

PSYCHOLOGICAL REACTIONS TO CRIME IN SMALL LOCAL COMMUNITIES

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RESUMEN

Este estudio se centra en las pequeñas comunidades residenciales. Siguiendo el modelo que considera dos tipos de reacciones psicológicas a la delincuencia, el miedo al crimen y la preocupación por la delincuencia, se estudia la influencia de diferentes variables sobre las dos dimensiones. El estudio se basó en los habitantes de dos pequeñas comunidades de diferentes dimensiones distantes pocos kilómetros de la una de la otra: un pueblo rural y una ciudad pequeña. Se tuvieron en cuenta las variables demográficas, las actitudes ideológicas, la exposición a los medios de comunicación de masas y la dimensión de la comunidad de residencia. Un modelo de ecuaciones estructurales se puso a prueba para verificar la hipótesis de las influencias. Los resultados mostraron la fuerte influencia de las actitudes autoritarias en ambas reacciones psicológicas a la delincuencia

ABSTRACT

This study is focused on small residential communities. According to the model considering two kind of psychological reactions to crime, the Fear of Crime and the Concern about Crime, we studied the influence of different variables on these two dimensions. The study involved residents of two small communities of different dimension distant few kilometres the one from the other: a rural village and a small town. Taken into account demographic variables, ideological attitudes, mass media exposure, and the dimension of the community of residence. A structural equation model was tested to verify the hypothesized influences. Results showed the strong influence of authoritarian attitudes on both psychological reactions to crime.

Key words: miedo al crimen, comunidad local, autoritarismo, Medios de comunicación [fear of crime, local community, authoritarianism, Mass Media]

Introduction

In the rich societies crime is one of the key concerns that affect citizens. As maintained by some scholars, fear may be a bigger problem than crime itself (Scarborough, Like-Haislip, Novak, Lucas, & Alarid, 2010). In fact the last forty years research on psychological reactions to crime pointed out that insecurity produced by this phenomenon is often not linked to objec-

tive data. Crime rates do not predict well the fear of crime by people living in a local community (Forde, 1993), often there are higher values of fear of crime in places where there are lower crime rates.

Even direct experience of crime, the so called victimization, does not predict higher fear of crime. The classic victimization model maintained that fear of crime is the result of direct experience (Skogan & Maxfield, 1981) but research did not support this simple assumption. Results about the relationship between victimization and fear of crime are not univocal (McGarrell, Giacomazzi, & Thurman 1997; Gibson, Zhao, Lovrich, & Gaffney, 2002). The indirect victimization model was developed to account for the inconsistent findings. This model maintains that people who have higher level of fear are the ones that perceived themselves as more vulnerable to crime (i.e. women, and elders).

At present crime rates and victimization were considered only a part of the complex web of variables influencing behaviours and attitudes about crime (Austin, Furr, & Spine, 2002).

In any case it is not correct to think of psychological reactions to crime just in terms of cognitive evaluation of personal risk. There is a general agreement in considering at least two principal psychological reactions caused by the crime. According to seminal model proposed by Furstenberg (1971) and subsequently maintained by other authors (i.e. Roché, 1993; Amerio, & Roccato, 2007) these two main reactions are the Fear of Crime (FC) and the Concern about Crime (CC). The first one (FC) is an emotional reaction of anxiety for one's own safety. This is not just a reaction to a concrete danger, but also to a potential one. The majority of the literature on psychological reactions to crime referred only to this dimension. The second psychological reaction to crime is a concern about crime as a social problem (CC). This is a feeling concerning the safety and well-being of the community of belonging.

According to the literature, there are different factors that increase fear of crime. First of all demographic variables like gender, age, and socioeconomic status. Fear of crime is higher among women (Ferraro, 1995; Perkins & Taylor, 1996), youths (Warr, 1995; Lane & Meeker, 2003), senior citizens (Baba & Austin, 1989; Amerio & Roccato, 2005), and low-status individuals (Rohe & Burby, 1988; Pantazis, 2000; Kanan & Pruitt, 2002).

The effect of victimization is controversial. Several studies have found that victimization is either unrelated or only marginally linked to fear of crime (Gates & Rohe, 1987; Liska, Sanchirico & Reed, 1988; McGarrell, Giacomazzi, & Thurman, 1997; Gibson, Zhao, Lovrich, & Gaffney, 2002).

Finally also contextual factors exert a positive effect on fear of crime, among these the objective spread in the environment of micro-criminal behaviours (Moser, 1992; Rountree, 1998; Miceli, Roccato, & Rosato, 2004) and the presence of the so called physical or social incivilities (signs of urban decay like small acts of vandalism, loitering by teenager groups, prostitution, and homeless people) (LaGrange, Ferraro, & Supancic, 1992; Sampson & Raudendush, 1999; Robinson, Lawton, Taylor, & Perkins, 2003).

In fact fear of crime is usually higher among people that live in the cities (Perkins, Wandersman, Rich, & Taylor, 1993; Kuo, Bacaicoa, & Sullivan, 1998; Miceli, Roccato, & Rosato, 2004) where incivilities and criminality are widespread.

The concern about crime is not always correlated with fear of crime (Roché, 1993), and in general is higher (Warr, 1995; Tartaglia, 2004). It depends less on victimization than on the individual's value system, world outlook, and political orientation (Amerio & Roccato, 2005). One of the political attitudes usually associated to a dangerous worldview is Authoritarianism. From classical work of Eric Fromm (1941) up to Altemeyer's conceptualisation (Altemeyer, 1981,1996), authoritarianism was conceived as a reaction to insecurity. Altemeyer maintains that authoritarian people tend to perceive the world as a threatening place. Altemeyer's theory posits that authoritarianism is made by three dimensions: Authoritarian submission, Authoritarian aggression, and Conventionalism. The Authoritarian aggression is a general aggressiveness directed against deviants that are perceived to be lawful targets according to established authorities. It includes the idea of a generalized menace, the request of social order, and the stigmatization of criminals. This attitude is a significant predictor of concern about crime (Roché, 1993, Tartaglia, 2004).

Concern about crime is also influenced by the mass media (Heath & Petraitis, 1987). Several authors studied the relation between exposure to the mass media and the psychological reactions to crime in general. The majority of the models rest on the notion that the mass media devote a disproportionate amount of space to crime compared to its effective diffusion, and describe it in rather dramatic tones (O'Connell, 1999). This fact spreads fear among users, even when users are not specifically vulnerable or victimized. Results show that the effects of newspapers and television on reactions to crime are complex, not simply direct, and that they are amplified by personal and social characteristics of the audience (Weaver & Wakshlag, 1986; Chiricos, Padgett, & Gertz, 2000; Lane & Meeker, 2003).

Method

Aims

Psychological reactions to crime have been studied mainly in urban environment where crime and insecurity among residents are more present (Miceli, Roccato, & Rosato, 2004). This study is focused on small residential communities, where crime rates are lower, social bonds are stronger, and the sense of community is higher (Prezza, Costantini, 1998). The sense of community and the presence of a supportive social environment are related to the perception of safety and security (Perkins & Taylor, 1996). The aim of the study was to verify the effects of different variables on fear of crime (FC) and concern about crime (CC) in a sample of people living in small communities. In particular we considered: (a) Demographic variables (gender, age, and educational level); (b) exposure to mass media; (c) dimension of community of residence; (d) ideological variables (authoritarian aggression and political orientation).

On the ground of the cited literature we hypothesized that: (a) Fear of Crime was influenced by gender, age, exposure to mass media, dimension of community of residence, and authoritarian aggression; (b) Concern about Crime was influenced by gender, exposure to mass media, and authoritarian aggression; (c) authoritarian aggression was influenced by exposure to mass media and political orientation. The hypothesis (c) is based on the literature on mass media effects stressing that often mass media spread a view of the world as a threatening place (O'Connell, 1999; Chiricos, Padgett, & Gertz, 2000) and on Altemeyer's definition of right-wing authoritarianism (Altemeyer, 1981; 1996).

Participants and measures

We carried out our study on a sample of 160 adults resident in two local communities of the Northwest of Italy distant few kilometres the one from the other. The first one is a small town of about 10000 residents, half of the active population works in the food industry and 15.2% of the inhabitants are foreigners (data of the Italian National Institute of Statistics, 2009). The second community is a rural village of about 1000 residents with 7.4% of foreigners. The study involved 80 residents of the small town and 80 of the village.

The whole sample was composed of 79 males and 81 females; their average age was 42.6 years ($SD = 14.2$); participants attended school on average for 11.6 years ($SD = 3.4$). We controlled if subsamples of the two communities were different in demographic variables. The only significant difference ($t = -3.21$; $p < .01$) was in educational level: resident of the village

attended school on average for 10.8 years whereas residents of the small town did it for 12.5 years. We think this difference reflects the socio-economic profile of the two communities: the first one is mainly made by farmers; the second one has an important component of more educated employees.

Data were gathered by means of a questionnaire including five sets of variables:

Reactions to crime. We used two items yet used in previous researches (Amerio & Roccato, 2007) considered as operationalizations of Fear of Crime (FC) and Concern about Crime (CC). Respectively the items were 'Think of micro-criminality. How would you define the situation regarding this problem in your area of residence?' for Fear of Crime and 'Think of micro-criminality. How would you define the situation regarding this problem in Italy?' for Concern about Crime. Items were scored on a 4 points Likert-type scale ranging from (1) not at all afraid, to (4) very afraid.

Authoritarian aggression. We used a 17 items scale (Tartaglia, 2004) concerning the perception of social disintegration, the stigmatization of criminals, and the request of the social order ($\alpha = .75$). Items were rated on a 5 points Likert-type scale ranging from (1) complete disagreement to (5) complete agreement.

Political orientation. The positioning on the left-wing/right-wing axis was assessed by a 10 point thermometer (1 = left-wing orientation; 10 = right-wing orientation).

Mass media exposure. We assessed this variables by means of a single item asking an estimate of the daily hours spent watching TV.

Demographic variables.

We contacted participants directly at home; questionnaire completion took about 20 minutes. Respondents received a small token of appreciation. Beside preliminary analysis, to verify the hypothesized relationships between variables we tested a structural equation model.

Results

First we conducted some preliminary analysis. In table 1 are reported descriptive statistics for measures we used. As expected Concern about Crime is higher than Fear of Crime. In general participants are slightly right-wing oriented. Table 2 reports correlation indexes among measures. Contrary to our expectations age was not related to psychological reactions to crime and so we did not use this variable in the following analysis. We also tested differences in psychological reactions to crime between resi-

dents of the village and residents of the small town and between males and females. Means and t values are reported in table 3.

Table 1
Descriptive statistics: Means and Standard Deviations.

| | Mean | SD |
|--|------|------|
| Fear of Crime | 1.96 | .61 |
| Concern about Crime | 3.32 | .59 |
| Authoritarian Aggression | 3.64 | .56 |
| Political orientation (1 = left; 10 = right) | 5.82 | 2.26 |
| Daily hours spent watching TV | 2.37 | 1.21 |

Table 2
Correlations among measures: Pearson's r values.

| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|-------------------------------|--------|--------|--------|------|------|
| Fear of Crime | | | | | |
| Concern about Crime | .329** | | | | |
| Authoritarian Aggression | .368** | .383** | | | |
| Political orientation | .101 | .242** | .416** | | |
| Daily hours spent watching TV | .175 | .285** | .299** | .149 | |
| Age | -.013 | .165 | .062 | .027 | .030 |

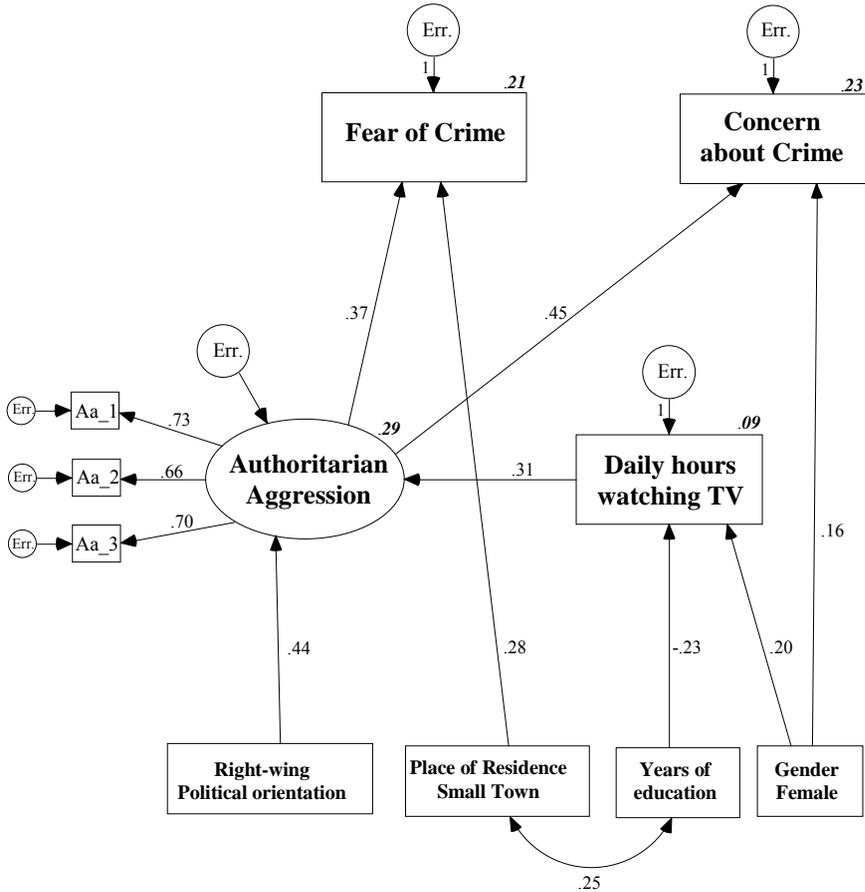
** p < .01

Table 3
Differences in psychological reactions to crime by place of residence and gender:
Means and t values.

| | Means | | t |
|---------------------|----------------|-------------------|---------|
| | <i>Village</i> | <i>Small Town</i> | |
| Fear of Crime | 1.76 | 2.17 | -4.55** |
| Concern about Crime | 3.26 | 3.39 | -1.45 |
| | <i>Male</i> | <i>Female</i> | |
| Fear of Crime | 1.85 | 2.09 | -2.52* |
| Concern about Crime | 3.19 | 3.46 | -3.05** |

** p < .01; * p < .05

Figure 1
 Psychological reactions to crime prediction model: Standardized regression weights, variances, and correlations.



After preliminary analyses we built a structural equations model assuming the influences postulated above. On the grounds of preliminary analyses we did not include in the analysis the variable Age. For Authoritarian Aggression we used a partial disaggregating approach (Bagozzi, 1993; Bagozzi & Edwards, 1998) by examining groups of aggregated rather than single items as indicators. The advantage of this approach is that it reduces the number of variables in the model that may result in an excessive worsening of the fit, allowing anyway to estimate the measure error of the latent variables.

As usually recommended (Hu & Bentler, 1998), we tested the model fit using different fit indexes, in order to attenuate the limits of each of them. We used the χ^2 , CFI (Bentler, 1990), TLI (Tucker & Lewis, 1973)—also known as NNFI (Bentler & Bonett, 1980)—and RMSEA (Steiger, 1990). For CFI and TLI, values higher than 0.90 were considered satisfactory, as indicated by Bentler (1990). As concerns RMSEA, we followed Browne (1990), who considers values lower than 0.08 as satisfactory and values lower than 0.05 as good.

The first model tested proved acceptable according to all the fit indexes: $\chi^2(30) = 41.70$, $p = .076$, CFI = .95, TLI = .93, RMSEA = .050 (90% CL = .001, .083). However some path was not significant. Thus, we tested the same model deleting these paths. This second model was satisfactory regarding all the fit indexes and all the parameters were statistically significant: $\chi^2(33) = 47.16$, $p = .052$, CFI = .95, TLI = .93, RMSEA = .052 (90% CL = .001, .083). Figure 1 shows the model in graphic form. We found the following influences to apply: (a) Fear of Crime is positively influenced by Authoritarian Aggression ($\beta=.37$) and by living in the small town ($\beta=.28$); (b) Concern about Crime is positively influenced by Authoritarian Aggression ($\beta=.45$) and by being a woman ($\beta=.16$); (c) Authoritarian Aggression is positively influenced by exposure to TV ($\beta=.31$) and political orientation ($\beta=.44$); (d) Educational level negatively influences the exposure to TV ($\beta=-.23$) whereas being a woman do it positively ($\beta=.20$).

The model explains 21% of the variance of Fear of Crime and 23% of Concern about Crime.

Discussion

Results partially confirmed our hypothesis. The study confirmed that, also in small local communities, psychological reactions to crime are influenced by variables of different nature. The strongest influences are the ones of authoritarian attitude, an ideological variable influenced by the political orientation. As expected that variable influenced both reactions to crime. The authoritarians perceive the world as a threatening place and easily feel they and their society are in danger (Altemeyer, 1996). The right-wing political orientation influenced authoritarian aggression but did not affect directly the psychological reactions to crime. That point is interesting because shows how the reactions to crime are influenced by the right-wing authoritarian attitude but are not direct effects of a right-wing political orientation.

Also the influence of the community of residence on Fear of Crime was confirmed. Consistently with previous literature (Perkins, Wandersman,

Rich, & Taylor, 1993; Kuo, Bacaicoa, & Sullivan, 1998; Miceli, Roccato, & Rosato, 2004) people living in the bigger community (the small town) feel themselves more unsafe. This is interpretable because of three concrete factors that differentiate the two communities. First, the crime rates are higher in the small town respect to the rural village. Second the presence of foreigners is higher in the small town. Third the greater social control and the stronger social networks present in the village could lower the fear for one's own safety. Other researchers suggested a strong inverse relationship between size of social networks and fear (Scarborough, Like-Haislip, Novak, Lucas, & Alarid, 2010).

Gender influenced Concern about Crime, this result is interpretable by the fact that women perceive themselves as more vulnerable to crime and this fact increases their worry about it. The gender did not influence Fear of Crime but this is not a new result, Amerio and Roccato (2005) using the same indicators used in this study had the same result.

Other results are unexpected. The age did not result linked to psychological reactions to crime, this is not so surprising because different researches pointed out different relationships among age and fear of crime. Some authors found higher level of fear among youths (Warr, 1995; Lane & Meeker, 2003), others among the senior citizens (Baba & Austin, 1989; Amerio & Roccato, 2005). In general the relation between Fear of Crime and age do not seem to be linear. Our sample was made by a majority of middle-aged persons so it is not strange that we did not find any relation between age and psychological reactions to crime.

A more surprising result concerns the role of mass media exposure in our model. We hypothesized the influence of mass media on authoritarian aggression and also on psychological reactions to crime but we had to modify the model assuming the influence only on authoritarian aggression, that in turn influence the reactions to crime. It seems that TV watching does not directly increase the perception of seriousness of crime problem but increases the perception of social disintegration and the need of more social order by means of a tougher administration of justice. It seems that political orientations and TV exposure contribute to build that particular view of the world as a threatening place that is the base of an authoritarian attitude and also of the worry about the crime.

Conclusions

It is interesting to note that also in small local communities, where people can have a more direct and precise perception of the environmental danger, the authoritarian attitude strongly influences the reactions to crime.

The two communities where the present study was conducted are quite safe places with low crime rates; it could be interesting to reply this research in community where the crime is a relevant problem to verify if also in this case ideological variables, like authoritarian attitude, are so relevant. In general the model we tested allowed us to explain a good proportion of variance of psychological reactions to crime, in any case we would like to reply the study increasing the number of predictors. For example considering more features of the local communities.

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