

Revisiting crime surveys: emotional responses without emotions?

OR

Look back at anger

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(Received 13 February 2002; accepted 24 June 2002)

Research exploring the emotional responses to crime experienced by the citizens of several major European and North American countries has suggested that a significant proportion of the residents of these countries 'fear' or feel 'angry' about the possibility of criminal victimization. It has ceased to appear incredible to us that we are regularly finding that between a quarter and two thirds of our citizens are fearful or 'angry about crime' 'all of the time'. The argument put forward in this contribution to the work in this field is that the emotional responses to crime have been exaggerated by the inappropriate use of the survey as a measurement tool. Ethnographic and qualitative data suggest that experiences of 'fear' and 'anger' are less common. Suggestions for improving the ability of the questions used in surveys to accurately capture these emotional responses are advanced.

An epidemic terror seized upon the nations; no man thought himself secure, either in his person or possessions, from the machinations of the devil and his agents. Every calamity that befell him he attributed to a witch. If a storm arose and blew down his barn, it was witchcraft; if his cattle died of a murrain—if disease fastened upon his limbs, or death suddenly entered and snatched a beloved face from his hearth—they were not visitations of Providence, but the works of some neighbouring hag, whose wretchedness or insanity caused the ignorant to raise their finger and point at her as a witch. The word was upon everybody's tongue. France, Italy, Germany, England, Scotland, and the far north successively ran mad upon this subject, and for a long series of years furnished their tribunals with so many trials for witchcraft, that other crimes were seldom or never spoken of. Thousands upon thousands of unhappy persons fell victims to this cruel and absurd delusion. In many cities of Germany, as will be shown more fully in its due place hereafter, the average number of executions for this pretended crime was six hundred annually, or two every day, if we leave out the Sundays, when it is to be supposed that even this madness refrained from its work.

(Charles MacKay, discussing the 'witch manias' that gripped Europe between the 12th and 15th centuries)

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Introduction

The corpus of work surrounding terms like the ‘fear of crime’, ‘emotional reactions to crime’, ‘anxieties about crime’ is vast. A few years ago, Jason Ditton and his colleagues wrote that ‘the fear of crime is now bigger than General Motors’ (Ditton *et al.* 1999a). That neither the editor of the journal their article was published in, nor either of the peer-reviewers commented on this throw-away first-liner is a testament to the size of the field relative to others in criminology. In 1992 Chris Hale reviewed the literature for the London Metropolitan Police (UK) and noted that there were 200 published articles on the subject (Hale 1996). In 2000, Ditton and Farrall (2000a: xxi) revised this to over 800.

In sum, this body of work would appear to suggest that the fear of crime is wide-spread amongst members of many contemporary westernized societies. It is our own 20th century ‘epidemic terror’. For example, the 1994 British Crime Survey reported that a quarter of the population were ‘very worried’ about burglary and rape (Hough 1995: 9). The same report suggested that of a range of contemporary life worries, burglary and rape headed the list (1995: 15), out-stripping job loss, road accidents, illnesses and debt. Later sweeps of the BCS suggested that the 1994 figures represent something of a ‘blip’, and that for the period between 1984 and 2000 around 20% of the population were ‘very worried’ about burglary (2000: 45). The same survey reported that the proportion of respondents feeling ‘very worried’ about street crimes (muggings and robberies) similarly hovered around the 20% mark. Crime surveys of rural areas (see Koffman 1996: 89–95) have suggested similar rates of fear of crime. The Aberystwyth Crime Survey (Koffman 1996) found that a quarter of the sample reported feeling ‘a bit/very unsafe’ (1996: 98). It would appear that we are fearful of victimization at almost every turn. Questions relating to the fear of crime were one of the only consistent elements of the 1982–1994 BCS sweeps (Mayhew 1996: 48).¹

So great has been public policy concern in the UK, that the Department of Transport, Local Government and the Regions (DTLR) has requested that the various local authorities with a community safety remit start asking resident citizens about their fear of crime from 2002/2003, and that questions relating to this topic be asked every three years to monitor fluctuations in fear of crime rates (DTLR 2002, Chapter 11 and Annex A). In the space of 20 years in the UK, the fear of crime has gone from a marginal topic of research to a best value performance indicator. The aim of the article is to review the current methodologies and to suggest possible improvements to these.

One recent addition to this field is the subject of the current contribution—viz ‘anger’ about crime. I want to use this article to open up and explore in further detail both the nature of crime-related anxieties, and how these are best researched. It is my contention that, as researchers, we have ‘gone wrong’ somewhere along the line, and that the end result is a misrepresentation of the extent of people’s anxieties about crime. The arch-villain in this process has been the survey, or rather, the misguided use of the survey as a tool for collecting data about anxieties about crime.

Revealing the contours of ‘anger’

In late 1994, under the guidance of Jason Ditton and Jon Bannister, Liz Gilchrist and I embarked upon a series of interviews aimed at exploring in greater detail what people meant when they said that they were ‘afraid of crime’. We had hoped to gain access to a previous survey’s respondents, and return to them to ask them to expand upon their answers, but this proved unworkable, and so we set about conducting our own mini-survey. We did this by interviewing, on their doorsteps, 150 or so residents of four areas in and around Glasgow (the general methodology is outlined in Farrall *et al.* 1997). After the interview, which lasted only a few minutes, respondents were asked if they would be willing to be re-interviewed in greater depth on their feelings about crime—and 90% agreed to this request (Farrall *et al.* 1997: 660).

The ‘follow-up’ interviews, as I shall call them, took place a matter of weeks later, and respondents were selected so that age, gender, and levels of self-reported fear and risk were evenly represented. As they are wont to do, a number of ‘funny things’ started to emerge from the follow-up interviews. Often we were confronted by people who gave different answers during the follow-up interviews from those they gave when first seen. These ‘inconsistencies’ often related to their fears or perceived levels of risk, and formed the basis of an article on the methodology of surveying the fear of crime. Another finding that also emerged was that people weren’t only ‘fearful’. Many respondents reported that they ‘didnae fear’ crime, but that they were ‘mighty cautious’ when locking up at night or when they were on their way out. Others said that they were fearful, but they added that they were also annoyed that it could happen. Still others reported very violent irritation and anger at crime.

Armed with a series of words used to describe what being ‘fearful’ meant, we started to group these responses into similar types of feelings. We were eventually left with four groups of feelings:

- fear/afraid/anxious/scared types of feelings;
- cautious/thoughtful/aware-of-the-possibility-of-it-happening type feelings;
- angry/cross/raging/‘bloody annoyed’ types of feelings; and
- upset/hurt/tearful/let-down/betrayed feelings, which were often exclusively associated with actual experiences of victimization.

The next stage of our research (following a series of discussion groups) involved turning the findings from the above into a series of questions that we could use in a survey. This entailed further house-to-house calls in order to test the acceptability of the question wording and respondents’ apparent liking or disliking of the questions. Following this, the questions were refined, and, along with other new survey questions, used in a household survey of those aged over 16 in the Strathclyde area of Scotland. The questions were operationalized as:

- In your everyday life, do you THINK about (e.g. someone breaking into your home)?

- In your everyday life, are you AFRAID of someone (e.g. someone breaking into your home)?
- In your everyday life, does the thought of someone (e.g. breaking into your home) make you ANGRY?

(With the following as the response codes (shown to respondents on a card): 'not at all'=1; 'hardly ever'=2; 'don't know'=3; 'some of the time'=4; and, 'all the time'=5.)

The fieldwork lasted from January to March 1996. In all, 1629 respondents were interviewed for the main sample, and a further 600 as part of an ethnic minority booster sample. In addition to this, the author undertook a series of back-check interviews with 21 respondents from the main sample. It is data collected from these last two stages of interviewing that forms the main part of the rest of data presented herein.

We initially aired anger as a candidate emotional response to the possibility of victimization in an article dealing with measurement error in survey questions (Farrall *et al.* 1997: 674). However, we did not report fully on this until 1999 (Ditton *et al.* 1999a, b). These two articles suggested that anger was both more common a response than fear, and that it was more intensely felt (Ditton *et al.* 1999a: 89). These general findings held across age and gender (1999a: 90), although victims were more likely to report anger than non-victims (1999a: 92). Respondents who reported feeling anger were more likely to have felt that governments should increase spending on public services (1999a: 96). An indication of the extent to which anger out-stripped fear, is given in figure 1 (1999a: 88, and reproduced here as figure 1 also).

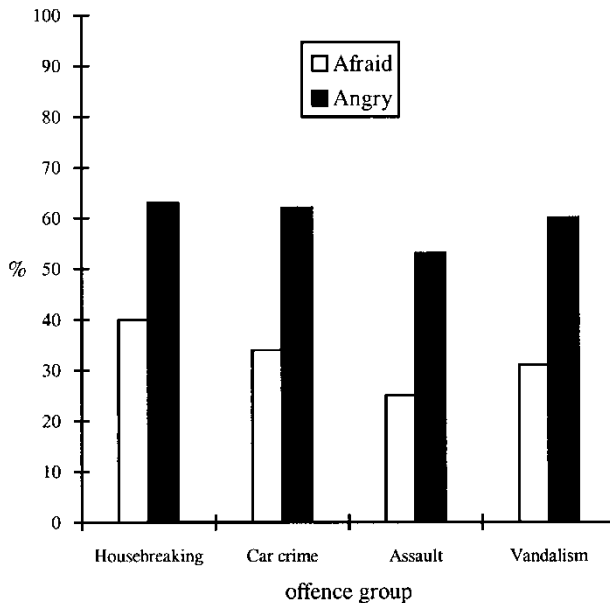


Figure 1. Percentages of respondents 'afraid' and 'angry'.

As can be seen, whilst around 40% of respondents reported feeling 'afraid' of housebreaking, the percentage who reported feeling angry about the same crime was much higher, at over 60%. Similarly, whilst only around a third of the sample reported feeling afraid of car crime, the figure for anger was nearer two-thirds. Almost twice as many respondents reported feeling angry about assault or vandalism than had reported feeling afraid of either of these crimes.

Before even these results were published, the Home Office had decided that a question concerning anger about burglary would be used in the (then) forthcoming British Crime Survey (i.e. the 2000 BCS). The question used was altered slightly, and became:

- In your everyday life, does the thought of someone breaking into your home and stealing something make you feel . . . ?

(With the following as the response codes: 'very angry'=1; 'fairly angry'=2; 'not very angry'=3; and 'not at all angry'=4.)

The responses gained from this question are even more staggering than the original Scottish data. Of the 1933 respondents asked this question, 1328 (69%) said 'very angry' and 452 (23%) 'fairly angry'. In total, 92% of respondents selected one of the 'angry' responses. Or, to misquote Charles Mackay, 'the word was upon everybody's completed questionnaires'. This of course makes the question virtually redundant for further analyses—the responses are so skewed towards one end of the scale that this item cannot really be thought of as being a 'variable' (i.e. there is insufficient variation in responses for analytical purposes). Another study (Semmens 2001) that relied on 'open-ended' questions, found that some 35% of respondents in a mail survey ($N=693$) reported feeling angry when questioned about burglary. The question used in this case was:

- How does the thought of someone breaking into your house and stealing, or trying to steal something, make you feel (use the one word which best describes how you feel)?

The respondents gave answers which were coded as being indicative of the following emotional responses (greatest first): 'angry'=35%; 'physically sick/disgusted'=18%; 'vulnerable'=13%; 'fearful'=11%; 'shocked'=9%; 'generally sad'=6%; 'violated'=6%; 'other'=1%; and 'wanted retribution'=1%.

A further article based on the original data collected in Scotland investigated emotional responses following victimization (Ditton *et al.* 1999b). A literature review suggested that feelings of anger were quite common post-victimization (1999b: 38–40). Data from the 396 victims in our sample suggested that anger was again the prevalent emotional response across age, gender groups and victimization type, but that there were interactions between these (see table 2, Ditton *et al.* 1999b: 41). Further analyses suggested that, as time elapsed: initially fearful respondents became more angry about their victimization; that initially angry people became more angry; and that those respondents who were initially very angry, became less angry.

In the same article we reflected on what anger ‘meant’ to our respondents. This entailed revisiting the data collected during an earlier qualitative phase of our enquires (see below for more details). Because at the time of the earlier phase we had not expected to find ‘as much’ anger, this investigation revealed little by way of conclusive evidence about what people meant when they said they were angry. ‘Feeling angry’ meant a wide range of emotions, from mild irritation, to annoyance at oneself or others (including the police), to ‘hot’ anger. The following was typical of the sorts of angry reactions we found:

I was absolutely furious with the police. Here, we have a system where we have an alarm which dials through to the police. Now, in fact, we thought that had happened anyway. It was so naïve of us, and so silly. Obviously, if you cut the telephone line, it can’t dial through to the police. But it was the weasel words of the burglar alarm company. They hadn’t lied to us, but what they had said was...we said, ‘What happens if the wire is cut?’, and they said, ‘Oh, the system goes off...well, the bell goes off, but the system doesn’t actually work properly (and didn’t ring through to the police station)...the neighbour heard, it was one o’clock in the morning, it was Saturday night...they had already phoned the police, and they had already been around the house with their dog, and there was no sign of anything. The police came, and they didn’t notice that the wire was hanging down the side of the house. They didn’t notice that there was a ladder lying in the garden. They didn’t notice, none of them, the alarm. They didn’t check the phone, and they didn’t notice that the alarm wasn’t setting properly...So the police didn’t come back, and you’d have thought it might have been reasonable to come back and check, and I was very, very angry...and they were quite unrepentant. They said that they couldn’t be expected to know how everyone’s burglar alarm worked...but I’m just expecting them to do a six-point check list, that they do every time they’re called out. You know, you walk round the house, you check the window ledges, you walk around the garden, you should check...it’s not unreasonable to check that there’s no wires hanging about the place...I was very angry.

(47 year-old woman)

However, the back-checks with respondents who had completed the main survey, suggested that feelings of anger were harder for respondents to expand upon (Farrall and Ditton 1999). Respondents were asked to reflect upon the interpretation they had drawn from the key words in each of the questions on ‘thinking’, feeling ‘afraid’ and feeling ‘angry’. This was a particularly difficult task as it required a great deal of introspection on the part of the respondent.

Virtually all of the respondents who could provide an insight into how they had interpreted the word ‘think’ said that they had taken the word as referring not to a period of conscious reflection and contemplation, but rather to something that ‘crossed their mind’. The word ‘afraid’ appeared to be a harder word to define (when asked to explain their interpretation, most respondents explained their answer rather than their interpretation). The word ‘angry’ however appeared to have been especially difficult for our respondents to talk about. One respondent said ‘Y’know, if somebody broke in, you know, I would be angry’, another said ‘Anger?... Anger, just frustration, sadness, just a strong emotional feeling...’. However, what does come from the data is that respondents report feeling angry only if and when they think about it actually happening to themselves. One respondent said ‘I would be angry if it somebody broke into the house’, whilst another reported ‘Well, I suppose you get angry at the thought that you’ve spent x

amount of years building up the property and making it nice and getting the possessions and the material things you want in the house and somebody goes in and takes it away—you'd be damned angry. . .'. As such, the meaning of 'anger', if it has one meaning, appears to be related to feelings of injustice, especially injustice that has not been or cannot be dealt with. In some cases this anger is aimed at 'responsible others' (such as the police) or have failed to live up to expectations, in other cases it appeared to be 'formless'—a general anger about the fact that these things could happen to one. In no cases was anger directed at the offenders (see Ditton *et al.* 1999b for further discussions of the meaning of anger).

Whatever the meaning of anger, and whatever the influence of subtle variations in question wording or coding procedures, the available survey data suggest that anger about crime was extremely common, both post-victimization (a finding others had already made) and in the absence of any specific victim experience. To say that we were staggered when we first looked at the data from the Scottish survey is something of an understatement. It quickly became clear in our minds that this 'finding' of near-universal feelings of anger would be the defining finding of the project, and data collected subsequently has done nothing to suggest otherwise. Anger was 'out there' and it was very 'big'.

Can we believe our eyes?

The question that I now wish to pose, and to provide an answer to, is this: do we find the findings about anger—and by implication 'fear', 'worry' etc.—credible? That is, do we, as a community of scholars, believe the data we have been producing for the last 20 or so years? Are we really prepared to unquestioningly accept that almost a third to two-thirds of the westernized, civilized society are 'fearful' (or 'angry', or 'worried') of crime 'some' or 'a lot' of the time? Is this merely a 20th century equivalent to MacKay's 'cruel and absurd delusion'?

I do not wish to claim that no-one is ever angry at finding that they have been robbed or burgled, nor do I wish to suggest that no-one ever feels even slightly anxious about leaving one's house unguarded even for short periods of time. Rather I wish to open up a dialogue about the frequency with which people actually feel these emotions in the course of their lives, and the frequency with which people report feeling these emotions.

It was, I recall, no lesser sociologist than C. Wright Mills who implored sociologists to '. . . use (their) life experiences in (their) intellectual work. . .' (1959: 196). With this in mind, I shall recount two stories—one about my mother and one about myself. Shortly before I started work in Glasgow (Scotland), my mother, who had never really been a particularly 'fearful' woman, 'phoned me in a state of some distress. A colleague of hers at work, who lived in a very 'posh' neighbourhood, had come home from her holidays to find that her house had been burgled and 'gutted'. Literally gutted. Whilst away, a 'team of expert burglars' had arrived in a van and set about first of all removing all of her and her husband's furniture and then removing most of the household consumables, viz, cooker, washing

machine, fitted kitchen, the lot. Understandably, this woman was distraught, and when she turned up for work, ‘infected’ my mother (and I suspect several other people) with a living, breathing fear that their houses ‘were next’. This is understandable, of course—one cannot help but feel the utmost sympathy with this woman. What was less obvious, at least to my mind, was that my mother thought that when she and my father went on their holiday, their house would be visited by this same gang. The house that my parents then occupied was an ex-council house in an ageing, but still ‘respectable’, estate which was not known for its being ‘posh’ and the other side of town from the previous victims’ house, and hence miles from where the gang were thought to be based. My mother—in clearly a state of some agitation—begged me to come home and look after the house whilst they were away. Being the ever dutiful son, I refused point-blank and steadfastly remained in Guildford. The house wasn’t burgled and my mother has never referred to this episode since.

The previous summer, after I had finished my first degree, I decided, rather than get a summer job as I had done previously, that I’d buy myself a mountain bike and spend the summer ‘goofing off’ with my new toy. Two days after I’d bought it, I went away for the weekend, leaving the bike in my parents’ garage. When I returned, I discovered, to my utter, spitting, hair-pulling rage, that someone had prised open the garage door one night and made off with my new toy. For an hour or so I was furious. Then I calmed down and filled in the insurance paperwork whilst my mother made ‘... us a nice cup of tea’.

What do these stories tell us? Or at least, which parts do I wish to bring to your attention? Leaving aside my rant and my mother’s fear of the Brink’s Matt gang doing a job on her kitchen, these responses to crime—both actual and imagined—were fleeting. My mother was probably terrified for a week or so, and I was livid for half an afternoon—after that we got on with going to work, studying, the shopping, remembering to pay the ‘phone bill and so on. I don’t think that either my mother or I are very atypical people (others may disagree). Where then would we be placed on standard crime survey questions on fear and anger? We would, respectively, be placed as ‘very fearful’, but not very often very fearful, and ‘very angry’, but not very often very angry. The matrix formed by these fear-severity and fear-frequency dichotomies does not fit comfortably with current question styles, which often in practice conflate frequency and severity of emotional responses.

A related set of problems can be detected from the back-check interviews undertaken on those people who had completed the main survey questionnaire. The following comes from one such interview with a woman in her 60s (SF: interviewer; F: interviewee):

SF: Can you remember the last time you did think about somebody breaking into your home?

F: Mm, I think it was just one night we heard the door was tried, and that was it, but nothing, they must have just went away, we didn’t do anything about it, I mean, there’s no point in ‘phoning the police or anything like that, and you just sort of think, you know, and if they’d got in while we weren’t here maybe they could have got into the house, but I never, and that was it and I never said any more about it.

SF: And how long ago was that?

F: I think it would be maybe about October or November

SF: Sorry that was October year just gone, 1995 (three months previously).

F: I think it was October, and it was my husband that heard it, it wasn't me.

During the survey, when asked how often she thought about someone breaking into her house, she gave the reply 'some of the time' (that is, one point removed from 'all of the time'). Others gave similar responses. Another respondent, a woman, when I arrived at her home told me that she and her husband 'thought about crime all the time', but during the interview, when asked to tell me when she last recalled thinking about it looked blankly at me and said 'Oh well, . . . it's about . . . , we had it . . . , that's a lot of years ago . . .'. So her 'thinking' about crime was actually a lot less than she claimed. This is not to suggest that she'd never thought about crime, but just that she'd not thought about it as often as she thought she had.

In one man's case it was clear that the act of being surveyed had made him consider his reactions to crime for, if not the first time, then for the first time in a long while:

Yes it does make me angry, but it doesn't make me angry 'most of the time'. (Mm). In this situation it would have been 'not at all', although it does make me very angry, because if somebody broke into my house I would be damned angry, but as far as it reads there, the answer would be 'not at all', because I never think about it, or I had never thought about it until (the interviewer) came out.

(Male in his mid-20s)

All of this raises the possibility that the very act of being surveyed about their feelings concerning crime, if not 'creating' these feelings, certainly appears to be exaggerating them (Schuman and Presser 1996: 85, Bishop *et al.* 1986). The observation that people appeared to report the most serious extent of their fears rather than the most common or typical was a finding that we first outlined a number of years ago (see Farrall *et al.* 1997: 665–666). Quite why people should exaggerate the extent of their fears 'upwards' towards the more fearful rather than 'downwards' to the less fearful is unclear. If crime is a rare (and trivial)² event for many, and surveys suggest that it might well be, then the estimations given by respondents may be subject to various biases (Tourangeau *et al.* 2000: 86). Whatever the explanation, we need to find a way around this if we are to produce an accurate portrayal of the extent of people's fears.

Another of the findings that emerged from the back-checks was the issue of the period of time for which answers were being provided. As none of the questions used to measure people's fear of crime have directed the respondent towards a time period for which their answers should apply, it was decided to investigate this issue. We discovered that people gave answers that varied hugely in terms of the time periods for which they were reporting. In short the respondents' answers fell into two categories: one

emphasizing 'social' boundaries to their answers (e.g. moving to an area, reaching retirement age, being burgled) and the other referring to an arbitrary time period (e.g. 'the last year', 'all of my life', 'the past ten years').

Those referring to arbitrary time periods as the boundaries for the answers to the three new 'fear of crime' questions were all in a narrow age band (55–65 years old). The time periods that they refer to range from 'how I felt just now' to 'over the last year' to 'the whole of my life'. Clearly then, when people are asked about how much they thought, felt 'afraid' or got 'angry' their answers vary hugely in relation to the time period to which they are reporting.

These findings resonate with some of the findings we had reported in Farrall *et al.* (1997). For example, when one respondent was asked how much he worried about being robbed or assaulted at the quantitative interview, he replied by placing himself in the middle of the 1–5 scale. At the qualitative interview, when asked again about how much he worried about this type of offence, he said 'No, no, 'cause as I say, since I got done the first time (during the late 1970s), I'm very careful'. So he was very fearful, and is now a much less fearful as he takes precautions. This appeared to be a particularly prevalent problem (Farrall *et al.* 1997: 666). Of course, this would matter little were it not for the fact that the fear of crime is now a frequently used indicator of the success of crime reduction initiatives in policing, street lighting or general neighbourhood renewal. Perhaps the observation that people do not report their fear of crime for any uniform or specified period of time is the explanation of why fear appears to be so difficult to reduce (see Nair *et al.* 1993, Ditton and Farrall 2000a). Clearly, if people are providing answers which related for an extended period of time, it is hard to talk about changes in fear levels over time in any meaningful sense, be it year on year changes or pre-/post-intervention data.

All of this is starting to add up to a rather serious set of problems for those wishing to investigate emotional responses to crime and victimization using quantitative tools. Some may argue that this sort of research is bound not to accurately portray emotional responses to crime, because emotional responses to anything are not best captured using quantitative methodologies. These arguments, undoubtedly, have some currency. Quantitative tools are not very good at drawing out the nature of some issues, and I would include emotional responses to crime amongst these. However, what we must do as well as exploring 'what' these emotions mean and signify for people (and for which we will probably have to rely upon qualitative methodologies), is to grasp the extent to which people actually feel these emotions. There are, then, two questions which need to be answered. The first is how did we arrive in this juncture, where emotional responses to crime are chronically over-estimated? and the second is what can we do about it?

It is my belief that the problems we have encountered with the measurement of the fear of crime (and by implication, anger about crime) are the result of asking quantitative tools to do tasks that they are ill-equipped to do. The conceptualization of emotional responses to crime (and my own experiences, both 'lived' and gained vicariously as a result of

interviewing people) suggests that such feelings are rather vague, ill-defined, transitory, and heavily context-dependent. To this end, the age old fear of crime question ‘how safe do you feel walking around in this area on your own after dark?’ was a perfect way to approach this topic conceptually. That is, that walking around after dark when alone can engender feelings of unsafety for many people, and this has been borne out by several qualitative studies. Where this conceptualization fails us, however, is when it is used wholesale in survey research. Surveys are not very good at vague, heavily context-specific, ill-defined experiences, which is exactly what emotional responses are for most of us (be they emotional responses to crime, to trips to the dentist’s, or to a lover’s face). This is not to say that surveys can never capture contexts, or that survey researchers should give up on their attempts to incorporate the qualitative data in their researches, but merely to accept that, like any methodology, surveys have limitations and that we have to face that fact that in researching emotional responses to crime these limitations have been reached and breached. Or, to paraphrase:

Measurement may fail because of poor measures, but also because of poor ideas. Measures may not represent a concept well empirically because the concept is, so to speak, *unrepresentable*.

(Brewer and Hunter 1989: 142, emphasis added)

This is not to suggest that the fear of crime is a ‘poor idea’, but rather that it is unrepresentable (or at least, not well representable) given current quantitative/survey approaches to the topic.

Towards a new measure

So, what next? Give up the quantitative investigation of emotional responses to crime? I think not. There are things that we can do to maintain our quantitative interest in people’s emotional responses to crime.

The solution to the variable time periods for which respondents appear to report fear, anger, thinking and the such like is fairly straight forward—ask respondents to direct their answers to the past year only. Of course, there may also be very good reasons for collecting data which relates to periods outside of this time-frame, and there is little problem, that I can anticipate, in asking people two questions—fear in the last year and fear ‘in general’. This makes sense within the logic of national and local crime surveys, as other experiences are also recorded for the past year (most notably victimization, but also perceptions of the crime rate and contacts with the police).

As for the problem relating to the severity or extent of these feelings, I propose that we need to ‘ground’ people’s answer in their actual experiences. In so doing, I suggest that we mimic the questions which people are asked about their victimization. I propose, therefore, that respondents should be asked if they can recall, in the past year, any occasions on which they actually felt fearful, angry, etc. because they thought that they might be victimized. Those who cannot, are assumed probably not to have experienced such events which produced intense

feelings (because, if these had been intense they would, presumably, have remembered them). Those who do report experiencing such feelings, can then be asked a series of questions relating to the intensity of these feelings and the frequency of these feelings. This is exactly what the British Crime Survey and similar crime surveys have been doing for years when recording victimization experiences. This entails accepting that crime surveys cannot capture the full experience of ‘fear’, ‘anger’ and so on, and instead using surveys for what they do very, very well: auditing. We are still able to conceptualize fear etc. as being emotional responses which ebb and flow over the course of people’s lives (à la all of the qualitative data which has ever been collected on this subject), but instead of attempting to measure these feelings by asking vaguely worded questions which allow respondents to interpret them variously, we simply count the frequency with which these emotions are felt.

On the basis of the above observations and reasoning, I propose that rather than ask questions about emotional responses to crime in the ways hitherto used, that the following questioning structure is employed:

- In the past year, have you ever actually felt fearful about the possibility of becoming a victim of crime?³

- If ‘yes’, on the last occasion, how fearful did you feel?

(0=cannot remember; 1=not very fearful; 2=a little bit fearful; 3=quite fearful; 4=very fearful.)

- If ‘yes’, how frequently have you felt like this in the last year?⁴

(0=cannot remember; 1=once or twice; 2=between three and six times; 3=seven to twelve times; 4=more than once a month.)

- If ‘no’ or ‘can’t remember’, go to next question.

Of course, ‘fearful’ can be replaced with ‘worried’, ‘angry’, ‘anxious’, etc., and similarly ‘victim of crime’ changed to ‘victim of assault’, ‘victim of burglary’, ‘victim of car crime’ and so on. The time periods can equally easily be altered (‘before the introduction of street-lighting in this area’/ ‘following the introduction of street-lighting in this area’, or ‘in the past six months’ etc.). Of course, the items measuring the severity and frequency of these feelings will need to be thoroughly piloted before any definitive scales can be developed.⁵

I fully accept, as do many others who rely on survey research for the empirical basis of their labours, that surveys are not perfect at everything. With regard to emotional responses to crime, I think that surveys have had a pretty poor run these past 25–30 years. If I were writing an end of year report for crime surveys I might be tempted to write ‘started brightly, but when we moved on to more complex issues let themselves down through an inattention to detail and a belief that their past successes would make-up for their later sloppiness’.

Above I have reviewed some of the evidence of a series of systematic failings inherent in the quantitative measurement of emotional responses to crime. These have suggested that 'fear' and 'anger' may have been over-reported and that detailed qualitative work regarding people's feelings about crime and experiences of such feelings suggest that these feelings may be less common than we think. In an attempt to retain the contribution of the quantitative investigation of this topic as a valid and useful one, I have suggested a series of changes that I suspect may improve matters.

However, there is a terrible conservatism that haunts crime surveys. No one wants to break the mould and ask new questions or to propose new ways of asking the old questions for fear of making the previous 25–35 years of data collection redundant for comparative purposes. There are three points that I wish to make with respect to this. First of all, we no longer consider single women who live alone and whose physical appearance we may find disagreeable to be 'witches', and accordingly the number of witches burnt at the stake each year as an indication of the 'fight against devilry' is of little importance to us. Similarly, the number of 'odd looking bumps' on a man's head and the general appearance of his skull are no longer considered to be useful criteria by which criminality can be measured. *This suggests to me that change is desirable.*

Earlier I noted that questions on the fear of crime were one of the few invariant topics of the BCS. Other questions have not always been asked, and some have been changed. Indeed, the entire methodology has been changed from written to computer assisted interviewing (Mayhew 1996). *This suggests to me that change is possible.*

Finally, to claim that we cannot alter question styles or wording because this will leave redundant earlier data is nothing short of an admission that question wording influences data, and that changes in question styles will result in changes in the data 'produced', e.g. Fowler (1992), and therefore that survey-research 'reality' is methodology-dependent. Given my argument above, summarized as 'we are misrepresenting the nature and frequency of people's emotional responses to crime', *this suggests to me that change is inevitable.*

I hope that the changes suggested herein will go some way towards a more accurate representation of citizens' emotional responses to crime and victimization.

Acknowledgements

This article was originally presented at the Law and Society Association Conference, 2001 in Budapest. I would like to express my gratitude to the editors and two anonymous reviewers whose comments undoubtedly improved the clarity of the arguments contained herein. Jason Ditton and Susanne Karstedt were also kind enough to make suggestions on an early version of this article. Flaws and weaknesses in the argument remain my own, however.

Notes

1. Several studies undertaken in the USA, Australia and in mainland Europe also testify to these rates of anxiety. For example, studies in Holland (van der Wurff *et al.* 1989), Slovenia (Mesko and Farrall 2000), Switzerland (Killias and Clerci 2000: 439–440) as well as those studies undertaken in the UK and referred to above, have frequently demonstrated the fear of crime to be a common experience amongst those surveyed. In the USA, the spiritual home of the crime survey (Block 1993: 183), numerous studies dating back to the surveys organised following 1965 Presidential Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration of Justice (Ennis 1967, Reiss 1967, Biderman *et al.* 1967) have suggested that a significant proportion of the population experiences crime-related fears on a regular basis. See Hale (1996), and Ditton and Farrall (2000a) for reviews of this literature. Numerous countries, it would appear, have 'successively run mad upon this subject'.
2. For example, less than half of all crimes reported in the 1992 British Crime Survey were reported to the police, with the most common explanation for failing to report being that the event was 'too trivial', Mayhew *et al.* (1993: viii and 25).
3. This question wording builds upon the observations made by Sterngold *et al.* (1994), that filter questions reduce the likelihood of survey questions leading respondents towards giving attitudinal responses about issues which they have no attitude.
4. This question wording is aimed at capturing absolute frequency rather than relative frequency (Schaeffer 1991).
5. Nor should the adoption of these questions be seen as the end of the matter (even if they do prove useful post piloting). There is still a need for those researching the fear of crime to undertake more rigorous back-checks, to rely upon methodological triangulation more than they currently do, and to generally be more sceptical about the responses given during surveys. To this end, I repeat my calls for all of the above (made in Farrall *et al.* 1999 and Farrall and Ditton 1999). More recent work on emotions and crime has started to engage with issues surrounding philosophies of the mind and the meaning of emotions (see, for example, Karstedt 2002).

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