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Psychological proximity and the construal of crime: A commentary on ‘Mapping fear of crime as a context-dependent everyday experience that varies in space and time’

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We agree with Solymosi and colleagues that standard survey methods often struggle to capture the lived reality of fear of crime. Surveys can shed light on the distribution, predictors and potential outcomes of risk perception and emotional experience in a particular population. Yet, the method often seems to ‘flatten out’ the phenomenon, presenting as something that is stable across time and space (cf. Gray, Jackson, & Farrall, 2011). To capture the transitory and situationally-specific nature of fear of crime, innovative technologies are needed. Experience Sampling Methods (ESM) promise to open up new ways of examining situated experiences of fear of crime and understanding of the interpretive processes that drive them in given social and physical contexts.

While acknowledging the advantages of ESM, in this commentary we discuss a potential drawback of the proposed method. In particular, we consider the idea that the methodology may affect the very thing that it measures by sensitising people to crime and risk. But drawing upon the construal level theory of psychological distance (CLT; (Liberman & Trope, 2008; Trope & Liberman, 2010), we argue that this may occur in a psychologically interesting way.

At the core of the method is a smartphone application that asks research participants whether they are – at that very moment – worried about becoming a victim of crime. The application thus invites individuals to think about the personal relevance of crime, but importantly this is framed in terms of personal risk and threat. If the application sensitizes people to think about crime in this way, then it might also lead them to experience more fear of crime by making crime more psychologically proximate. Relevant here are CLT’s two mechanisms by which people are capable of experiencing and expressing reactions to events that are not present in their immediate context. The first mechanism is psychological distance from – or proximity to – the distal event in question. According to Trope and Liberman (2010: 442): ‘Psychological distance refers to the perception of when an event occurs, where it occurs, to whom it occurs, and whether it occurs.’ The second mechanism of CLT is mental construal of the distal event itself that refers to the representation of the event, i.e., ‘what’ might occur.

Starting with psychological distance, individuals can think about crime as an issue – and class of events – that is more or less relevant to them along four dimensions: time (when), space (where), social distance (to whom) and hypotheticality (whether). By ‘pinging’ research participants and asking them whether they are worried about becoming a victim of crime, they are stimulated to not only think about crime as a category of potential events, but also something that could in principle happen in the ‘here and now’ – something that is potentially close to them in terms of time, space, social distance and hypotheticality.

Psychological proximity may also shape how people construe crime itself. According to CLT, representations of a distal event can be high-level (i.e., abstract, superordinate and decontextualized) or low-level (i.e., concrete, subordinate and context-bound). A high-level conception of crime would stress the abstract and organising ‘gist’ of this class of events, e.g., crime as a social problem and its causes. By contrast a low-level conception of crime would stress more varied and concrete features of specific realisations, such as specific crime events and their consequences (for discussion, see

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(Gouseti & Jackson, 2015). If ESM do increase psychological proximity, CLT predicts that people will start to construe crime in more low-level terms (in a more concrete, specific and variegated fashion) when they are notified to report fear of crime. They will begin, for example, to make greater differentiation between types of crime and impact; and they will create a more specific sense of who (i.e. the offender and the victim), where, why and under what conditions the personal risk of crime might occur. In fact, there is a good deal of criminological evidence that fear of crime is strongly related to people making sense of 'signs of crime' in their environment, projecting the possibility of crime onto certain individuals, groups and community conditions (Farrall, Jackson, & Gray, 2009; Ferraro, 1995; Innes, 2014; Skogan & Maxfield, 1981).

In our view, an important next step in the piloting of ESM is to assess whether the method does sensitise people to crime by increasing psychological proximity. If it does, the method risks overstating the extent of fear of crime; indeed it may partly create it (cf. Lee, 2007). But leaving this ethical issue aside for one moment, ESM may be a useful method if it does increase psychological proximity – it could be used to assess the importance of psychological distance and crime construal. CLT may be a powerful theoretical lens through which to explore the mechanisms by which individuals are capable of experiencing and expressing reactions towards crime by projecting risk onto their immediate social and physical environment.

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