



Exploring Situational Fear of Crime

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Introduction¹

Fear of crime is a societal issue with real-life consequences. As such, fear of crime is a topic that has prompted intense discussion in the fields of politics, the media, and academia, not least in the Nordic countries (e.g. Heber, 2007). However, discussions of fear of crime most commonly relate to a rather vague conceptualisation of fear that focuses on individuals' unspecific and value-oriented thoughts about crime (for a discussion, see Farrall et al., 2009). While providing an important general overview of fear of crime within society, the current knowledge base thus lacks a perspective on the more concrete dimension of fear. There are important questions that remain largely unanswered regarding specific experiences or events of fear in our daily lives. More specifically, under what circumstances do we actually experience fear of crime, become worried about crime, or change our behaviours due to fear and worry about crime? And, why are similar circumstances perceived differently by different individuals with regard to their fear-generating properties? These questions are important because they focus on fear as it actually unfolds in our daily lives, and not merely in terms of a vague or general belief about crime.

However, the survey methods that have traditionally been used in fear of crime research are not able to capture many of the fear experiences that occur in the diverse situations that constitute our daily lives. A research project was therefore initiated with the aim of using alternative methodologies to start looking into this dimension of fear. A smartphone application (STUNDA) was developed in order to collect information about experiences of fear in real time, in real-life situations. Using a convenience sample of roughly 200 students, the project has proven two main points. First, fear of crime varies across different contexts in our daily lives, suggesting that fear appears to be a fairly dynamic phenomenon (Engström & Kronkvist, 2021). Second, it is both possible and feasible to employ alternative methodological approaches to study this dynamic form of fear of crime (Kronkvist & Engström, 2020).

This paper outlines the rationale for the project and explains why we need to complement the current knowledge base with a situational perspective in order to expand our understanding of fear of crime. In the future, a broadened understanding may also result in more accurate tools for successfully dealing

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with fear of crime. In the Nordic context, this could be relevant for public sector actors, such as the police, who in Sweden are under an obligation to work to reduce fear of crime. Overall, the main theme of the paper is centred on explaining the concept of situational fear of crime and highlighting the need to use novel approaches to collect empirical data on this phenomenon.

1. The Fear of Crime

1.1. *Affects, Cognitions and Behaviours*

Fear of crime is often used as an umbrella term that covers a wide range of different, more specific, phenomena that may be defined as reactions to and beliefs about crime. Jackson and Gouseti (2014) argue that fear of crime can be categorized across three broad dimensions. First, the affective dimension refers to emotional reactions or states, such as immediate physical reactions to threats and worry about victimisation more generally. Second, the cognitive dimension refers to risk evaluations and other dimensions that, for instance, relate to the potential perceived consequences of victimisation. Finally, the behavioural dimension consists of actions that individuals take as a result of fear of crime, such as protective behaviours and avoidance or the exercise of restraint in relation to various activities.

1.2. *Expressive and Experiential Fear of Crime*

There are additional complexities in fear of crime that need further consideration in order to disentangle various types of fear. One important distinction that is often overlooked is the difference between fear as a 'vague' general feeling and fear as a direct experience. Farrall and colleagues (2009) distinguish between the two, defining general beliefs or worries about becoming a victim of a crime as *expressive* fear of crime. Fear of crime as a direct experience is instead defined as *experiential* fear, which focuses on actual events or moments of fear. Here, fear of crime is treated as something more tangible: it happens in daily life rather than being a constant feeling.

More generally, this division of fear into expressive and experiential definitions reflects the notion of fear as a trait or a state (Gabriel & Greve, 2003). Fear as a trait might be defined as a more stable internal feeling, but also as a kind of individual disposition to experience frightening moments or states of fear. Stated simply, if you are generally more worried about victimisation, then you are also more likely to experience concrete events of worry. As Gabriel and Greve (2003) have noted, these two dimensions are likely to be interrelated to the extent that experiences of fear affect an individual's more general dispositional fear. However, treating states and traits as separate concepts is important, not least because concrete events or moments of fear may provide more useful information for policy makers and others involved in creating safe environments. In fact, it is difficult to expect policy makers



to make decisions on the basis of research focused on a more abstract and trait-like fear, which may not be strongly anchored in the real-life 'dangers' that society needs to tackle. Focusing on more concrete experiences of fear may instead reveal patterns in these experiences that point to relatively 'objective' types of circumstances that can be targeted with various forms of interventions. Crucially, however, these experiences are rarely studied, at least not using adequate methodologies that actually capture fear as an event or moment in our everyday lives.

1.3. *Surveying the Dynamics of Fear of Crime*

If fear can be experienced as an event that occurs in our daily lives, then the next relevant question is how these experiences can be examined. A common approach to studying fear of crime involves the use of surveys that aim to capture various aspects of fear during the past year, an approach that may provide important knowledge about more general or expressive aspects of fear. However, methodologies of this kind are subject to several limitations when it comes to examining experiential fear of crime as a phenomenon that varies across time and space. For instance, memory and aggregation biases make it difficult to provide reliable retrospective estimates of previous experiences of fear (e.g. Solymosi et al., 2015). It is also more difficult in general to retrieve memories of prior experiences without bias (e.g. Shiffman et al., 2008). Notably, there is also evidence of exaggeration in retrospective studies on fear of crime (Farrall et al., 2009).

Nevertheless, traditional surveys are based on an assumption that fear may result from experiences linked to certain moments or situations in everyday life. There is an item that is commonly used in large-scale fear of crime surveys (e.g. the Swedish Crime Survey) that refers to feelings of safety when walking alone in one's neighbourhood at night. This item clearly implies that there is a certain type of situation that may potentially be experienced as frightening. However, there are several other situations in our daily lives that it is also relevant to examine, and which are not covered by these traditional surveys. Further, the concept of 'situational fear of crime' needs to be elaborated further in order to understand how fear of crime unfolds in different situations for different individuals.

2. **Placing Fear in a Situational Framework**

2.1. *The Situation*

Within criminology, there has been a fairly wide range of research, based on different theoretical perspectives, that has directed a central focus at the significance of the situation. However, the definition of a situation, and consequently the situational perspective, has varied considerably across different theoretical approaches. In this paper, we depart from situational action



theory (SAT), which employs a definition that provides a general framework for understanding the properties of a situation (Wikström et al., 2012). Here, a situation consists of the interaction between individual characteristics and the features of environmental settings. SAT states that as an individual (with his/her level of crime propensity) interacts with the surrounding environment (i.e. the setting with its specific features), a situation unfolds in which a perception-choice process takes place. This process may in turn result in an act of rule breaking (e.g. a criminal offence) if such an act is perceived as a viable option and the individual then chooses to engage in the act.

While SAT is a theory of crime causation and not a theory of fear of crime, the notion of situations as the key to understanding how individual and environmental factors interact may nonetheless be transferrable to the realm of fear of crime. Stated simply, we would argue that understanding *situational fear of crime*, in line with the tenets of SAT, also requires us to focus on »kinds of people in kinds of settings« (Wikström, 2014: 84).

2.2. Defining Situational Fear of Crime

Situational fear of crime may be viewed as involving a specific focus on experiential fear of crime as it unfolds in situations in everyday life. *Why* and *how* fear is experienced in a given moment are questions that place fear of crime within a situational framework, similar to that employed in SAT. Individuals with their various characteristics interact with environmental settings with their varying features, and this creates opportunities for fear to occur. While situational fear can be of any kind (e.g. affective, cognitive or behavioural), what makes it unique is that it is hypothesised to be the result of a person-setting interaction that occurs in specific situations in our everyday lives (see Engström & Kronkvist, 2018).

Using the same terminology as SAT, a situational approach to fear of crime acknowledges that people vary in their individual predisposition, or propensity, to experience fear. Just like crime propensity, fear must to some extent be related to individual factors, because fear is not equally distributed among the population. Here, several individual factors may be of relevance, including psychological factors (e.g. personality traits), perceived vulnerability, and previous experiences (e.g. victimisation), to name a few. Similarly, settings are not identical; they provide different cues or opportunities for fear which make some settings more fear-generating than others (e.g. time, place, presence of others, etc.). At the same time, we must also consider that settings that are perceived as fear-inducing by most people may nonetheless be perceived as completely safe by a minority, which highlights the importance of the person-setting interaction; that is, how different settings are *interpreted* by different individuals.

While not all these theoretical aspects have been fully examined yet, some of the recent work conducted by our research project provides a number of



methodological and theoretical insights that further our understanding of fear of crime as a direct experience in our everyday lives.

3. STUNDA: One Step Closer to Situational Fear of Crime

The research project »STUNDA: Examining experiences of situational fear of crime through smartphone applications among young adults in Malmö« was launched as a first step towards an empirical examination of situational fear of crime. A smartphone application (STUNDA) was developed and distributed among a convenience sample of students in Malmö, Sweden (see Kronkvist & Engström, 2020). While the application includes a number of different surveys spanning different forms of fear of crime, the main tool for the purpose of specifically examining *situational* fear of crime takes the form of a signal-contingent survey. This survey is based on so-called experience methods, a term that refers to a set of methods in which data are collected in relation to experiences, as these unfold in everyday life, either in real time or in near retrospect (see e.g. Scollon et al., 2003). More specifically, the study participants received notifications in the smartphone application at random time points, which prompted them to respond to a short survey regarding the current moment. Features of settings were measured, including the type of place, the activity that the participant was involved in, the presence of other people, the geographical location, and the time. In addition, items measuring fear of crime in that particular moment were also employed. Individual characteristics were measured in less detail, but had been collected at the time participants enrolled in the study, in the form of demographic characteristics and measures of general or expressive fear. In sum, almost 200 participants downloaded STUNDA to their smartphones and responded to almost 1,300 signal-contingent surveys that provided detailed information on different situations (for full details regarding the data collection, see Kronkvist & Engström, 2020).

The analyses that have been carried out to date indicate that features of settings are related to fear of crime, perhaps most notably being in a non-home setting, and experiencing a setting during hours of darkness (Engström & Kronkvist, 2021). These results were found when controlling for individual factors, including a proxy measure of individual fear propensity. Thus, features of settings appear to be important to fear of crime, irrespective of individual factors. Nevertheless, individual fear propensity also exhibited a significant association with fear of crime, which indicates that individual factors still matter. It can thus more broadly be concluded that both individual characteristics *and* features of settings matter for fear of crime. While these findings must be interpreted with caution as a result of the convenience sample, it seems safe to conclude that there is some evidence in support of a situational perspective on fear of crime. More generally, the findings show that



fear of crime is a concrete and varying experience in people's lives and thus a separate phenomenon from more stable, vague or general beliefs about fear of crime (i.e. expressive fear of crime). This is a rudimentary finding, but is nonetheless very important, since it supports the underlying assumption of a situational perspective on fear of crime: that fear can be a fairly dynamic phenomenon.

On a methodological note, it should also be mentioned that the analyses conducted to date show that experiences of fear, as they occur in moments of everyday life, can be studied using a dedicated smartphone application (Kronkvist & Engström, 2020). It is thus possible to collect detailed situational data, which in turn offers possibilities to further analyse situational fear of crime.

3.1. *Future Directions*

While we have presented situational fear of crime as our key theoretical concept, it is important to state that this concept is still in its infancy, and further elaborations are likely to be required as further empirical tests are carried out. For instance, although the STUNDA project has so far provided important initial insights that are of value to an understanding of situational fear of crime, additional research is needed based on a more well-elaborated theoretical perspective, and with a focus on a situational *analysis* in which the interaction between individual characteristics and features of settings is examined. The principal outstanding issue that needs to be addressed before conducting such a full test of the main theoretical idea involves a much fuller exploration of the concept of fear propensity (i.e. identifying how this propensity is constituted). Thus, while features of settings were fairly well measured in the STUNDA project, future research is needed to identify and validate reliable measures of individual fear propensity.

Another important aspect for the future relates to the developmental side of situational fear of crime. A situational approach to fear need not necessarily explain *why* an individual has a given level of fear propensity, or *why* particular settings have fear-generating properties. However, these aspects are important in a broader theoretical sense, since they may be considered as referring to 'causes of the causes' of fear, as is argued in SAT in relation to crime causation (see Wikström, 2014). In other words, the developmental aspect of fear is not a matter of understanding what causes fear in a given situation but rather how individuals and settings develop in terms of fear propensity and fear-generating features. Clearly, in order to develop a more holistic picture, these developmental questions should be examined further in future research as a means of locating situational fear of crime in a broader context.

Finally, while there are a number of methodological pitfalls (see Kronkvist & Engström, 2020), it is important to continue with criminological research based on experience methods since they offer a possibility to come close to our everyday life experiences. In turn, within a not too distant future, such



research would enable a full analysis of the causes and characteristics of situational fear of crime.

4. Conclusion

The current paper has outlined a new take on fear of crime as a situational concept experienced in situations across everyday life, and provided suggestions on viable methods to empirically study this phenomenon. Drawing from the findings of a study using a convenience sample, the data do not allow for any far-reaching conclusions in terms of specific policy implications. However, the concept of situational fear of crime and the methods used for studying it are already now reasonable to highlight as being of potential future importance for criminal policy and practice. By using a novel methodological approach in which empirical data on fear of crime are collected in real-life situations, a more nuanced picture is possible where fear of crime is treated as a real-life experience. This alternative methodology may assist researchers, policy-makers and practitioners to distinguish between different forms of fear of crime, for instance between general expressions or beliefs about ongoing societal issues (e.g. gang-related violence) and actual situational experiences of worry about personal victimization. In turn, this approach offers a possibility to more accurately specify which aspects of fear that can be targeted with different fear-reduction strategies. We suggest that the situational aspect of fear is the main dimension of relevance for policy-makers and practitioners since it takes both the individual and the context into consideration, at the most concrete level (i.e. the situation).

Thus, a situational approach to fear of crime has clear practical implications. Fine-grained knowledge regarding the direct circumstances surrounding events which may be perceived as fearful or worrying, may prove to be vital in fear-reduction strategies. This knowledge includes a focus on both *individuals* with their respective levels of propensity to experience fear of crime, and a focus on *settings* with their fear-inducing qualities. The latter is perhaps the most tangible aspect of situational fear and thus of particular use when designing fear-reduction initiatives. Knowing where, when, and why fear and worry are experienced may provide useful answers on how to make urban environments safer.

Finally, while situational fear of crime is a general concept, the STUNDA project has been carried out in the Swedish context. The political and societal debate in Sweden is currently much directed at various themes related to crime and fear of crime, not least gang-related violence. However, given its significance in the societal debate and its potential role in justifying new (harsher) crime policies, it is striking that the concept of fear of crime is rarely defined or problematized outside of the academic sphere. Although it would be presumptuous to argue that the research conducted in the STUNDA project



could have a role to play in the current societal debate, it is our hope that at least a more nuanced and fine-grained picture of fear of crime may at some point find its place in the broader societal debate on crime and fear of crime. Without adequate knowledge about fear of crime as it is actually experienced in our everyday lives, it is difficult to find appropriate strategies to tackle this unfortunately widespread social issue.

Kontaktoplysninger

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