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# **Insecurities about Crime in Germany, Austria and Switzerland: A Review of Research Findings<sup>1</sup>**

## **Abstract**

This paper reviews the research literature on insecurities about crime in Germany, Austria and Switzerland. Making criminological studies written in German accessible to the wider European community, we first document how insecurities about crime have been conceptualised and measured in these three countries, and then review the various theoretical positions that have been empirically assessed. We consider the distinctiveness of the German-speaking research on insecurities about crime. We highlight commonalities and differences in the German- and English-language literatures on the topic in a way that makes the review relevant to criminologists from all European countries. Our goal is to help stimulate a truly comparative research agenda on insecurities about crime across the European continent.

**Key words:** Fear of crime; social transformation; Germany; Austria; Switzerland

This paper reviews the research literature on insecurities about crime in Germany, Austria and Switzerland. The exchange of ideas is central to the criminological enterprise but language barriers are often an impediment. If European criminologists are to develop a cohesive and comparative literature, theory and research must be accessible to all. With this goal in mind, our review enables scholars from across Europe to compare their own literatures to that emerging from the German-speaking world.

### *Overview*

Our review falls into two sections. We first document how insecurities about crime (or fear of crime – we use the phrases interchangeably) has been conceptualised and measured in these three countries, before reviewing the theoretical positions that have been empirically assessed. Along the way we address the various historical and political backdrops to the work – in particular the re-unification of East and West Germany – and we highlight parallels and departures in the German- and English-language literatures (since German-speaking research has been heavily influenced by Anglo-Saxon criminology). In contrast to US and UK research, however, the work we review here places special emphasis on the idea that insecurities about crime are just one element of a broader array of social insecurities. We therefore conclude with the argument that future research in other European countries might explore the extent to which insecurities about crime are rooted in public perceptions of neighbourhood breakdown (as in the UK) or in more abstract insecurities about society and social change (as in Germany and Austria).

### *Origins of Research into Fear of Crime*

It was the 1970s before German academics began to express an interest in the topic of fear of crime. First came the argument that people's feelings of insecurity about crime affect their quality of life, and that the state should therefore protect people from both real *and* supposed threats (Schwind et al., 1978). But it was only after the political upheavals in 1989 (Boers, 2003b)<sup>2</sup> that sustained attention was paid to fear of crime, as scholars saw this as an opportunity to study a society undergoing rapid social change. The years following reunification and the fall of the "Iron Curtain" saw the new federal states (from the former German Democratic Republic, GDR) experience an increase in perceptions of insecurity (Boers and Kurz, 1997; Bundesministerium des Innern und Bundesministerium für Justiz, 2006). Since then, fear levels have been higher in the East than in the West (Bilsky 1996; Bilsky et al., 1995; Bundesministerium des Innern und Bundesministerium für Justiz, 2006; Boers 2003a; Dittmann, 2005; Ewald, 2000; Kury et al., 1992; Reuband, 1996; Forschungsgruppe 'Kommunale Kriminalprävention in Baden-Württemberg', 1998), although the mid-1990's witnessed decreasing public anxieties in both the East and West, producing what has been a gradual alignment of the old and the new federal states in levels of fear of crime (Bundesministerium des Innern und Bundesministerium für Justiz, 2006; Dittmann, 2005; Dörrmann and Remmers, 2000).

Research in Switzerland and Austria followed a few years after Germany. Neither country experienced reunification, so they lacked such a stimulus to research the topic. In addition, the criminological infrastructure is more developed in Germany. Levels of fear of crime in Austria have remained relatively low over the last fifteen years, according to the security barometer of the Ministry of the Interior (Giller, 2007). Swiss researchers can draw on several waves of the Swiss Crime Survey, beginning in 1984, showing a trajectory of decreasing levels of fear between mid-1980s and mid-1990s and a steadily increase in levels of fear since then (Killias et al., 2007).

## 1. The meaning and measurement of public insecurities about crime

German-speaking criminologists have long distinguished between *social attitudes to crime* and *personal attitudes towards crime* (Boers, 1991, 1993, 2003a, 2003b; Boers and Kurz, 1997, 2001; Bundesministerium des Innern und Bundesministerium für Justiz, 2006; Dittmann, 2005; Frevel 1998). Social attitudes refer to the degree to which crime is seen as rife and a threat to society (e.g., national crime rates, the evaluation of the police, and attitudes towards punishment). Personal attitudes refer to judgments of one's own personal risk of victimisation. Personal attitudes towards crime are further divided into the *affective*, the *cognitive*, and the *conative* (Bals, 2004; Boers, 1991, 1993, 2003a, 2003b; Boers and Kurz, 1997, 2001; Bundesministerium des Innern und Bundesministerium für Justiz, 2006; Frevel, 1998; Greve et al., 1996; Hirtenlehner, 2006b, 2008; Schwarzenegger, 1992; Schwind et al., 2001). Affective relates to the emotional reaction to crime, while cognitive refers to personal risk assessment. Conative is concerned with protective and avoidance behaviour. Feelings, thoughts and behaviours are also assumed to interact. For example, someone may assess a situation as dangerous (cognitive aspect) when coping skills are judged as inadequate, they may then experience an emotion of fear regarding the situation (affective aspect), and they may then react in a defensive manner (conative aspect) (see Boers and Kurz, 1997).

### *Emotional dimensions to the fear of crime*

While the affective aspect typically refers to the emotional reaction to crime events (Boers 1991, 1993, 2003a; Frevel 1998), the German-speaking literature imported indicators from the US and UK that include: '*How safe do you feel walking alone in your local area after dark?*' ('very safe', 'quite safe', 'a little unsafe', 'very unsafe')<sup>3</sup> (Boers and Kurz, 1997; Boers, 1991, 2003a, 2003b; Bundesministerium des Innern und Bundesministerium für Justiz, 2006; Lüdemann, 2006; Reuband, 2000a) or '*Is there an area around here – that is, within a kilometre - where you would not like to go by yourself at night?*'<sup>4</sup> (Reuband, 1992, 2000a; Arnold, 1991; Schwarzenegger, 1992). The use of such measures is declining in part due to methodological criticism by Boers and Kurz (1997), Boers (2003a, 2003b) and others.<sup>5</sup>

Better measures differentiate between specific criminal offences (cf. Greve et al., 1996; Hirtenlehner, 2006b, 2008; Janssen and Schollmeyer, 2001; Reuband, 2000a, 2006). Such indicators often refer to levels (intensity) of worry, e.g.: '*How much do you worry, out alone in your neighbourhood after dark, about being threatened or verbally abused, beaten up, robbed or mugged, murdered, sexually molested, assaulted, raped?*' ('Not at all worried', 'Somewhat worried', 'Quite worried', 'Very worried').<sup>6</sup> It remains unclear what people mean when they say they are (for example) fairly worried about being burgled. How often do they worry? When they worry is it always at the same intensity? To what extent do these worries stimulate precaution or erode psychological well-being?<sup>7</sup> Future research might examine the everyday experience of anxieties, worries and fears about personal safety and victimisation threat, and rounds 3 and 4 of the European Social Survey provide data on the everyday impact of worry about crime.

### *Cognitive dimensions of fear of crime*

Numerous studies have distinguished between cognitive and emotional components of attitudes towards crime (Bals, 2004; Boers, 1991, 1993, 2003a; Hirtenlehner 2006b, 2008; Lüdemann, 2006; Schwarzenegger, 1992). Two distinct factors emerge via exploratory factor analysis, suggesting that risk assessment and emotional reactions are conceptually related but empirically separable dimensions (Reuband, 2000a; Forschungsgruppe 'Kommunale Kriminalprävention in Baden-Württemberg', 1998; Kury and Obergfell-

Fuchs, 1998; Obergfell-Fuchs and Kury, 1996). Normally measured in terms of personal risk assessments of falling victim (Boers 1991; Boers and Kurz, 1997, 2001; Hirtenlehner, 2006b, 2008; Schwind et al., 2001; Schwarzenegger, 1992; Bals, 2004; Lüdemann, 2006), cognitive aspects of fear of crime refer to perceptions of the personal likelihood of victimisation. For example, Boers and Kurz (1997) asked individuals: *'How likely do you think it is, that in your local area you could be molested, get beaten up, be assaulted and robbed, killed, sexually harassed, attacked or raped?'* ('Not at all likely', 'Somewhat likely', 'Quite likely', 'Very likely').<sup>8</sup> In many cases the reference period is limited to the next twelve months (e.g. Bals, 2004; Hirtenlehner, 2006b, 2008; Kräupl and Ludwig, 1993; Lüdemann 2006; Kury et al., 1992; Reuband 2000a, 2001; Schwarzenegger, 1992; Dörmann and Remmers, 2000).

The narrow focus on perceived likelihood of victimisation echoes a dominant but limited conception of perceived risk that is also evident in US and UK research. Future studies might explore the utility of expanding risk perception to include not just perceived likelihood, but also perceived control and consequence (Warr, 1987; Tulloch, 2003; Jackson, 2005, 2009). One of the first steps in this direction began in Switzerland. In a theoretical paper, Killias (1990: 98) suggests that there are three dimensions to perceived susceptibility to crime: exposure to risk; the anticipation of serious consequences; and the loss of control. According to Killias, each dimension is associated with physical, social and situational aspects of vulnerability. For example, more serious consequences are expected to occur amongst women, the elderly, and people in bad health (physical factors), amongst victims without networks of social support (social factors), and in isolated areas where no help is available (situational factors).

#### *Conative (behavioural) dimensions to the fear of crime*

Behaviours (protective and avoidance behaviour) are thought to be both brought about by – as well as being constitutive of – fear of crime (Bals, 2004; Boers 1991, 2003a; Boers and Kurz, 1997; Frevel, 1998; Greve et al., 1996). Avoidance behaviour is usually measured by asking people about the ways they behave 'simply as a result of crime' or their behavioural responses when they feel threatened by crime. These include the avoidance of specific modes of transportation, places (streets, parks) and groups of people (young people, immigrants). But they can also include actions that people take to protect themselves or their property (Boers, 1991, 2003a, 2003b; Boers and Kurz, 1997; Bundesministerium des Innern und Bundesministerium für Justiz, 2006; Greve et al., 1996; Schwind et al., 2001). One way of asking this is *'Do you avoid certain streets or parks when you walk alone at nights in your local area, to prevent something happening to you?'*<sup>9</sup> (Kury et al., 1992). Other questions ask about behaviours over the last twelve months (see for example, Lüdemann, 2006).

However, despite the importance of asking people what they do in relation to the threat of crime, in comparison to affective and cognitive dimensions, the conative (behavioural) aspect receives less attention in empirical research in Germany, Austria and Switzerland. This is also true in the US and UK, although there is early UK evidence that worry can actually motivate people to take precautions that in turn reduce risk and feelings of insecurity (Jackson & Gray, 2009). Future research across Europe might explore how people manage their sense of risk through their own crime preventive behaviours.

#### *Methodological research*

There has been a good deal of debate over how best to measure fear of crime (Obergfell-Fuchs et al., 2003), in part fuelled by empirical evidence that different methods can yield different results. Kreuter (2002) argues that attitudes towards crime are in fact akin to non-attitudes, triggered by the question rather than recollection of actual experience. Kury

et al., (2004) argue that answers to questions such as ‘*How safe do you feel walking alone in this area after dark?*’ might simply reflect insecurity in ambiguous situations rather than concrete emotions regarding perceived threat of crime. Such an argument posits that much of what has been termed ‘fear of crime’ might more accurately be referred to as unease about disorder and incivility, as grievances on the communal and political level, as well as calls by citizens for interventions by local authorities. For example, a Viennese study (Stangl, 1996) used narrative interviews to highlight how problematic experiences in public spaces were mainly concerned with irritations associated with disorder – threats of crime were of minor importance in people’s daily lives.

## **2. Explanations of public insecurities about crime**

Three main perspectives to explain fear of crime can be found in the German-speaking literature (Boers, 1991, 2003a; Bundesministerium des Innern und Bundesministerium für Justiz, 2006; Frevel, 1998). Each operates at one of three levels of explanation: the victimisation thesis operates at the personal level; the social control perspective operates at the social meso-level; and the social problem perspective operates at the social macro-level. Drawing together some of the principal arguments of the three perspectives is the task of the interactive model of Klaus Boers (1991, 1993, 2003a; Boers and Kurz, 1997, 2001).

### *Personal level: Victimisation perspective*

According to the victimisation perspective, fear of crime should be largely the result of personal experience of crime. In line with this view, people who have been victims of an offence – especially if the offence was violent or sexual – will be more afraid of becoming a victim in the future (Boers 1991, 2003a; Boers and Kurz, 1997; Bundesministerium des Innern und Bundesministerium für Justiz, 2006; Frevel, 1998) than people who have not been victimised. Contrary to expectations, however, fear of crime does not seem to be strongly related to area-level crime levels (Boers, 1991; Boers and Kurz, 1997; Lüdemann, 2006; Schwind et al., 2001). Indeed, the high fear of crime in Eastern Germany after re-unification cannot be explained by high victimisation rates, since crime rates were never higher in the East than in the West of Germany (Boers, 1996; Boers and Kurz, 1997).

Some effect of victimisation has been found on affective aspects of fear, but as with the Anglo-Saxon literature these effects are rather weak (Bilsky et al., 1995; Boers and Kurz, 1997; Janssen and Schollmeyer, 2001; Killias et al., 2007; Kury et al., 1992; Kury and Oberfell-Fuchs, 1998; Lüdemann, 2006; Schwarzenegger, 1992). At the same time, victimisation does seem to have a stronger impact on cognitive dimensions of fear of crime compared to emotional dimensions (Boers, 2003b; Gabriel und Greve, 2003; Frevel, 1998), with experiences of victimisation often more closely connected with perceived risk than with emotional fear (Boers, 1991, 2003b; Boers and Kurz, 1997; Bundesministerium des Innern und Bundesministerium für Justiz, 2006; Frevel, 1998; Schwarzenegger 1992). Interestingly, the statistical significance of the effect of victimisation on fear disappears after controlling either for socio-demographic variables or perceived risk (Arnold, 1991; Boers, 2003a; Bundesministerium des Innern und Bundesministerium für Justiz, 2006), suggesting that some social groups experience higher levels of victimisation than other social groups, and that victimisation raises subjective perceptions of risk which in turn increase emotional fear.

If fear of crime is strongly related to victimization, then we might also expect that groups with higher victimisation rates should be the most fearful ones. Yet women and older people – who have the lowest victimisation rates – seem to fear victimisation more

than men and young people do (the ‘fear of crime-victimisation paradox’, see Boers and Kurz, 1997; Boers, 1991, 2003a; Bundesministerium des Innern und Bundesministerium für Justiz, 2006; Reuband, 1992), especially when it comes to sexual assault, harassment and rape (Killias et al., 2007; Reuband, 1992; Kury et al., 1992; Kury and Obergfell-Fuchs, 1998; Arnold, 1991; Forschungsgruppe ‘Kommunale Kriminalprävention in Baden-Württemberg’, 1998; Lüdemann, 2006; Boers, 1991, 1993; Feistritzer and Stangl, 2006; Schwarzenegger, 1992). But the fact that women have higher fear levels regarding other types of offences suggests that women’s fear goes beyond the fear of sexual offences (Bundesministerium des Innern und Bundesministerium für Justiz, 2006; Boers, 2003a; Frevel, 1998).

Findings concerning the age-fear relationship are mixed. In some studies older people tend to report higher levels of fear of crime (Killias et al., 2007; Lüdemann, 2006; Oberwittler, 2008; Boers, 1991, 1993; Hohage, 2004) while other work finds curvilinear relationships (Feistritzer and Stangl, 2006; Kury et al., 1992; Schwarzenegger, 1992). Moreover, the age-fear relationship is sometimes slightly different for men and for women: for women some studies indicate that younger people are more afraid than are older people, but for men fear of crime tends to increase with age (Kury and Obergfell-Fuchs, 1998; Forschungsgruppe ‘Kommunale Kriminalprävention in Baden-Württemberg’, 1998). In other research no significant age differences are found (Bals, 2004; Greve et al., 1996; Hirtenlehner, 2006b).

Some explanations have been advanced for the fear of crime and victimisation paradox. Bilsky and Wetzels (1994) argue that if victimisation is measured using a drop-off and sealed-envelope survey, women actually report higher victimisation rates than men. Higher correlations between fear of crime and victimisations can also be found if a narrower definition of non-victims is used, and if the asymmetry of distribution is considered (see also Bilsky et al., 1995). Moreover, Kury’s (1994) research suggests that lower levels of fear of crime are reported partly because of increased social desirability effects among males.

Indeed, indirect victimisation experiences and the experiences of others known by the respondent may also be important. In their report on crime and crime control in Germany, the Federal Ministry of the Interior and the Federal Ministry of Justice (Bundesministerium des Innern und Bundesministerium für Justiz, 2006) considered the role of interpersonal communications (such as conversations about the victimisation of known others). Ewald (2000) argues that the rise in fear of crime in Eastern Germany after reunification can be partially explained in terms of more communication about crime, measured by increasing proportions of respondents reporting that they know people who had experienced crime. However, only moderate relationships between indirect victimisation and fear of crime have been observed (see for example, Arnold, 1991; Boers, 1991; Lüdemann, 2006; Schwarzenegger, 1992). Some studies could not find evidence for a fear-enhancing effect of vicarious victimisation (Bals, 2004; Boers and Kurz, 1997). Vicarious victimisation seems to affect perceived risk more than affective feelings of security (Bals, 2004; Boers, 2003a; Schwarzenegger, 1992).

#### *Social meso level: Informal social control perspective*

Overall, there is little evidence that fear of crime is simply (or solely) the result of victimisation. The informal social control approach, by contrast, seeks to explain fear of crime in terms of features in the neighbourhood that people associate with crime (Boers 1991, 2003a; Boers and Kurz, 1997; Bundesministerium des Innern und Bundesministerium für Justiz, 2006; Frevel, 1998; Hirtenlehner, 2008; Hohage, 2004). Individuals perceive certain characteristics in the immediate environment as signs of

social disorganisation and instability (such as dirt and garbage, and groups of juveniles hanging out on the streets), indicating that there is something wrong with the neighbourhood and that the community's capacity to regulate people's behaviour is impaired.

Numerous studies have found a close connection between perceived incivilities and crime-related feelings of insecurity (Bals, 2004; Boers and Kurz, 1997; Häfele and Lüdemann, 2006; Hirtenlehner, 2006a, 2008; Hohage, 2004; Janssen and Schollmeyer, 2001). For example, Austrian studies have shown that low levels of disorder in public spaces have been a protective factor against fear in Vienna (Hanak et al., 2004, 2007; Hanak, Karazman-Morawetz and Krajewski, 2007). And while the effect of perceptions of disorder on fear of crime is generally found to be mediated by risk assessment, some studies have found a significant effect even after controlling for the perception of risk (Bals, 2004; Hirtenlehner, 2006b, 2008).

Research on public perceptions of neighbourhood breakdown and stability mirrors some US and UK research (Hale, 1996), which suggests that people draw from signs of neighbourhood breakdown and information about crime and risk (Ferraro, 1995). But it also suggests that fear of crime expresses public beliefs that there are signs of crime present in their neighbourhood. The perceptual processes that underpin such beliefs may reflect a series of inferences, stereotypes and evaluations about social and moral boundaries and the things viewed as hostile to settled community and shared trust (Farrall et al., 2009).

#### *Social macro level: Social problem perspective*

There are two main approaches to the effect of macro level explanations of fear of crime. While they are often categorised in the German-speaking literature as part of the same approach (Boers 1991, 2003a), sometimes they are decoupled (Hirtenlehner 2006a, 2009; Hirtenlehner and Karazman-Morawetz, 2004a, 2004b). Given their different foci they will be discussed separately here.

The first approach understands fear of crime as a social phenomenon shaped by the dramatisation and exploitation of crime in the arenas of politics and mass media (Bals, 2004; Boers 1991, 1993, 2003a; Boers and Kurz, 1997; Bundesministerium des Innern und Bundesministerium für Justiz, 2006; Frevel, 1998; Hirtenlehner, 2006a). While the mass media may be especially important (Frevel, 1998), only a few studies in the German-speaking countries investigate the relationship between media reporting and fear of crime (Boers, 1991; Pfeiffer et al., 2004, 2005; Reuband, 1998; Schwarzenegger, 1992). What exists has found only weak (Reuband, 1998) or very weak (Boers, 1991; Schwarzenegger, 1992) associations between fear of crime and media crime reports. Reuband (1998) suggested that the effect of media crime reporting on fear of crime was mediated by perceived risk, while Boers (1991) and Schwarzenegger (1992) showed weak correlations between media consumption and emotional fear even after controlling for risk appraisal. Crime coverage on TV may be more influential than crime coverage in newspapers (Boers, 1991; Schwarzenegger, 1992), with Reuband (1998) finding a robust statistical effect between television viewing and fear of crime.

Boers and Kurz (1997) and Kury et al. (1992), argue that the role of the mass media may be of particular importance in the case of East Germany, since after reunification people started to have access to media from the West. Observing events about which they previously had no information may have created for East Germans a feeling of soaring crime rates (Janssen and Schollmeyer, 2001; Reuband, 2000b). Measuring the content of news articles in Dresden and Düsseldorf before and after reunification, Reuband (2001) found that the average daily number of articles about crime



in East Germany increased significantly, eventually reaching similar numbers to those found in the West. Yet, while he assumes that the increase in media coverage of crime explains the increase in fear of crime after reunification, there are no data to support this claim (Boers and Kurz, 1997).

A second approach understands fear of crime in the context of general anxieties and uncertainties in times of social change (Ewald, 2000; Herrmann et al., 2003; Hirtenlehner, 2006a, 2009; Hirtenlehner and Karazman-Morawetz, 2004a, 2004b; Kunz, 1983; Sessar, 2008). This approach is sometimes referred to as the *generalisation* thesis (Hirtenlehner 2006a, 2009; Hirtenlehner and Karazman-Morawetz, 2004a, 2004b), and here again there are parallels with the UK literature (Taylor and Jamieson, 1998; Girling et al., 2000; Jackson, 2004, 2006; Farrall et al., 2009).

Drawing on theorists of ‘the risk society’, the argument is that fear of crime is part of a generalised and diffuse anxiety brought about by late modernity (Ewald, 2000; Herrmann et al., 2003; Hirtenlehner, 2006a, 2009; Hirtenlehner and Karazman-Morawetz, 2004a, 2004b; Kunz, 1983; Sessar, 2008). More particularly, diffuse anxieties are projected by citizens onto crime and criminals and fear is thus transferred to a more identifiable problem (Hirtenlehner, 2006a, 2009; Herrmann et al., 2003). Fear of crime may thus be best understood as a symbol of global and social changes, rather than the product of objective concerns about crime.

Empirical research concerning the so-called generalisation thesis is predominantly conducted in Austria. Analysing data from a survey set in Vienna, Hirtenlehner and Karazman-Morawetz (2004a, 2004b) argue that global, social and crime-related feelings of insecurity (as well as irritation with regard to “incivility” in the neighbourhood) may in fact form a monolithic syndrome of insecurity. Hirtenlehner (2006a) analysed data from a Linz sample and claim that abstract insecurities may explain the joint distribution of four subdimensions of generalised anxiety (fear of crime, social fears, life fears and disorders). There is other evidence for the generalisation thesis. First of all, research has shown that economically and socially vulnerable people tend to show higher levels of fear of crime (Boers, 1991). Second, fear of crime has been found to be related to high levels of anomie (Oberfell-Fuchs and Kury, 1996) and to general social problems in Vienna, such as fears of global threats and signs of social destabilisation (Hirtenlehner and Karazman-Morawetz, 2004a, 2004b).

Equally, research in Vienna suggests that the favourable assessment of the local security situation is not as much related to close-knitted social networks or a stable integration into the neighbourhood, but rather to a general trust in the state and its institutions (Hanak et al., 2004, 2007; Hanak et al., 2007). The continuity of the Fordist welfare state sets the foundations for immunity to crime-related insecurity feelings, with Austria’s trust in national and local institutions and authorities protecting citizens from the risks of late modernity (Hirtenlehner and Karazman-Morawetz, 2004a, 2004b). This explanation fits the trajectory of fear of crime in Germany especially well, in that the increase in fear of crime in East Germany after the social upheavals and reunification in 1989/90 can be explained in terms of the insecurity caused by the social changes that took place (Boers and Kurz, 1997; Forschungsgruppe ‘Kommunale Kriminalprävention in Baden-Württemberg’, 1998; Ewald, 2000; Reuband, 1996). Meanwhile, the subsequent decline in the rates of fear of crime after 1995 can be understood as part of an adaptation process (Boers and Kurz, 1997; Reuband, 2001; Ewald, 2000). The more that people get used to the new system, its structures and rules, the less diffuse insecurities are projected onto crime.

### *Interactive Model*

Powerful explanations of fear of crime are likely to draw upon a number of different levels of analysis – this much we know from decades of social scientific research. So Klaus Boers' (1991, 1993, 2003a; Boers and Kurz, 1997, 2001) interactive model, which integrates the different components into one framework, is of special interest. The model distinguishes between social attitudes towards crime on the one hand and personal attitudes towards crime on the other. It stresses how they interact and are shaped by the closer and wider social environment. According to this model, experiences of victimisation, media reports and signs of social disorganisation affect the perception of risk, while perceived risk leads to increased fear of crime when accompanied by a lack of coping resources (Boers, 2003a).

People's coping abilities in the relationship between risk appraisal and fear of crime are important to the framework. Coping abilities can be understood as the personal appraisal of the ability to deal with dangerous, crime-related situations. They are expected to moderate the effect of perceived risk on fear of crime. Little confidence in one's chances to master a situation successfully will allow an increased awareness of risk to increase the fear of crime. Boers and Kurz (1997) approach vulnerability through the concept of social milieus. This approach considers horizontal differences, shaped mainly by people's cultural and normative preferences, with social milieus measured in terms of social position (e.g. education, income) and cultural-normative orientation (capturing openness to new experiences, importance of education, and so forth). People in social milieus with higher levels of social, psychical, physical or economic vulnerability are expected to have lower coping abilities and therefore higher levels of fear of crime.

Testing this relationship Boers and Kurz (1997; 2001) found that in West Germany people in social milieus with low social, economic and normative resources were more worried about crime than people in other settings. However, in East Germany fear was found to be more associated with age and gender than to the social milieu of the respondent. Boers and Kurz (1997) argue that the observed association in the East can be interpreted as a special case due to the social upheavals of the 1990s.

The explanatory power of the interactive model has only been rudimentarily examined. Several studies document a connection between levels of fear and the assessment of risk or the above mentioned socio-demographic variables (e.g. Boers, 1991, 1993; Janssen and Schollmeyer, 2001; Kury and Obergfell-Fuchs, 1998; Schwarzenegger, 1992). But the subjective assessment of personal coping abilities has generally been neglected. Furthermore, risk assessment and social variables are mostly introduced simultaneously in regression models without allowing for their interaction (Bals, 2004; Boers, 1991, 1993; Janssen and Schollmeyer, 2001; Schwarzenegger, 1992). This permits the isolation of the main effects of these variables, but it does not permit testing of an interaction effect between risk appraisal and coping indicators. The few studies in which data on personal coping skills are collected directly often show the expected relationship between coping abilities and fear of crime, but in many cases ignore risk appraisal (e.g. Killias and Clerici, 2000; Killias et al., 2007).

Only one study has tested the interactive model as a whole, namely Hirtenlehner's (2006b) study with Austrian data. The core thesis of the interactive constitution of fear of crime in terms of risk perception and negative assessment of coping abilities could not be confirmed. No significant interaction between risk assessment and coping abilities was found. Even though fear of crime was increased as a direct consequence of the anticipation of risk, coping resources did not play a moderating role.

### **3. Summary**

Our final goal is to consider more broadly the distinctiveness of the research on insecurities about crime conducted in Germany, Austria and Switzerland. We highlight some similarities and some differences with the Anglo-Saxon literature. And we identify future opportunities for exchange, not just with UK and US researchers, but also with criminologists from across Europe.

The systematic interest in public perceptions of security in Germany came only in the context of reunification and the fall of the “Iron Curtain” (Oberfell-Fuchs and Kury, 2003). In Germany, but also in Austria and Switzerland, belated attention to the issue meant that research was from the beginning heavily influenced by the Anglo-Saxon research. Explanatory models, empirical tools and policy discussions have developed and sometimes been uncritically adopted. But perhaps there are two main areas of special interest for the broader European criminological community. First, German-speaking criminology has been concerned with the systematisation of diverse and multi-faceted findings. Klaus Boers’ interactive model is the core of this systematisation process (1991, 1993, 2003a; Boers and Kurz, 1997, 2001), and is widely accepted in the German-speaking countries; nearly all studies at least implicitly refer to it. Its merit lies in two different aspects. First, it carefully differentiates the various components of public attitudes towards crime. Second, it is a coherent integration of the major explanatory approaches found in the international literature. Crucially, this model has potential for further research at the international level, indeed such a comprehensive and detailed incorporation of the vulnerability theory can still not be found in the Anglo-Saxon context.

Second, studies on the social control perspective often show a close correlation between perceptions of incivility and fear of crime. But contrary to Anglo-Saxon work, authors from Austria (Hirtenlehner, 2008) and Germany (Lüdemann, 2006) attribute the insignificance of local informal social control to the strong role of the state in these countries. Indeed, the breeding ground of the autonomous contributions of German-speaking criminology can be found in the radical changes of the former GDR and the marked welfare state tradition. This context led German-speaking criminologists to consider fear of crime to be embedded in wider social anxieties and uncertainties. The collapse of the GDR and its reunification with the former Federal Republic of Germany was used by German criminologists as a ‘natural experiment’ to study the effects of rapid social transformation processes on crime and perceptions of insecurity (Boers et al., 1997). A special emphasis was placed on the development of perceptions of insecurity in those new federal states in the East of Germany most affected by the social upheaval. This unique opportunity led from the beginning to a consideration of fear of crime in the context of social, economic and existential uncertainties.

The marked regulation and welfare state tradition of the German-speaking countries, and the central role played by the state in managing the upheaval, resulted in German-speaking countries being less concerned with the strengthening of the community (social capital and informal social control) and more with the institutional protection of existential risks (Hirtenlehner, 2009; Hirtenlehner and Karazman-Morawetz, 2004a, 2004b; Kunz, 1983). In particular, Austrian research has highlighted the role of the welfare state and its institutions in the stabilisation of high perceptions of security (Giller, 2007; Hanak et al., 2007; Hirtenlehner 2006a, 2009). The generalisation thesis (Hirtenlehner, 2006a, 2009) understands fear of crime as a projection of diffuse social and existential anxieties, fed by social transformation processes. Compared to the Anglo-Saxon perspective, there is more emphasis placed on the role of these global and national concerns in the fear of crime. While the British and American literature emphasises the

role of the neighbourhood and the community, the German research is more concerned with the impact of global and 'remote' uncertainties on citizen's well-being.

Research from other European countries may shed some important light here. How do different communal and societal characteristics interact with cultural and institutional conditions in shaping people's insecurities about crime? To what extent does the socio-cultural, institutional and political context influence scientific reflections on fear of crime? In some countries, public perceptions of crime may operate against the backdrop of broader anxieties about long-term social change, but crucially these anxieties translate into fears of crime through mediating perceptions of community and neighbourhood (as found in the UK research of Girling et al., 2000; Jackson, 2004; Farrall et al., 2009). In other countries, fear of crime may be just one facet of this broader set of insecurities (as found in some Austrian and German research, Sessar; Hirtenlehner, 2006). These issues focus our attention upon the contextual factors that affect the discourse on social anxieties about crime. An increased exchange between European scholars may help clarify some of these questions, and this paper has attempted to promote such scholarly interaction.

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<sup>2</sup> Of the few studies conducted in then Western Germany, we should mention Stephan (1976) and Schwind et al. (1978).

<sup>3</sup> From the original: 'Wie sicher fühlen Sie sich, wenn Sie abends im Dunkeln alleine durch die Strassen Ihres Stadtteils/Dorfes gehen?' ('sehr sicher', 'ziemlich sicher', 'etwas unsicher', 'sehr unsicher').

<sup>4</sup> From the original: 'Gibt es eigentlich hier in der unmittelbaren Nähe – ich meine im Umkreis von einem Kilometer – irgendeine Gegend, wo Sie nachts nicht alleine hingehen möchten?'.

<sup>5</sup> This is largely a function of critiques of the measures themselves. First, it may be difficult to capture a construct as complex as fear of crime with one single question (Kury et al., 1992; Bilsky and Wetzels, 1994). Second, some of the items do not mention crime as the reason for feeling insecure. They may thus capture a variety of other insecurities that are not related to crime in a narrow sense, like fear of being alone, fear of the dark or fear of being outside (Reuband 2000a). Third, some of them refer to anticipated fictitious or hypothetical events many people will never encounter (Bilsky and Wetzels, 1994; Bundesministerium des Innern und Bundesministerium für Justiz, 2006). Fourth, they do not differentiate between different types of offences (Boers, 1991, 2003b). And fifth, some vague measures of fear of crime may be used as a tool to express unease with living conditions and social circumstances in the immediate environment (Hanak, Karazman-Morawetz and Stangl, 2007, Hirtenlehner, 2009). Because of all this, the standard items may be tapping into different types of fear or even a diffuse fear of ambivalent situations (Boers, 1991, 2003a, 2003b; Boers and Kurz, 1997; Bundesministerium des Innern und Bundesministerium für Justiz, 2006). Furthermore, the situational context—places and times—may also have an effect on the results obtained (Boers and Kurz, 1997; Bundesministerium des Innern und Bundesministerium für Justiz, 2006). The formulation of such measures may lead to an overestimation of the real levels of fear of crime.

<sup>6</sup> From the original: 'Inwieweit beunruhigt es Sie, abends im Dunkeln in Ihrem Stadtteil/Dorf angepöbelt, zusammengeschlagen, überfallen und beraubt, getötet, sexuell belästigt, angegriffen oder vergewaltigt zu werden?' ('gar nicht beunruhigt', 'etwas beunruhigt', 'ziemlich beunruhigt', 'sehr beunruhigt').

<sup>7</sup> For a programme of UK research, see Farrall, Bannister, Ditton and Gilchrist, 1997; Farrall & Gadd, 2004; Jackson, 2005; Gray, Jackson and Farrall, 2008; Jackson & Gray, 2009; Farrall, Jackson and Gray, 2009), perhaps even using qualitative, diary and experience sampling methods (Gray *et al.*, 2008).

<sup>8</sup> From the original: 'Für wie wahrscheinlich halten Sie es, dass Sie tatsächlich in Ihrem Stadtteil/Dorf abends im Dunkeln angepöbelt, zusammengeschlagen, überfallen und beraubt, getötet, sexuell genötigt, angegriffen oder vergewaltigt werden könnten?' ('gar nicht wahrscheinlich', 'etwas wahrscheinlich', 'ziemlich wahrscheinlich', 'sehr wahrscheinlich').

<sup>9</sup> From the original: 'Wenn Sie hier nach Einbruch der Dunkelheit in ihrer Gegend alleine durch Strassen gehen, vermeiden Sie dann gewisse Strassen oder Plätze, um zu verhindern, dass Ihnen etwas passieren könnte?'.