news and disadvantage of participants' area of residence is not available yet. Such a study would be intriguing.

Our research had at least two other strong points. First, Study 2's experimental approach allowed us to test a causal link between our exposure to news media and fear of crime. This is especially relevant because we addressed the effects of exposure to newspapers, given that newspapers readers have the chance to be much more selective in relations to the news they want to read compared to people exposed to other channels, such as the television. Indeed, whether or not they actively and voluntarily choose it, the audience of television and radio is frequently exposed to crime news; on the contrary, in reading newspaper and accessing the Internet people can easily decide to read or skip crime news (Weitzer & Kubrin, 2004). The likelihood of accessing crime news is related to people's personal characteristics and previous experience with crime. Thus, adopting a research design with random assignment to the experimental conditions, we have been able to take under control potential confounding factors. Second, we focussed on moderated effects. This should be considered as particularly positive, in that, according to the literature, the identification of moderators of relations between independent variables indicates the degree of

sophistication and maturity of a field of investigation (Aguinis, Boik, & Pierce, 2001; Judd, McClelland, & Culhane, 1995).

The negative characteristics of Study 2's experimental approach are complementary to the positive ones. First, as it often happens in experimental design, our sample was not representative of any population. Thus, our results cannot be generalized. This limitation, however, characterizes the great majority of psychosocial research, and is less severe in experimental vs. survey research (Roccato, 2008). Moreover, we had to resort to perceived, and not to actual, disorder. However, this weakness is more apparent than real, in that the literature shows that the correlation between perceived and actual disorder is systematically strong, plausibly because residents' perceptions of disorder are pretty realistic (e.g. Perkins & Taylor, 1996; Taylor, 1999). Furthermore, we could not control for direct victimization, in that such experience is relatively rare, and entering such variable in our model we would have led to rather instable results due to the N of our research. Finally, we could not enter the disadvantage of participants' community in a multilevel test, in that such analysis needs samples larger and more heterogeneous than those we can use in standard experimental research. This did not allow us to model the direct and interactive effects of other ecological indicators of community disadvantage, among which economic inequality and expenditure in social protection. Vieno, Russo, and Roccato (2013) have recently discussed these variables as very effective predictors of fear of crime, and they concluded that fear of crime is, at least in part, social and economic insecurity in disguise. A multilevel replication of our Study 2, even if particularly complex, would be useful to developing the literature.

We see two other possible developments of this research. First, consistent with previous research on the relationship between media exposure and fear of crime, it could be interesting to differentiate between news reporting crimes committed in one's own area of residence and crimes committed in other locations. Similarly, future studies could compare exposure to different media channels, such as television vs. newspapers. Indeed, previous research showed fear of crime is likely to be enhanced by exposure to local television channels (Weitzer & Kubrin, 2004). Exposure

to local channels is frightening because crimes reported in the news typically take place in – or at least very close to – the audience area of residence (Heath & Petraitis, 1987); moreover, exposure to television is more frightening than exposure to newspapers and radio mainly because of the audio-visual characteristics of the media provide a more realistic account of crimes.

Second, it could be interesting to investigate the duration of the effect we observed. Norris and Kaniasty (1994) showed that being a direct victim of rape tends to foster fear of crime for about nine months, and that after this period its effects tend to weaken. Russo and Roccato (2010) expanded these findings, showing that indirect victimization, especially multiple or repeat experiences of victimization occurred to people belonging to one's social network, tends to have more long-term effects on fear of crime than direct victimization. Given that exposure to crime news has been compared to a very light form of indirect victimization, that is, crime-related vicarious information (Roccato & Russo, 2012), it could be argued that long-term effects of exposure to crime news would be quite weak or even null. However, in this study we addressed the effects of exposure to one single newspaper article: This clearly represented a limitation of the study given that people are daily exposed to a massive volume of crime news. Nonetheless, in spite of the exposure to just one article, we still observed significant effects of the abstract language on fear of crime. Based on Study 1's results showing that some sources (*Il Giornale*) tend to adopt more abstract descriptions of criminals, we could expect that daily reading of such newspapers would have pervasive long-term on fear of crime.

To conclude, we believe that our results have been relevant from two different points of view. From the theoretical point of view, they could be the basis for a new explanation of the relations between media exposure and fear of crime. Second, consistent with Robert (1991), 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 media environment and of the characteristics of the communities in which people live.

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Footnotes

1. Here we present some examples of titles and extracts from articles published by *Il Giornale* that show the ethnocentrism and intolerance of the journal's editorial line: "A Moroccan is the killer of the two pensioners"; "H. K. is one of the many, too many, immigrants spread in Italy hunting for prays"; "The North African immigrant is charged of being the animal who butchered using a rod and a knife a little old couple"; "The Macedonian painter: 'I have killed the two elderly because I wanted their money'" (see http://www.cronachediordinariorazzismo.org/tag/quotidiani-razzisti/).

2. It is worth noting that, even if these authors studied perceived risk of crime and not fear of crime, the two construct are often treated as interchangeable and have many predictors in common (Rountree & Land, 1996; Russo, Roccato, & Vieno, 2011).

3. The alpha of the battery was under the .70 value, that is, the threshold below which an α is conventionally considered as satisfactory (Nunnally, 1978). However, this low α depended more on the small number of items we used to measure perceived disorder than on a weak correlation among them (mean inter-items correlation: $r = .38$).

Table 1.

Prediction of fear of crime, moderated regression analysis

	Step 1			Step 2			Step 3		
	b	*SE*	β	*b*	*SE*	β	*b*	*SE*	β
Intercept	.54**	.16		.52**	.16		.53**	.16	
Gender (1 = woman)	.06	.21	.04	.02	.21	.01	.02	.21	.01
Age	.02	.02	.11	.03	.02	.13	.03	.02	.13
Abstractness (1 = abstract)	.10	.10	.12	.10	.10	.11	.11	.10	.13
Nationality (1 = immigrant)	-.15	.10	-.17	-.17	.10	-.19	-.16	.10	-.18
Disorder perception	.12	.29	.05	.10	.29	.04	.07	.29	.03
Abstractness*Disorder				.58^	.29	.23	.58*	.29	.24
Abstractness*Nationality				.11	.10	.12	.11	.11	.12
Disorder*Nationality				.34	.29	.13	.33	.29	.13
Abstractness*Nationality*Disorder							-.16	.29	-. 06
R^2		.05			.14			.15	

ΔF(df)	.80 (5,74)	2.50 (3,71)^	.28 (1,70)

Note: ** $p < .01$. * $p < .05$. ^ $p < .10$.

Figure caption

Figure 1. Moderated effect of perception of disorder on the link between exposure to abstract vs.

concrete descriptions of the criminal and fear of crime

Figure 1.