Reconceptualising Fear of Crime: The Emergence of Crime Awareness

Presented by
Madeleine Jarrett-Luck, B. Soc. Sc.
Student ID: 13112464

Submitted in total fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of

Master of Arts (Research)

June 2015

Criminology Department
Faculty of Society and Design
Bond University
Queensland, Australia
ABSTRACT

Over the past fifty years, the concept of ‘fear of crime’ (FOC) has become firmly embedded in fields such as crime prevention, victimology and media studies. It is generally perceived as an irrational response to discourse about crime events or crime rates in the sense that those who are least likely to be impacted tend to have higher levels of fear. There remain tensions in the literature on FOC because it is a difficult concept to define and because ‘testing’ of the concept has been heavily reliant on quantitative studies. After fifty years of researching this phenomenon, it seems appropriate to revisit the concept in the light of social, cultural and technological changes wrought in the 21st century.

This conceptual thesis seeks to reformulate the ‘fear of crime’ concept in light of the notions about risk, pre-eminence of global threats over domestic offending, the proliferation of information-sharing through social media which has strengthened our ‘connectedness’ and the seeming ubiquity of some crime prevention mechanisms that has led to a view of them as banal. The thesis reflects the complexity of FOC and provides new avenues for the exploration of risk perceptions, social trust, and the apparent banality of prevention. The involvement of these factors in shaping responses and attitudes towards crime victimisation risks demonstrates a need for a reconceptualisation of crime fear. Qualitative findings from a previous research project by the candidate reflected the complexity of FOC and provide new avenues for the exploration of risk perceptions, social trust, and the apparent banality of prevention. Consideration of extant research further showed instances of awareness in discussions about crime risk management and so the concept of ‘awareness of crime’ was created.

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The awareness concept is shaped by several factors. The first is familiarity with crime risks, where these have become part of day-to-day life and so are no longer feared. Secondly, the 21st-century mass-media scepticism and social media savvy shapes understandings about crime. People are active in sharing information and experiences...
relating to crime victimisation, and social trust appears to affect perceptions and responses to crime. The third major contributor to awareness is the way in which individuals judge threats to their safety. The seriousness and likelihood of victimisation dominate judgements about the significance of a crime risk. Subsidiary factors supporting awareness include the eschewing of ‘fear’ labels, given the negative connotations of the word ‘fear’ and its derivatives. The individual responsibilisation for crime prevention in neoliberal societies encourages awareness because there is a reduced onus on the state to protect the public from victimisation. Finally, a sense of control over personal crime risks appears to perpetuate awareness in place of fear of crime where there is a belief that crime risk has been managed.

Awareness presents a new lens through which to consider theories of crime such as Routine Activity Theory, as it appears to shape decision-making processes and routine behaviours where these affect victimisation risk. Awareness is also linked to Beck’s risk society thesis since it has arisen partly from a preoccupation with risk-management. Crime awareness calls for further investigation into information-sharing via social networking and construction of crime risks, and cultivation of worldviews through media. The changing nature of risks, globalisation, and communication may be creating a shift where attitudes and responses towards crime risks in the 21st century are characterised by awareness, and thus fear of crime is no longer the most suitable paradigm through which to examine these.
Declaration of Originality

This thesis is submitted to Bond University in fulfilments of the requirements of the degree of Master of Arts (Research). This thesis represents my own original work towards this research degree and contains no material which has been previously submitted for a degree or diploma at this University or any other institution, except where due acknowledgement is made.

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Madeleine Jarrett-Luck

15th October, 2015
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis was made possible by the assistance, logistical support, and encouragement of those in the Faculty of Society and Design at Bond University. This includes permissions given and critiques offered that both facilitated the conduct of the research and ensured the quality of the written document. However, the individual to whom I owe the most in regard to the completion of this thesis is my principal supervisor Assistant Professor Robyn Lincoln, without whom I never would have hoped to achieve this end. Her expertise, academic writing skills and keen critical eye have helped me to make this work one of my greatest achievements to date. I would also like to thank Dr Joy Cameron-Dow for her words of advice, Dr Terry Goldsworthy for serving as my secondary supervisor, and Ms. Mandei Saranah for the role she played in organising the logistics and conditions of my postgraduate degree.

I wish to thank my entire family, both Lucks and Jarretts, for their love and support throughout the entire process, without which I would have struggled to both conduct my research and write up the accompanying thesis. Your patience and understanding throughout the past two years have been invaluable in enabling me to complete this work; I could not have done this without you. This acknowledgement also extends to my adoptive Gold Coast family, the Manions. The warmth and selflessness with which you offered your support and opened your home to me has been a kindness that has allowed me to press on through the most difficult of times when I was far from my own family in South Australia. I especially thank Sophie Manion for listening, laughing, and always being there when I needed her the most. I also thank Hamish Knight for his words of encouragement and humour. This work could never have been finished without the two of you.
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