A Psychology of Social Order:

Public Attitudes to Crime and the Risk of Crime

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Abstract

This paper introduces the fear of crime to risk research, noting a number of fronts for future study to address theoretical under-specification in fear of crime work, encouraging inter-disciplinary enquiry into both the psychology and the cultural significance of risk. In this spirit, an emerging framework is documented that describes how people make sense of the risk of crime. It draws together social-psychological and sociological work on risk perception, emotion and environmental perception, examining the social meaning of crime, incivility and social order while incorporating processes of stereotyping and social identity. One key feature is a ‘psychology of social order’: how people conceive social order, what they see as hostile to that social order, and why crime comes to embody or exemplify such things. Another is the designatory function of such attitudes: to identify a person, a behaviour or environmental conditions as criminal (or criminogenic) is to place outside of respectable society, to demand censorious action and to regulate normative boundaries of social conduct.
This paper introduces public perceptions of crime to the risk literature, and sketches out a new framework for interdisciplinary research. The fear of crime is widely recognised as a pressing concern amongst many European citizens (Hale, 1996). Anxieties about crime have deleterious effects for the individual and for society by exacerbating the impact of crime and harming quality of life and community trust, cohesion and social control. Shift to a more abstract level and one finds the mark of public anxieties about social order. In the political climate, in areas such as asylum policy, the introduction of identity cards, and the detention of suspects of terrorism, public fears exert some subtle force on policy that balances security and liberty, calculating the need for authoritarianism to secure safety against the need for liberalism to secure freedom.

Public perceptions of crime also have a palpable influence on specific public policies. Anxieties about crime make themselves felt through public demands on the police and the Government of the day to manage crime and its concomitant causes and effects. Clamour for more ‘bobbies on the beat’; increasing calls for the Government to tackle anti-social behaviour; the seeming refusal of many people to believe that crime rates are actually falling – all these evidence the influence of public perceptions of risk. And Governments respond: witness popular punitive Law and Order sloganeering, police strategies of reassurance, and the policing of incivilities and ‘signal crimes’ (Innes, 2004). Indeed, public perceptions of risk have encouraged the police to focus on reassurance, sometimes at the expense of the management of crime; reassurance policing could be seen as a distortion of priorities away from actual risk reduction (cf. Eiser, 2004).

This topic is thus a fascinating field of enquiry. But more than this, it speaks to basic ideas in the social sciences. In sociology, public attitudes toward crime speak to fundamental sociological problems but with a twist – public perceptions of deviance, social order, control and capital. And in psychology and social psychology, public perceptions of the risk of crime raises issues of cognition, emotion and threat appraisal, of representations of individuals, groups and communities, and of attitudes to community conditions that bind social life and cohesion.

So far so good: this is an important issue; it is intellectually exciting; it straddles disciplines, touching on important problems in each. Yet the field of enquiry at the heart of these issues is the fear of crime, and herein lies the rub. Even a cursory survey of the criminological literature reveals a body of knowledge that lacks theoretical specification and sophistication. Criminology has struggled to capture exactly what the concept entails. It has failed to elucidate process explanations of the psychology of risk and it has lacked a serious consideration of cultural factors. The lack of concerted input from sociology and psychology is striking. But one opportunity is the relatively independent development of the fear of crime literature to work on risk perception. Cross-disciplinary contributions are found in their parallel interests in the emotional and cognitive features of threat appraisal, and in the social meaning and amplification of risk. Yet few crossovers have emerged, despite the benefits to both fields of enquiry.

This paper consequently tries to persuade the reader that the fear of crime is a good topic for risk perception research, encouraging crossover contributions to improve theoretical resources in fear of crime work. But moreover, the paper argues that many of the key themes within fear of crime research that need developing are exactly those areas within risk perception: the role of emotion in the psychology of risk and cultural factors in risk (Taylor-Gooby, 2004, p. 15). Future inter-disciplinary work will thus benefit both fields. An emerging perspective is then outlined that coheres around the idea of a ‘psychology of social order’, bringing together concepts from sociology, social psychology and risk perception. The paper thus identifies a wealth of promising avenues for collaboration within this new framework.

Let us begin with an analysis of the concept of fear of crime – a consideration of the political and social context that has shaped its emergence and trajectory. This idea was borne out of turbulent times. The issue of crime gathered social meaning in the public imagination against the backdrop of social change, drawing out perceptions of social order and moral consensus, and whatever people see as damaging cherished aspects of social organisation. Yet fear of crime
research was motivated by political will to identify and respond to such perceptions, and the following section argues that it has served a narrow remit, following a dynamic that will be familiar to many risk researchers.

**The fear of crime: the career of a concept and its political context**

Public anxieties about crime are not unique to modern times. For Pearson (1983), many generations have had their ‘respectable fears’, about social groups and behaviours but particularly about young people and youth subcultures seen as delinquent and criminal. Each generation believes itself uniquely threatened, yet such respectable fears commonly express anxieties about a society whose secure, stable moral centre is seen to be under threat. Bound up in such fears is the expression of more inchoate anxieties about the direction and character of social change – the nature of those at the edge of society and what they say about the national character and trajectory. Today the most frightening figure might be the ‘feral’ underclass best typified by the hooded teenager: uncontrollable, with nothing to lose and no commitment to community, lacking in the norms, values and morals that underpin cooperation and mutual obligation.

Societies create their own characteristic forms of deviance and criminality. One need not to be reminded that a particular behaviour becomes labelled as criminal according to formally codified legal rules and normatively prescribed codes, and this occurs according to an array of complex social, institutional and cultural processes. At different times, and in different places, some crimes have represented greater threats to individuals, communities, and societies than others. In the UK, towards the end of the 1970s, Hall *et al.* (1978) identified a ‘moral panic’ over young, black, male muggers. Mugging, they argued, had become a vivid metaphor for the perceived breakdown of order and cohesion, of declining stability and standards of living; moreover, this issue had become racial, a touchstone to tensions amongst the white population.

Public anxieties about crime thus have a long history. Yet the contemporary label ‘fear of crime’ was born out of the early US crime surveys of the 1960s, emerging as an object of social scientific investigation against a backdrop of increasing governmental interest in ‘Law and Order’ (cf. Lee, 1999; 2001), and a State in the throes of becoming ever-more a ‘knowledge society’ (see Melanson, 1973; Lee, 2001), collecting increasing amounts of information about its citizens. With the growing sophistication of statistical collection and analysis, and the political will to understand and intervene in the lives of its population, crime surveys documented with greater accuracy than recorded police figures the prevalence of crime. At the same time, these surveys took a temperature reading on public feeling about crime.

And feelings were high. President John F. Kennedy was assassinated in 1963, riots flared up in twenty inner-city ghettos in the mid-1960s, the issue of civil rights boiled over in numerous arenas; race, disorder and unrest had become national anxieties. The 1967 President’s Crime Commission on Law Enforcement and the Administration of Justice, which commissioned some of these first crime surveys, located White anxieties about crime within this context (Stanko, 2000). The surveys assessed the prevalence and distribution of anxieties about crime, and examined the correlation to crime rates themselves, finding high levels that did not match statistical estimates of risk. Looking beyond the prevalence of fear and its relationship to crime: to make sense of high levels of public feeling, one of the reports of these pilot studies sought to locate anxieties in their social and moral context.

‘Perceptions of changes in the prevalence of crime can be expected to evoke particularly intense public reactions in that these can be taken as signs of threats to the fundamental moral order.’ (Biderman *et al.* 1967)

Since these early beginnings, crime surveys have migrated across the world; fear of crime has become an important policy issue in and of itself in many countries. So significant is the issue to UK public policy for example, that the Dept. of Transport, Local Government and the Regions
DTLR) requested local authorities with a community safety remit to ask residents about their fear of crime in the period 2002/03. These questions are to be asked every three years so fluctuations in the fear of crime can be monitored (DTLR, 2002, Chapter 11 and Annex A). In the UK the fear of crime has gone from a small and highly specialised topic of research to a Best Value Performance Indicator. The reduction of such feelings also forms a key aspect of interventions such as the National Reassurance Policing Programme and safer neighbourhood programmes.

The crime survey; a particular paradigm of research; scholarly activity motivated by narrow political questions regarding the prevalence of fear, its relationship to crime, and the implications for the criminal justice system – all this dominated the tone and tenor of UK criminological work and policy debate for much of the 1980s and early 1990s. Studies focused on the relationship between ‘objective’ and ‘subjective’ risk, examining who feels unsafe walking alone after dark, or worried about falling victim of a range of crimes, then estimating socio-economic correlates, alongside victimisation experience and perceptions of community conditions, such as incivilities like young people hanging around in the street, graffiti and litter. Public opinion was contrasted with expert assessments of risk, and public fears were deemed out of proportion to statistically estimated risk, then they were thought to be misplaced and irrational. Partially an artefact of method that enumerated fear and statistically estimated risk – one could look at so-called ‘disparities’ between these estimates – the debate attained a level of polemic because there were real political points to be made and agendas to be played out. It was a question around which criminological and political positions solidified. It was an issue that could be interpreted in divergent ways to serve different agendas.

But why was crime salient to people? Why were people anxious? For Garland (2001), the 1970s and 1980s saw crime move from a problem that afflicted the poor to increasingly become a daily consideration for many. Liberal sensibilities about the seriousness of crime as a problem were dented as victimisation became a prominent fact for the middle-classes. Increasing direct and indirect experience, mass media raising the salience of crime and ‘institutionalising’ public concern, and the growing visibility of signs of crime—in the form of physical incivilities, such as vandalism, and social incivilities, such as groups of intimidating youths hanging around in the street—all helped to bring crime and the risk of victimisation into people’s everyday lives. As Garland (ibid.: 153) puts it, ‘rising crime rates ceased to be a statistical abstraction and took on a vivid personal meaning in popular consciousness and individual psychology.’

Garland (ibid.: 154) continues: ‘. . . diffuse middle-class anxieties [became shaped] into a more focused set of attitudes and understandings, identifying the culprits, naming the problem, setting up scapegoats.’ Events such as the urban riots of the early 1980s (alongside media reports and commentary) transformed crime as a major issue, linked it to questions of race and class, and fixed it as a target for more diffuse anxieties about social change. In particular, images of the excluded and disaffected young males of the inner city became resonant as the perception grew of them ‘as a newly dangerous, alien class’ (ibid.: 154). The issue of crime reflected and refracted other social issues, problems and social changes – public anxieties about an increasingly atomised society, loosening and diversity of morals and values, a sense that the culture and character of England was under threat (cf. Pearson, 1983).

Such an explanation is plausible, focusing as it does on the social meaning of crime that gathered during the 1970s and 1980s, analysing how cultural significance connects to public attitudes and concerns about social change and social relations. It opens up a window to why crime might have gained the popular salience it had – why people link groups, behaviours, environments and community conditions to crime, and therefore why people associate risk to the things they perceive around them. Yet the remit of the fear of crime work in the 1980s and early 1990s remained narrow. It was politically motivated, focusing on the comparison between fear and risk, on who was afraid (measured using crude indicators) and who should be afraid.
Why this political charge? One answer is in the real increase in expenditure on the criminal justice system and crime control in the 1980s. ‘... [The] emotional temperature of policy-making had shifted from cool to hot... the new discourse of crime policy consistently invokes an angry public, tired of living in fear, demanding strong measures of punishment and protection.’ (Garland, ibid.: 11). Along with a greater concentration on the victim, the empirical ‘discovery’ of fear of crime was invoked to support ‘tougher’ neo-conservative political agendas and policies, exemplified by the vast increase in the funding of the criminal justice system (Lee, 1999). At the same time, those who wished crime policy to be less authoritarian sought to downplay public anxieties, arguing that policy should not be based on inaccurate public perceptions. The late 1980’s saw a growing conviction within the police force and the liberal middle-classes that public fears were exaggerated, inflamed by the mass media, and a mismatch to the actual threat of serious victimisation (Jackson, 2004a). The Home Office report of the Working Group on the Fear of Crime (Home Office, 1989), or Grade Report, was influential in this respect. It took for granted that fear of crime was an issue partly independent of crime, concluding that the media (and interestingly some crime prevention strategies) significantly fuel public concern that often becomes out of proportion to statistically estimated risk.

It was only until the early 1990s that criminologists began to tire of the rationality debate, critically examining the logic of comparing statistically estimated risk to public attitudes and fears. Sparks (1992a, 1992b) argued that to insist on a real and rational basis for fears is to wield ‘some blunt theoretical instruments’—it is ‘simply to invert the logic of the moral panic thesis rather than to correct it’ (ibid.: 122). The critical question is, when and under what circumstances is it rational to be afraid? To describe fear as rational because it is ‘wholly accounted for an antecedent level of objective risk’ (ibid.: 123) begs the question, what are the criteria for proportionality (cf. Reiner, 1988)? To decide the basis of when a fear is ‘wholly accounted for’ involves moral and political choices. But more than this, the approach presupposes a theory of risk perception that assumes that people go about their lives actuarially estimating the likelihood of victimisation. The risk of victimisation experience should really be seen as a product of uncertainty: ‘the resources available to us in making the necessary judgements are both enormously extensive, varied, complex and inherently incomplete’ (ibid.: 132). We have partial information and a range of experiences and beliefs, all of which render some situations, people and places threatening, unsafe or dangerous.

‘If we are afraid of a thing we must first have an image or representation of it (cf. Cohen, 1981). Why then should it not be the case that the fears which preoccupy us most would not be those which are most likely to come to pass? Rather they are likely to be the most representationally powerful fears – fears which attach to our sense of identity, security and potency in the world and which therefore affect us as whole social beings and not as the risk-accounting ciphers of crude rational choice theories’

(Sparks, 1992a: 133).

There was also a change of emphasis in the 1990s policy arena, with a movement away from denigrating people’s fears as misplaced and irrational. Anxieties about crime become part and parcel of what police and other agencies needed to deal with, alongside crime itself. The Crime and Disorder Act 1998 formulated the concept of ‘community safety’, giving local authorities and the police joint statutory responsibility. Local agencies were now responsible for carrying out ‘audits’ of community safety in their local area, including measurement of fear of crime and some evaluation of the effect of strategies.

‘Fear of crime can often be more debilitating than crime itself. It can prevent people from leading normal lives, and distort their perceptions as to the safety of
the communities in which they live. There is a clear expectation on the part of
the Government that the strategies should address fear of crime and disorder, as
well as actual levels thereof.’

(Home Office, 1998, section 1.47, original emphasis)

Government was no longer denigrating public perceptions of risk. The policy focus on
fear of crime as a legitimate problem produced a conviction that public perceptions of risk were
more a response to lower-level disorder, anti-social behaviour and low social cohesion than
anything else.

Such thinking has led to a widely held belief among policy makers that reducing anti-
social behaviour and visible signs of disorder can ‘decrease public fear of crime, increase public
confidence in the police, and reduce incidence of more serious crime’ (Bland and Read, 2000,
p.1). Central elements of the Crime and Disorder Act aimed to improve the ability of multi-
agencies to address anti-social behaviour, particularly relating to young people. These include a
number of orders: child safety, anti-social behaviour, and parenting. They also include provisions
for local child curfews and powers for the police to remove truants. The police currently place a
high priority on tackling what are sometimes called ‘quality of life’ issues. As Bland and Read
application of methods to tackle them are high priorities for the police and partner agencies.’
Such an emphasis on reassurance is also seen in increasing police visibility tactics.

Serious doubts remain however, about the clarity of the concept of fear of crime, and
about how it is measured (Garofalo, 1979; Ferraro and LaGrange, 1987; van der Wurff et al.,
is as if the focus on rationality burned up the energy of criminologists. When the rug was taken
away from the debate, interest waned. This has left a distinct lack of theoretical resources.
Notable by its absence (until relatively recently) is psychological theory on emotion, cognition
and behaviour that comprise the phenomenon. The next section identifies outstanding dilemmas,
documenting how risk perception work might contribute.

So, what is the fear of crime?
Is crime different to any other risk? Perhaps a little: upon reflection it seems more everyday than
some risks, more rooted in a social context, seeping into perceptions of people, behaviour and
communities, motivating emotions, cognitions and behaviours regarding security, safety and
possibility in routine spheres of life. But the debates surrounding crime and the fear of crime have
had a similar trajectory to those regarding other risks, centring on the mismatch between expert
and public perceptions of risk. Another striking similarity, as mentioned at the beginning of this
paper, is that both need developing along the same two lines: psychology of risk and cultural
factors. This section analyses the component parts of ‘fear’ and ‘crime’, identifying current
thinking, noting outstanding dilemmas. It also draws out how fear of crime and risk research can
cross-contribute, applying existing ideas from one to the other, noting ideas for future
collaborative work.

Considering ‘fear’: emotion and the psychology of risk
Many emotions may arise when thinking about crime and the idea that one may fall victim. One
may feel sad or anxious about the health of one’s community and society, worried about the
morals and values of particular individuals and groups – unsettled by a sense of disorder and
‘lawlessness’. One may feel indignant or outraged about the prevalence of crime, angry that
others might make one feel unsafe and intrude on one’s way of life. And one may feel worried or
afraid of the immediate prospect of victimisation, anxious about one’s safety. Some emotions will
be fluid and transient, felt at particular times and in specific situations (see Farrall, 2004); others
may be more diffuse yet more constant, persistent over time, resistant to location in time and space (see Hough, 2004).

It matters which emotion we are talking about when we consider ‘fear’. Topline findings regaled by the media give the impression that significant numbers regularly feel fearful of becoming a victim of crime. Yet this may be an emotional representation of reality, encouraged by crude measures and naïve and maybe even mischievous interpretation (Farrall et al. 1997; Farrall & Gadd, 2004; Jackson et al., in press). However, people may only very occasionally find themselves in physically dangerous situations. Rather, responses such as anxiety or worry may be more common. Moreover, the frequency of even these feelings may be relatively low (Farrall & Gadd, 2004; Jackson et al., in press), more akin to an awareness of risk or thoughts about the possibility.

A key task for criminology – and for risk research – is to examine explanatory processes underpinning emotional responses to risk. The fear of crime literature is finally beginning to approach convincing psychological perspectives, although much is currently speculative. One rather obvious place to start is the cognitive appraisal of the meaning of the threat of crime. Emotion almost always has a significant or functional cognitive component (Mathews & MacLeod, 1994). Even an emotion like fear – an automatic and non-conscious physical response to an immediate threat in the environment (LeDoux, 1991, 1995) – is open to cognitive explanation: it requires perceptions of the threat involving automatic and non-conscious processes. For more complex emotions like worry, extensive higher level processing will be involved (Johnson & Multhaup, 1992).

The risk perception feature that has received most attention within the criminological research literature is personal estimation of likelihood. Ferraro (1995) found that perceptions of the likelihood of falling victim were an important factor associated with fear, mediating most of the impact of environmental perceptions of the symbols that a person associates with crime. Key to a risk perception approach is a recognition of the variety of ways in which people generate the sense that their property or themselves could be targeted; a focus on ‘the anticipatory rather than the reactive nature of fear and worry . . . [places the] analytic emphasis upon an understanding of the ways in which some people (and not others) acquire a sense of susceptibility’ (Sacco and Glackman, p. 101, 1987).

Another key aspect to any psychology of risk is thus an individual sense of the actual impact of falling victim. For Warr (1984, 1985 and 1987), differential perceptions of the consequences of victimisation constitute a sensitivity to risk. Such perceptions of the seriousness of offences combined with subjective probabilities of its occurrence to strongly predict fear (Warr, 1990). As such: ‘. . . circumstances or events that appear innocuous or comparatively minor to males or younger persons are apt to be viewed as more dangerous to females and the elderly because of the offences they imply or portend’ (Warr, 1994, p. 19). The heterogeneity of different types of crime – with regard to ‘relevance, explanation and consequences’ (Gabriel and Greve, 2003, p. 6) – may mean that the same crime could have a different anticipated resonance or impact from one individual to the next. For example, one person may associate burglary with the risk of physical or sexual assault; another person may associate burglary with the loss of material goods and a great deal of inconvenience. Ferraro (1995, p. 87) argues that sexual harassment: ‘. . . may shadow other types of victimization among women. Rape may operate like any other master offence among women, especially younger women who have the highest rate of rape, heightening fear reactions for other forms of crime.’

There is also emerging evidence that perceptions of the severity of the consequences of victimisation affect estimates of the likelihood of the event (Jackson, 2004b). The availability heuristic predicts that the subjective assessment of probabilities is affected by the speed and ease with which it is recalled or imagined (Tversky and Kahneman, 1973). Furthermore, psychological research suggests that the catastrophic nature of an event looms larger than any sense of its probability (Kahneman and Tversky, 1979; for a review see Jackson et al., 2004): associating a
crime with particularly devastating consequences may be enough to make one worried even without thinking it is terribly likely to occur.

Another concept at the heart of cognitive features of risk perceptions is a sense of control over the risk. Jackson (2004b) found feelings of control were associated with worry about crime as well as perceptions of the likelihood of falling victim. And intriguingly, the sphere of control might be broadened to include a sense of efficacy over the environment. An environment seen to be unpredictable, unfamiliar and beyond the control of oneself or one’s community may generate a sense of disquiet and an instinctive need to scan the environment for signs of trouble – a sense that ‘…anything could happen.’ Tulloch (2003) uses qualitative methods to show that her ‘…participants deploy discursively constructs of locus of control and self-efficacy that are more commonly identified through psychometric measurement’ (p.475). Mirroring Carvalho & Lewis (2003), Tulloch (p.475) argues those who were fearful saw themselves at the ‘mercy of powerful others (criminal gangs, predatory males, armed gunmen, paedophiles, etc.) and chance (through the random lottery-like nature of attacks).’ In contrast, the unfearful individual felt protected, claiming high levels of control over their environment, feeling that others were not aggressively dominating public space.

One study has tried to draw together some of these features in one framework, developing Ferraro’s ideas (1995) from a psychological perspective (Jackson, 2004b). In this model, worry about personal crime in public space is defined as both an emotional evaluation of an immediate situation, interpreting cues in the environment that signify a sense of possibility and threat (a mental event), and a mental state, a concern about potential danger, of imminent and distal threat or events yet to transpire – a chain of thoughts and images about an unpleasant and uncertain outcome (Borkovec et al, 1983; Macleod et al, 1991). Jackson (2004b) found that the frequency of worry about personal crime was shaped by an appraisal of threat comprising perceptions of likelihood, control and consequences. Inferences about victimisation risk were shaped by beliefs about crime incidence, and both were largely a product of interpretations of the physical and social environment. Worry can subsequently stimulate a preoccupation with negative information and future unpleasant outcomes, increasing the scanning of the environment for salient material relating to threat (Mathews, 1990), making ambiguous events more threatening (Butler and Mathews, 1983, 1987; Russell and Davey, 1993). People who worry about crime may see threat more readily, echoing Gabriel and Greve’s (2003) argument that dispositions to interpret situations as threatening result in specific occurrences of fear.

Defining the fear of crime this way has implications for study and debate. Approaching the phenomena as a set of related constructs, not just as ‘worry’ about crime, emphasises the complex and subjective nature of this phenomenon. Feeling vulnerable – feeling unable to control falling victim and feeling that consequences would be severe – is formulated as one reason why people worry. We should think hard about whether we really feel able to judge whether such individuals are worrying needlessly, when one of the reasons they worry is that they feel unable to manage the risk and its effects.

Emotion, cognition and the psychology of risk
The model just described also has implications for the nature and upkeep of emotion and cognition regarding the risk of crime. Feedback may occur, whereby emotion directs and strengthens cognition regarding the nature of crime and its specific threat. In a heightened emotional state, one might more quickly see risk in ambiguity and associate people, situations and environments more readily with crime. Emotions can create and shape beliefs, amplifying or altering them and making them resistant to change (Frijda, Manstead and Bem, 2000). Emotions may provide information and guide attention, just as beliefs backed up by emotion direct attention towards belief-relevant information (Clore and Gasper, 2000).

In this spirit, future work on the psychology of risk – bringing in concepts from risk research – might develop our understanding of the interplay of emotion and cognition.
Particularly important may be the distinction between two modes of information processing. On the one hand is a formal, logical and numeric style of reasoning; on the other, a type of thinking that Epstein (1994: 710) calls ‘intuitive, automatic, natural, non-verbal, narrative, and experiential’. For Slovic, Finucane, Peters and MacGregor (2002), this second system, which they term ‘experiential’, is affect-laden rather than formally logical like the ‘analytic system’. It involves more rapid processing and the encoding of reality in images and metaphors rather than abstract symbols and numbers. And as Sloman (1996) suggests in an influential article, such associative processing probably operates by using more rapid pathways based on context and similarity rather than the conscious use of logic and evidence.

Paul Slovic has termed the role of emotion in risk perception the ‘affect heuristic’ (e.g. Slovic, Finucane, Peters and MacGregor, 2002). A stimulus can evoke images that have affective and cognitive dimensions. When a representation becomes tagged with affect, giving it a good or bad quality, the overall affective impression can be more influential than more cognitive assessments. Furthermore, the affect heuristic, or short-cut, may shape numeric assessments of risk and benefit. Readily available images of GM food that are tagged with ‘badness’, for example, are more likely to increase judgements of riskiness and decrease the perceived level of benefit (Finucane, Alhakami, Slovic and Johnson, 2000). Similarly, a more immediate sense of danger shapes attention and increases likely threat assessment (Armony, Servan-Schreiber, Cohen and LeDoux, 1997).

Strong emotions may have a greater impact. Borkovec (1994, p. 29) argues that long-term worrying can inhibit emotional processing and maintain ‘anxious meanings’, or negative thoughts and images. Worriers can be preoccupied with negative information and future unpleasant outcomes, hyper-vigilant in scanning for salient material relating to threat (Mathews, 1990), see ambiguous events as threatening (Butler and Mathews, 1983, 1987, Russell and Davey, 1993), and over-estimate risk (Butler and Mathews, 1983, 1987, MacLeod, Williams and Beckerian, 1991, Vasey and Borkovec, 1993).

So, feelings about a risk object seem to infuse more formal and numeric appraisals. But the two systems can also diverge. Affective reactions may also be shaped by different things, and may arise without cognitive mediation (Loewenstein, Weber, Hsee and Welch, 2001). It is worth replicating their ‘risk as feeling’ model (figure 2).

Figure 2: Risk as feeling model (from Loewenstein, Weber, Hsee and Welch, 2001)

According to this model, cognitive evaluations tend to be composed of assessments of likelihood and cost, but emotional reactions also constitute factors such as the vividness with
which consequences can be imagined, mood and prior experience with the event. Emotions can then directly influence judgement or behaviour. Furthermore, when cognition and affect diverge there is a tendency for feelings to hold sway; our evolutionary makeup strongly influences fear responses and threat appraisal.

**Considering ‘crime’**

*The vividness of risk*

Next to the targets of these thoughts, feelings and behaviours: ‘crime’. What is being perceived, evaluated and responded to here? There are many types of criminal victimisation: property crimes; personal crimes in public space by strangers; personal crime in private space by intimates – to name but a few. And the prospect of falling victim of each is likely to have a different resonance from one person to the next. People may also not make sharp distinctions between crimes with different legal statuses but nevertheless seen to be similar: for example, the possibility of being harassed or threatened in the street may be lumped together with being mugged and being physically attacked by a stranger – a sense that someone with hostile intentions might intrude on one’s personal space in a public area.

‘Crime’ is likely to involve the representation of that event, an image or narrative of how it would proceed, and emotional responses to such images. Feelings are likely to involve ‘…thoughts with themes with the emotion; and a mode of thinking, a style of mental processing, which [increase] the speed of image generation and make images more abundant’ (Damasio, 2003, p. 84) – an appraisal of the object, the generation of more and more images of the event, its situations, its character and its effect. The greater the vividness and sense of impact, the greater the potential emotional response, because these emotions over time may generate more and more structured and vivid images. Cognitive heuristics thus come into play. For example, judgements based on availability, where the risk of crime engenders vivid images that are easy to retrieve, would elevate estimates of the probability of that event occurring. Mass media reporting of just one particularly dramatic and resonant episode might have extensive consequences for public assessments of threat.

Someone may thus say they are worried about being attacked in the street because they can easily bring to mind an image of themselves being targeted and victimised in this way, an event that they feel vulnerable towards. They may feel that becoming a victim of street-crime would involve significant costs, despite the relatively trivial nature of most crimes. Similarly, one individual may imagine that being burgled would involve serious material, physical and psychological effects; another may feel that the consequences would be comparatively manageable. As Loewenstein et al. (2001) argue, the vividness of risk shapes emotional response to risk, and such responses often outweigh any divergent cognitive responses. Moreover, a feedback system might mean someone already emotionally animated by risk somehow builds a more extensive and vivid image of the risk event, fleshing out effects, protagonist and relevant causes and circumstances. This might then make the risk more substantial, structured and relevant to that individual.

*Learning about risk*

But where do people get a sense of the incidence and nature of crime in society and their neighbourhood. Where do images of risk come from, whether they involve the extent of crime, or the criminals, the victims, the events and their consequences? Despite an abundant literature on media effects – particularly the ‘mean world’ hypothesis – little work has been done into how representations, imagery and symbols of crime circulate in society, transmitted and transformed by multiple actors with a wide array of effects. It is important to take account of the transmission mechanisms through which representations, beliefs and attitudes about societal risks are propagated in different social and cultural contexts. Social meaning plausibly infuses appraisals of a perceived threat or an uncertain event, and places risk objects within a cultural context.
One promising route is to take advantage of the loose but inclusive set of concepts organised by the Social Amplification of Risk Framework. This was proposed in the late 1980s (Kasperson et al., 1988) partly to integrate aspects of the psychometric and cultural theory paradigms, and work is continuing. For Pidgeon, Kasperson and Slovic (2003, p. 2),

... [it] aims to examine broadly, and in social and historical context, how risk and risk events interact with psychology, social, institutional, and cultural processes in ways that amplify and attenuate risk perceptions and concerns, and thereby shape risk behavior, influence institutional processes, and affect risk consequences.

Kasperson, Kasperson, Pidgeon and Slovic (2003, p. 15) describe SARF thus, and it is difficult to improve their summary:

... as a key part of [the] communication process, risk, risks events, and the characteristics of both become portrayed through various risk signals (images, signs, and symbols), which in turn interact with a wide range of psychological, social, institutional, or cultural processes in ways that intensify or attenuate perceptions of risk and its manageability ... The experience of risk therefore is not only an experience of physical harm but the result of processes by which groups and individuals learn to acquire or create interpretations of risk. These interpretations provide rules of how to select, order, and explain signals emanating from the physical world (Renn, Burns, Kasperson et al. 1993, p. 140). With this framework, risk experience can be properly assessed only through the interaction among the physical harms attached to a risk event and the social and cultural processes that shape interpretations of that event, secondary and tertiary consequences that emerge, and the actions taken by managers and publics.

The goal then, is to understand why some hazards and events come to be of social and political relevance, even while experts judge them to be relatively unimportant (risk amplification). Conversely, why do other events (to experts, more serious) induce comparatively low levels of concern and activity (risk attenuation)?

Perhaps the greatest strength of SARF is its attention to processes of communication. The framework states that risk signals are received, interpreted and passed on at a series of 'amplifier' stations and diffused through different channels. While the media are primary amplifiers, stations can also include individuals, groups and organisations such as activist groups of government agencies, driven by their interests and functions. The results are signals that are increased or decreased in intensity and transformed in their cultural content.

Representations of risk and the mass media: framing and anchoring
It seems plausible to suggest that people will seek out risk information if they are already emotionally or cognitively engaged with the topic. And they are more likely to build a vivid image of the event, to personalise it, to think over the consequences, and to interpret ambiguity in threatening ways. If someone is emotionally animated by the risk of crime, they may attend to information about crime – to read newspaper articles about lurid and dramatic crimes of violence, or to watch TV programmes such as Crime Watch.

Let us consider, then, the role of the mass media in risk communication. To mix metaphors slightly, Murdock, Petts and Horlick-Jones (2003; but see also Petts, Horlick-Jones and Murdock, 2001) remind us that the media are not a single black box and that messages are not magic bullets. Rather, a plural set of media can amplify or attenuate risks if they resonate with public feelings and mood – if the symbols and representations deployed capture existing public concerns and frames of reference. Furthermore, many consumers are sophisticated readers of
multiple media messages. They understand hype and drama. Laypersons try to make sense of things by ‘integrating the media’s diverse and divergent arguments and anchors with their own interpretative grids underpinned by direct and local knowledge, experience and formal education’ (Petts et al. 2001.).

The mass media are important agenda-setters and providers of information though, especially when the public has little direct experience of an issue. A key concept here is framing. Issues are more likely to receive media attention if they can be easily integrated into a narrative that motivates interlinked processes: (a) connecting; (b) contextualising; and, (c) anchoring. In the first, links are made between new events and already familiar instances and narratives, providing a readily available frame in which to understand novel phenomena. In the second, links are made to more abstract but still resonant contemporary issues; in the third, the imagery and connotations of an event are placed within popular anxieties and fears.

In this type of account, symbols are important in shaping and reproducing the social meanings attached to risks. One interpretive account of lay perceptions can be found in Horlick-Jones, Sime and Pidgeon (2003). They are interested in the ‘thick descriptions’ (Geertz, 1973) that communicate, for them, so much of the meaning and interpretation present in how people make sense of risk. For example, a risk issue might stimulate a set of concerns and debates quite apart from a narrowly conceived idea of the risk object itself. This is because the issue might involve a set of ‘symbolic tangles’ (Horlick-Jones, Sime and Pidgeon, 2003, p. 284).

Wiedemann, Clauberg and Schutz (2003) offer a similar approach, but this time stressing the narrative structure. They argue that experts see risks as chains of cause-and-effect, and are interested in the nature of the hazard, the dose needed to induce harm, the exposure of that dosage, and the extent of the potential damage caused. By contrast, laypersons see risks ‘primarily in a social and relationship-oriented context . . . based on common patterns for interpreting events, which are heavily influenced by the media, such as scandal stories, investigative exposes, tragedies, and disaster reports’ (ibid., p. 289). At the heart of such narratives is a range of regularities, they argue. These include: the designation of heroes and villains to actors; the assignation of intentions and motives; dramatizing the conflict by filling out a logic to its build-up; drawing out a moral of the study, particularly around the consequences; and, bringing in other instances that strengthen and clarify the ‘moral of the story’.

Using the notion of ‘risk signatures’, Petts, Horlick-Jones and Murdock (2001) show how patterns of talk and structures of accounts are at the heart of lay interpretations of a risk. These draw upon both the interpretative work of individuals and the information and imagery received from the mass media and direct experience. A risk signature can be more or less grounded in everyday experience, and the more they are grounded, the more they are seen as a personal and credible threat. But they also see trust to be a key underpinning of a particular risk signature. Not only does a lack of trust raise issues of vested interests, but a lack of trust also creates discord between the values and interpretive practices of the public and the information they receive from the mass media, government and industry.

Day-to-day perceptions of crime risk: not ‘crime’ but ‘social order’?
So far we have considered the psychology of risk and ways in which representations of crime and risk circulate in society. Another way of conceptualising ‘crime’ moves the focus to day-to-day features of the environment that stimulate fear, to the visceral sense of being in a situation that one finds unsettling and threatening. This analysis also broadens out fear of ‘crime’ to be fear of those ‘symbols associated with crime’ (Ferraro, 1995; Jackson, 2004b; Innes, 2004).

Risk perceptions may be shaped by the presence of signifiers (Hale, 1996). We may feel uneasy at certain times of the day, alone, or in certain locations which feel unfamiliar and unpredictable, or in the presence of certain types of people who we seem anti-social and threatening. Signs of the violation of norms of behaviour and symbols of the lack of informal social controls seem to generate the sense that the social order is in flux. As Goffman (1971)
describes: ‘...the minor incivilities of everyday life can function as an early warning system; conventional courtesies are seen as mere convention, but non-performance can cause alarm.’ Threat can be signalled by the presence of certain persons who act counter to the ‘minor civilities of every day life’, who are behaving in ways that are ‘improper or appear out of place’. Conventional courtesies work to generate a mild sense of social order and control that sustain the ‘normal appearances’ that people rely upon in brief and light stranger encounters and social situations. They indicate that others value this social order; the absence can signal an ‘absent, weakened or fragile local social order’ (Innes, 2004). The presence of people aggressively dominating space both intimidates people and indicates that the community has lost control over public space. This opens up a lack of predictability and shared efficacy in the community, causing anxiety and unease.

The situation and its signifiers may consequently be the central target of appraisal more than the actual risk of crime: while things in the environment provide information about the threat of crime, it may be that fear of crime is more often a response to an unpredictable and disorderly environment. This is not an original point. Garofalo and Laub (1978, p. 250) argued that the then standard measures tapped into things above and beyond the ‘fear’ of actually becoming a victim of crime. They reflected a broader issue: that crime is tied up with symbolic issues, with a ‘disrupted sense of community...the fear of actual criminal acts as well as the feeling that one’s social situation is unstable, anxiety about strangers, the belief that one’s moral beliefs are being offended, and so forth.’ The Figgie Report (Figgie, 1980) continued the theme, differentiating between ‘formless’ and ‘concrete’ fear, between abstract threats to security and concern about becoming victimised.

Such work on incivilities and disorder brings to the fore the social meaning underpinning crime and those things that come to signify crime and brings us back to the qualitative work introduced earlier in this paper. It also raises the possibility that fear of crime serves to express day-to-day interpretations of the social world, and this is important in and of itself (Jackson, 2004b). Perhaps people use the language of ‘worry’ and ‘crime’ to articulate a concern about crime and its effects, a gauge of the health of community, as well as their anxieties about a wealth of related issues that crime connects to (Girling et al., 2000). People as such may use the crime survey to report their everyday experiences of fear as well as to express a more generalised attitude to crime, a concern about the effect and meaning of crime within their local community and within society more widely, a sense of the health of the collective order and mutual obligation that binds social groups; a disconnected and atomised community.

An extension of this is the idea that fear of crime is a ‘sponge concept’, a ‘lightning rod’ that serves to articulate other anxieties. Girling et al. (2000) listened to how people talk about crime, disorder and social order, identifying the broader cultural significance of crime. They examined how the interpretative and evaluative function of stories that individuals told imposed coherence on their perceptions and beliefs concerning crime, social relations and social change. Qualitative methods facilitated the investigation of the cultural meanings of crime—a perspective that goes back to Hall et al.’s (1978) thesis that crime operates as a symbol, expressing or condensing a number of other issues, conflicts, insecurities and anxieties. Girling et al. (2000) found that talk about crime disclosed an array of concerns and perceptions of their neighbourhood, of its social make-up and status, its place in the world, and the sense that problems from outside were creeping in. As Biderman et al. (1967) speculated: ‘Perceptions of changes in the prevalence of crime can be expected to evoke particularly intense public reactions in that these can be taken as signs of threats to the fundamental moral order.’ From this perspective the fear of crime – a way of seeing rather than a way of feeling – expresses complex and subtle lay understandings of the social world – broader social values and attitudes about the nature and make-up of society and community and the value placed on crime in its symbol of deterioration (Jackson, 2004b). By expressing ‘worry’ about ‘crime’, people may express worry
about the deterioration of cherished social conditions rather than offer a report on their everyday fear of falling victim.

**A psychology of social order**

The final section before conclusions briefly outlines an emerging framework that tries to bring together some of the work from sociology, criminology, social psychology, psychology and risk perception so far presented. The goal is to build a bridge across a psychological account of emotion and cognition in risk perception to an eclectical account of the social and cultural significance of crime. It is hoped that this framework also provides a useful inroad for risk researchers for inquiry into a new topic, and to develop theory, drawing concepts from a range of disciplines. This brief outline is necessarily brief, given the need to introduce the area of fear of crime to the risk research audience. It here focuses on the part of the framework that draws together ideas around the cultural factors of risk.

One key feature of the framework is a ‘psychology of social order’: how people conceive social order, what they see as hostile to that social order, and why crime comes to embody or exemplify such things. Rock (1998) argues that the simple recognition of ‘deviance’ by ‘normal’ society discloses “the form and structure of society, [just as] capitalists define communists; radicals define moderates; the poor define the rich[ and] the disrespectful define the respectable.” It is hypothesised that the significance of crime is shaped by how people conceive social order, and what people see as hostile to that order. As such crime is a 'net' people 'cast' over social conditions. The notion of crime gets associated with things seen to be threatening to social order and cohesion, whether this be particular groups or individuals, certain areas or community conditions, or more structural changes in society. G. H. Mead (1917) argues that the desire to punish rule breakers is linked to the motivation to maintain social solidarity in the group. When someone transgresses the shared moral values of society they are challenging the authority of that moral structure. Violations of deeply felt values evoke intense emotion and call for a passionate response. Talking to people about crime opens up a window to how they understand a fascinating range of aspects of the social world: the values, norms and character of individuals and groups; identity relations between groups and localities; the social meaning of disorderly and anti-social behaviour; and, the strength and nature of community.

What people see as hostile to social order may also be what they believe needs to be controlled, via the formal routes of the law to informal routes of social pressure. The topic of social control had its heyday in the 1970s and 1980s, but it become less influential as sociologists came to think the concept had lost its analytical purchase (Innes, 2003). Yet perhaps we need to tease out how public perceptions of the weakness of formal and informal social controls mesh with public perceptions of those things designated as deviant and hostile to social order. Perhaps the salience of crime is shaped by the perceived need for more social controls to regulate norms and values. To identify some things as threatening may be a call for improved social controls that might restore order and censure certain individuals and behaviours.

Another feature of this framework is a social psychological analysis of the designatory function of such attitudes: to identify a person, a behaviour or environmental conditions as criminal (or criminogenic) is to declare as deviant and to demand appropriate action. Mike Pickering (2001, p. 174) brings stereotyping and identity together in a fascinating way, considering how ‘stereotypes operate as distancing strategies for placing others in such a manner that will serve to point up and perpetuate certain normative boundaries of social conduct, roles and judgements, separating what is seen as threatening and disturbing from what is regarded as acceptable and legitimate’. When an observer classifies certain individuals and groups as criminal or not belonging to this society and not able to integrate, they may strengthen their own sense that they themselves are not those individuals and groups; they may also place these individuals and groups outside of community values, in need of censure. This perspective dovetails with issues of national identity and the impact of increased diversity on culture.
This raises another issue. Pickering (2001, p. 183) sees scapegoating as the pathologisation of one group as embodying a social problem. The links people make from crime to certain social issues depend on what people view to be the causes and implications of crime, as well as the desire to project anxieties onto particular groups. They may also depend on the existence of a moral panic, where a ‘condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests’ (Cohen, 1980, p. 9) against a backdrop of ‘cultural strain and ambiguity’ (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994).

Public perceptions of crime are thus laden with evaluations and meanings. They may make the risk of crime more salient, but they may also shape day-to-day perceptions of risk by infusing perceptions of behaviour, people, environments and community conditions, motivating the association of these with crime and threat. This starts off emotional and cognitive processes of risk perception (outlined earlier), which feed back into the association of ambiguous stimuli with risk. We need to uncover such processes, and investigate how circulating representations of crime, criminals and community conditions latch onto public systems of social meaning. We also need to develop our knowledge of day-to-day perceptions of the social world that people use to gauge risk – one important line of enquiry might be into how stereotypes of individuals/groups function in this regard. And much research is needed into the psychology of risk, and how emotion and cognition interact.

**Future for fear of crime, risk research and collaboration**

Crime is an aspect that goes to the heart of how society organises and governs itself, a public opinion issue that reveals how people understand social order and moral consensus. Public perceptions of crime consequently speak to a risk that by its very nature cannot be removed from its social context. But more than this, crime is a fertile topic for risk researchers because here is a risk that people manage in their everyday lives, a threat that constrains activity and animates people, drawing out outrage and anger, anxiety and insecurity.

Bringing together work on the fear of crime and risk perception promises much for interdisciplinary exchange, integrating concepts from psychology, social psychology, sociology and criminology. And strikingly, the two areas at the forefront of the risk research agenda are the two areas at the forefront of fear of crime research. Emotion is a ‘major new area of interest in the psychology of risk’ (Taylor-Gooby, 2004, p. 15). Cultural factors of risk are also identified by Taylor-Gooby (2004, p. 15) as where risk research ‘is at’. And crime is a risk that simply cannot be removed from its social context. People commit crime; it is an intentional act, most often committed by one individual to another. The criminal act, by and large, is harmful to aspects of social order and cohesion because it damages these aspects and represents their failure to regulate behaviour and mutual obligation. Crime is thus a topic of great social and cultural significance, and the working through of this in understanding public perceptions of risk is a challenge for fear of crime work.

This paper is a call for more research into public perceptions of crime and the risk of crime, particularly from risk researchers. Such work needs to be inter-disciplinary, and this should be seen as one of the attractions. But this is also a fascinating topic for social scientists to develop and share concepts, bridge levels of analysis, and perhaps most importantly contribute to an important social and political debate of our day.
References


