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Whose fear is it anyway? Resisting terror fear and fear for children

Rachel Pain

This chapter explores the insights that critical scholarship on the fear of crime has to offer for understanding fear of terrorism. I begin by observing that at least three widely circulating metanarratives about fear are identifiable in the west since September 11th 2001, intersecting popular culture, governance and academic scholarship. One is that terrorists are using fear as a weapon against western societies which is as effective as bombing itself. After the London bombings of July 7th 2005, the media suggested that our fear of terrorism was widespread (though not without congratulating Britons on their resilience and stiff upper lip, in comparison with supposed mass hysteria after September 11th). Another is that governments are promoting and manipulating fear in order to sanction domestic and foreign political priorities (see Cowen and Gilbert, and Megoran, in this volume). A third is that the victims of the war on terror are marginalised groups outside or within the west.

The most dominant and politically practicable idea – deployed by both neoliberal governments and their critics - is that people in western societies are now widely fearful of terrorism. However, such metanarratives contain crucial assumptions, not only about the movement of fear from political acts and discourses to ordinary people, but also about who is affected most by fear, and where. These need to be countered, as fear metanarratives have disturbing political implications which have not been considered in the recent spate of attention from critical scholars. As critical research on fear of crime has long maintained, people's emotions are not simply reactive to events, or this easily open to contagion, because they are already situated in complex individual and collective histories, places and everyday experiences (see Davidson et al. 2005; Alexander in this volume).

The chapter illustrates the danger of over-simplifying the impact of terror wars by drawing parallels between the new supposed terror fear and fear for children's outdoor safety. Stranger danger for children is a longer-standing western concern in which certain metanarratives of prevention and protection (such as 'paranoid parenting') also become privileged at the expense of textured understandings of emotions in the everyday lives of those who are marginalised¹. I use recent research about risk and fear from children's perspectives to illustrate the difficulties inherent in making remote assumptions about the fears of others; and to promote the need to listen to the narratives, as well as recognise the resistances and actions, of those concerned. For both terror fear and fear for children, I suggest that caution must be exercised in the naming, knowing, placing and privileging of certain fears rather than others.

Whose fear is it anyway?

I begin by questioning the current emphasis on the war on terror in debates around fear, even though this 'war' is an increasingly central subject of academic as well as popular interest. This emphasis should be open to question rather than taken for granted for at least four reasons.

First, in practical terms, there is surprisingly little in-depth research suggesting how terrorist events affect fear among the wider population. Their impact is presumed rather than demonstrated. There is, to be sure, evidence of long term trauma for those directly or closely affected, and there was evidence of short term anxiety among those using public transport in London in 2005. But beyond the first few weeks after these incidents - and I am speaking here of western countries where terrorism is rare - how intensely people in general feel fearful as a result of terrorist incidents, how it affects the way we go about our everyday lives, and how serious it is in comparison with other everyday concerns is largely unknown.

Second, speculating about these fears is conceptually complex, as it assumes that we know how fear works at a collective level. While there are simple theories of transmission and more complex theories of affective contagion, the truth is we do not know how fear may have diffused socially and spatially after recent incidents. These questions also connect to the intent of those who spread fear – both the terrorists in their pronouncement that ‘Britain is now burning with fear, terror and panic in its northern, southern, eastern and western quarters’², and the ways in which British, US and other governments have used the idea of fear to justify political actions at home and abroad in response to similar incidents (see Cowen and Gilbert in this volume; Robin 2004; Sparke 2005; Gregory and Pred 2007).

Third, the relationship between terror and fear is likely to be highly dependent on context; at a mundane level how safe and protected we generally feel, and at a more critical level what sort of global postcolonial relations we have with other nations and peoples (see Hopkins and Smith in this volume). Within Britain, there are socio-cultural gulfs between London and other regions which affect any scaling up of generalisation about how it might affect the wider population. And in particular places, the context and details of people’s lives shape how they relate and respond to more visible incidents. As I will go on to argue in relation to children’s fears, social marginality and social wellbeing are especially important axes here.

Fourthly, and following directly from this, discussions of fear and the war on terror bring issues of positioning to the fore. Who can I, or anyone, speak for, given the complexities and gaps in knowledge listed above? Other chapters offer grounded insights into the significant fears of *specific* communities within western populations (see Hopkins and Smith on Muslim communities, and Noble and Poynting on migrants in this volume). For many of us, these are the ‘new’ global fears which seem most urgent, and as these authors emphasise, they are not so new.

These difficulties in evaluating terror fears reflect a wider theme of this chapter: that of problematising expert knowledges about fear. The way in which fear has rapidly been cast in academic and popular discourses since 2001 can be questioned. For example, the fact that metanarratives of fear are manufactured by state and media is useful for legitimising policy, and questioning this is a useful line of policy critique, but the assumption of homogenously and equally fearful masses should not be assumed. We need to pay more careful attention to *whose* fear it is that we are talking about.

Fear of crime: what does critical analysis tell us?

In contrast to terror fear, fear about children in public space have received a considerable amount of attention. While other risks to children's safety have been explored (Roberts et al 1995; Hillman et al 1990), most of the literature has concentrated on fear of crime. In criminal justice and community safety policy-making, young people are almost exclusively defined as the perpetrators not the victims of crime, but a robust body of critical literature now challenges the associated givens about fear within mainstream discourses, often grounded in sensitive local fieldwork. Recent accounts of parents' fears for their children (Tucker 2003; Valentine 1997) have been joined by investigations of children's own fears (Anderson et al. 1994; Maguire and Shirlow 2004; Pain 2006; Tucker 2003). Such work explores the contradictory position of children, who are viewed in western societies as both vulnerable and as troublesome, as victims and perpetrators of disorder and crime (Aitken 2001; Scott et al. 1998; Valentine 1996, 1997). Poverty, race, gender and geography profoundly affect everyday experiences. Young people variously labelled marginalised or excluded – for example those from black and minority ethnic backgrounds, those who are homeless, excluded from school, suffering mental health problems or living in deprived neighbourhoods - are more likely to be victims of crime than offenders, and to be fearful as well as feared (Aitken 2001; MacIntyre 2000; Muncie 2003; Pain and Francis 2004).

The parallels with terror fears are clear: while they tend to be represented in the popular media as though they are distributed across a flat earth, the hidden impacts of terror in the west are sharply unequal and unjust; they are largely felt by othered bodies associated with threat (see Haldrup et al. in this volume). As we have discussed (Pain and Smith in this volume), there are questions around how we name, place, know and privilege fear raised in the critical literature on fear of crime which are also highly relevant to the global fears which this book begins to disentangle. This disentangling requires interrogating and questioning *whose* fear we are talking about, and emphasising the accounts of those who feel and are affected by it.

Contested fears for children's outdoor safety

To illustrate these points, I first make a critique, and then go on to show how these problems might be addressed, by discussing recent debates about children's outdoor safety in the western world. Below, I discuss 'paranoid parenting' as a widespread metanarrative in western societies. I then ground this critique using research conducted with children in north east England. The comparison to terror fear is relevant as the research examined children's everyday experiences and understandings of fear in relation to widespread discourses about danger and childhood. I was interested in examining fear discourses beyond public panics and media frenzies about strangers or paedophiles, to include expert knowledges of fear created by academic and other professional commentators. The research found that these expert knowledges contrast sharply with children's own knowledges and material experiences of fear, danger and harm.

'Paranoid parenting' as a metanarrative

While there is now much work across the social sciences on children, risk and fear, I want to take as an example of an expert discourse the work of Frank Furedi, author of *Culture of Fear* (2002) and *Paranoid Parenting* (2001). I have chosen this focus because of the wider resonance of his arguments, and the speed with which they were taken up in the popular media. The tone of his work is reflective of a wider body of social critique about parents worrying excessively and irrationally about their children in the UK and USA (see Bennett 2001; Ferguson 2001; Freely and Bright 2001). I suggest here that these are primarily accounts from the more privileged (middle class professionals in the UK) reflecting on the lives of other more privileged families. The metanarrative or grand story of fear produced is neither representative, nor specific in its focus.

Furedi's emphases in his work are on the general shift towards a risk society (2002), and the specific rise in fear-based 'paranoid parenting' which he sees as extremely damaging to children (2001). For Furedi, the widespread discourse of 'children at risk' is largely made up of imaginary fears. Parents are now bombarded with advice about bringing up children, covering nutrition, health, sleeping, play, stimulation and development, and physical and emotional safety from a wide range of dangers. Furedi argues that much of the advice is contestable, contradictory or simply unnecessary and damaging. These fears are manufactured by the state, scientists, childcare experts and businesses with products to market (see Katz in this volume): the media is complicit, but gives shape to our existing fears rather than creating them from scratch. Some of the *Paranoid Parenting* argument is convincing and well founded. However, I focus here on the aspect of the book that sparked much of the press interest after its release, parents' fears about children's safety from abuse. Furedi premises his critique on the assumption of a disproportionately low 'real' risk of child abuse, and the foolishness of parents who keep their children inside or drive them everywhere in response. He discusses the dangers of what he sees as constant supervision:

There is now a consensus that parents' concern with their children's safety has acquired obsessive proportions...the main focus of this obsession is 'stranger-danger' – a fear that has haunted British parents since the 1980s...the greatest casualty of the totalitarian regime of safety is the development of children's potential. Playing, imagining and even getting into trouble has contributed to the sense of adventure that has helped society to forge ahead

(Furedi 2001: xiv-xv)

While it is presented as a common sense critique of expert-led discourses of fear, however, Furedi's argument replicates the same problem. It comprises another reactionary metanarrative or fear story which is based on partial evidence, and barely at all on the perspectives or experiences of the parents or children involved. In other words, it runs up against the problems of naming, placing, privileging and knowing fear that we have outlined (see Pain and Smith in this volume). Its main limitations are as follows.

First, a key theme running throughout Furedi's work is that abuse is primarily a cultural construct which has become normalised within a broader culture of fear (Furedi 2002). This is highly problematic given key evidence about the extent and nature of child abuse which is omitted from his research. Fear, too, is presented as a culturally produced, rather than something which is partly informed by experience. Here as in other rationalist accounts, risk and fear tend to be dichotomised, with 'risk' presented as given, real and material, and fear as immaterial, imagined, fluid, a state of mind 'in here' which has little connection to what is actually happening 'out there'.

Second, there are limitations to the assessment of risk which underpin Furedi's arguments about the irrationality of fear for children's safety outdoors. The sources of data that he draws on are extremely unrepresentative, especially given that most risk to children is not reported to the police or to official surveys. He talks simply of 'the gap between adult perceptions and the reality of the risks faced by children' (2001: 5), drawing together survey evidence showing that parents view the risk of child abduction and murder by a stranger to be far higher than it actually is. A wealth of in-depth local evidence which suggests much higher levels of broader outdoor risk to children such as assault and sexual harassment (for example Anderson et al 1994; Aye-Maung 1995; Brown 1995; Hartless et al 1995; Loader et al 1998; Mori 2001) is not mentioned at all. Moreover, there is little appreciation of the circular relationships between fear and risk. For example, death rates for child pedestrians are decreasing in the UK, but this does not mean the roads are safer; it ignores an increasingly unsafe environment for pedestrians and consequent restrictions on children's exposure (see Hillman et al 1990).

Thirdly, Furedi fails to address the uneven nature of risk. Class, income, age, ability, race, ethnicity, gender and geography all have profound bearing on this debate. Furedi's account is of a white, middle class suburban childhood to be found especially in certain parts of the UK (especially in the south east), where children are shuttled by car between structured activities and have little independent contact with public space. This is a quite narrow slice of contemporary UK society, given that 25% of households nationally do not even own a car. Even within the bracket he describes, there are wide differences in transport patterns, play spaces and opportunities, values and practices of parents and children.

Fourthly, parents' agency, and in particular their ability to ignore, evaluate or resist expert advice and cultural fear is seldom mentioned. They are presented as media dupes who absorb what they read uncritically and without reference to their own personal contexts and experience. In fact, parents are immersed in and actively form and sustain powerful non-expert cultures through their beliefs and practices. These are not independent of 'expert' views (Furedi does hint at some interplay here), but are longstanding, deeply embedded and affect parents' choices as much or more than the expert advice. Parents also have their own knowledges about risk which feed into these knowledges, from their own childhood experiences of danger (see Pain 1997) and from first and second hand experience of the neighbourhoods they live in (Pain 2006).

Lastly, and most importantly, children are almost completely absent from Furedi's argument. They are presented as fiercely contested at material and discursive levels, abused through attempts to protect them from abuse, but as essentially passive victims in the whole theatre with nothing to contribute in terms of expertise. Furedi is right that children have a 'formidable capacity for resilience' (2001: 25), by which he means their ability to survive unscathed any slight risks that may exist with public space. But children are also knowers, negotiators, agents and experts in their own safety, who often have detailed local knowledge about risk, the extent of which is unknown to adults, and they wield considerable influence over their parent's assessments of and responses to risk.

‘Paranoid parenting’, then, is not only an expert criticising experts (an irony which we might nonetheless be sympathetic to), but replicates the distinction implicit in much official advice on child safety between experts and those in the know (professional adults) and non-experts and the ignorant (parents and children). The reality of fear is far more complex. While I do not question that paranoia about children’s safety grips certain people in certain places (and is aggressively promoted by manufacturers; see Katz in this volume), we have been too quick to accept this metanarrative, and slow to find out what is going on for people in their localities. The idea of terror fears has found the same popular and academic resonance, without attention to grounded knowledge. As the critical literature on fear of crime informs us, a more pressing task than castigating or supporting the lifestyle choices of middle class parents is to reveal what is going on for the more marginalised.

Listening to children: everyday fears and everyday risks

The research reported here was carried out in Gateshead, a town of around 190,000 people in north east England. The inner wards of the town, where the study was carried out, are some of the most economically and socially deprived in the UK. Children aged between 10 and 16 years were sampled from schools and exclusion units. Through discussion groups, self-completed questionnaires, and participatory diagramming, they were asked about their experiences of crime and sub-criminal behaviour, and the impacts of their own and their parents’ fear of crime. The research was designed in a way which allowed children to define the categories and risks which the research then collected information on. Detailed data were gathered about the places in which incidents occurred to children, and the places to which children and parents attached their fears (for more details on the methodology see Pain 2006).

The research showed that children in this area still have strong independent relationships with public space, as is still the case in many other parts of the UK (see also Matthews et al 1998; Skelton 2001). Unsupervised use of public space was widespread throughout the age bracket. Walking to school alone, and playing outside after school, were common, and some children had very wide spatial ranges, especially boys and older girls. Most of the children, especially those aged 12 and under, reported that there were some places their parents warned them not to go to, and some heeded these warnings. But a significant number of others disobeyed them, often being conservative with the truth about their movements or using mobile phones to mislead parents about their location (see Pain et al 2007).

Most relevant for the argument put forward here is the findings on experiences of danger, which challenge the cornerstone of the ‘paranoid parenting’ thesis that children are exposed to negligible danger outdoors and therefore that parents’ fears are groundless. Children reported experiencing and witnessing high levels of crime, harassment and disorder (Figure 1), rates which are similar to those reported to comparable research elsewhere (Anderson et al 1994; Brown 1995; Hartless et al 1995). These reported experiences make it difficult to dismiss children’s fears or those of their parents (Figure 1) as groundless or even disproportionate. Some of these experiences of danger may be minor, trivial, part of growing up, real learning experiences: many others involved physical or psychological harm.

FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

One of the key paradoxes in the debate over fear and children's safety is that parents' fears tend to revolve around public space (although not exclusively), whereas children are subject to much higher levels of abuse in private spaces (Morgan and Zedner 1992; Stanko 1990; Walklate 1989). Bullying has been recognised more recently as a key aspect of children's experiences of violence and fear outdoors (Percy-Smith and Matthews 2001), and it is common in this research (see Figure 1). However, many other outdoor incidents involved adults rather than other children.

The research also compared the locations where crimes and other incidents had taken place, with the locations which children said that they and their parents feared. There was considerable congruence; on the whole, the places that children feared the most were the same places where they or their friends had had experiences of violence or harm. For the places which parents worried about their children being in, the association is not quite as strong, but still demonstrates a reasonably good awareness of the local places in which children are at risk. The analysis emphasises the importance of the local specificity of parents' and children's fears (Pain 2006). It is crucial that these local experiences and knowledges are made visible before we make judgments about the rationality of different patterns of parenting.

Reconciling fear metanarratives and the everyday

What does this analysis of children's fear suggest for the new issues of fear that are emerging in the twenty-first century? I have suggested that there are problems in the common naming, placing, privileging and knowing of fear for/of children, just as we suggested for terror fear (see Pain and Smith in this volume). In both cases, there are widely appealing popular metanarratives which are circulating, which academic work sometimes seems to reproduce uncritically. There are competing metanarratives about fear for children's safety, of which 'paranoid parenting' in response to a negligible risk of abuse is the most popular. There are various stories about fear being circulated in relation to the war on terror, of which the most popular is that people *are* scared, which terrorists and governments may seek to create, manipulate or capitalise on. What critical research on the fear of crime has emphasised, and the example of fear for children illustrates, is that fear is an emotional response more strongly rooted in lives, local topographies and daily experiences of insecurity than representations of distant threats. Research underway on fear of terrorism is beginning to reveal this point (Panelli et al 2007). Fear was not dropped on Britain after the July 7th 2005 bombings, either by terrorists or politicians, to spread inexorably outwards from London. We know it was already there, embedded in and focused on complex places and identities, and local as well as international histories of risk and threat (see Hopkins and Smith in this volume). There is a need for more grounded analyses which pay attention to these social and political differences in fear, and their situation (see Pain 2007), and to downplay spectacular metanarratives about terror fear or children's fears and look closely at the spatial politics of fear: and especially at where fear is most destructive.

In both cases, too, important questions remain about the movement of fear – a point which is germane to understanding how global and everyday scales, events and experiences are linked. Sometimes fear moves very directly, arising from material experiences of risk and harm to children and their communities as I have argued here,

or from increased racist violence in response to terrorist events (see elsewhere in this volume). Such findings may downplay, though do not cause us to wholly dismiss, the effects of contrasting media representations of danger on the fears of the wider public. We know that neither fear for children or fear about terror is simply passed down to people remotely from outside their own situation: we may suspect that the movement of fear is not a movement from 'up above' filtered down to be taken up in the same form by those 'down below' - but we need to further explore these processes to make sense of them. As many other chapters in this volume have vividly illustrated, these binaries of global/geopolitical/discursive versus local/everyday/lived are artificial and misleading, though replicated in much academic work on the politics of fear. I have intentionally moved between them in this chapter, and between theoretical ideas and experiences on the ground. The task is to unpick them, to get a closer sense of the connectivity and shifting relations between them.

Most importantly, fear-provoking discourses - and the practices and materialities that accompany them - are interpreted, resisted and subverted by people in different ways. Accounts of fear must allow for this, seeing hope and resistance not just as a possible alternative to fear, but as always already a part of fear, a way of managing fear and making lives liveable and a means of protesting inequalities (see Askins, and Wright, in this volume). People define and redefine their identities and places in the face of fear and negative discourses. Children constantly practice strategies for dealing with their own fear and negotiating with the fears of their parents. Participatory work such as Cahill et al's (2004) with black and minority ethnic young women provides a powerful example of the transformation of fear and insecurity through research, into more positive action to challenge stereotypes about them and their neighbourhood in the face of global change. Work on terror fear might follow this lead.

Notes

¹ Katz (in this volume) also draws parallels between terror fear and parental fear. While she examines representational, commercial and policy forms of parental hypervigilance and homeland security anxieties, my focus here is on people's personal feelings and material experiences. This leads us to slightly different takes on the relationship between the state and the everyday.

² from an internet statement of the Secret Organization of al-Qaeda in Europe, who claimed responsibility for the July 7th bombings.

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