

Age and gender differences on fear of crime



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The current study aimed to investigate age and gender effects on fear of crime and their relationships with attitude towards prisoner and crime, life satisfaction, living arrangement and religion in a Chinese sample. 170 undergraduate and postgraduate students, with a mean age of 21.9 years, participated in this study. Participants were asked to complete a questionnaire on fear of crime. In general, women reported significantly greater fear of crime than men. A factor analysis was performed and two factors were extracted: "fear of being cheated" and "fear of physical harm". An age-gender interaction effect was found after controlling the variable of "attitude towards prisoner". Results indicated that older females had higher levels of fear of being cheated than males. Yet, gender and age differences in fear of fraud victimizations are a largely unexplored area. Additional research is needed to examine how women's fear of being cheated varies with age.

Introduction

Fear of crime has received considerable attention in the criminological studies. Over the last few decades, research has been carried out to explore how fear of crime is explained and handled by society. Information about fear of crime not only help us to understand and interpret what fear of crime meant for individuals and societies, but also facilitate government to develop active plans to tackle public's fear. Anxieties about crime may lead to behavioral adaptation, e. g. taking precautions against crime and avoiding certain places. Nonetheless, public anxieties about crime may also have negative consequences for the individual and for society. For example, they may exacerbate the impact of crime by damaging an individual's quality of

life or may affect the community by deteriorating a shared sense of trust, cohesion, and social control (Jackson, 2006).

The concept of fear of crime and its causation is widely examined in the criminological field, but there is a lack of agreement on the definition of 'fear of crime'. Fear of crime may involve two different concepts: an 'evaluative' component and an 'emotional' component (Skogen, 1984). For instance, Hollway and Jefferson (1997) referred crime fear as 'irrational' response in which the 'rational, calculating individuals who routinely miscalculate their " true" risk of crime'; whereas Ferraro (1995) suggested that fear of crime is 'an emotional reaction of dread or anxiety to crime or symbols that a person associates with crime'. Past research has identified a number of factors which appear to make a contribution to fear, such as age, gender, race, vulnerability, neighbourhood cohesion, personal knowledge of crime and victimization, confidence in police and criminal justice systems, perception of risk, and assessment of offence seriousness (Box, Hale and Andrews, 1988). However, the current study will focus mainly on age and gender effects on fear of crime.

Gender and Age Effects

It is well-documented that women are more fearful of becoming a victim of crime than men despite the fact that they are less often victimized by serious violent crime (Pain, 2001; Fetchenhauer and Buunk, 2005). Over the past decades, researchers have proposed different approaches to resolve the " fear victimization paradox": (1) hidden victimization of women; (2) gender tendencies of women to recall victimization experience, and to generalize

fear from one context to another; (3) vulnerability of women; and (4) male discount of fear. Most crime surveys have shown that the levels of violence against women (e. g. domestic violence) are far higher than men; therefore it has been argued that women are not 'irrationally' fearful of crime. It is because women and elderly under-report their actual victimization, and thus they appear to be less victimized (Pain, 2001). However, some have suggested that women tend to 'generalize' the actual experience of victimization across spatial contexts than men (Pain, 1995; Farraro, 1995). Warr (1984) found that fear of sexual assault operated as a "master offense" among women and their fear of sexual assault influenced fear of nonpersonal crimes, such as burglary. Yet, still others reported that males often discount their fear of crime (Smith and Torstensson, 1997). Previous literature has demonstrated that males are suppressed by the perception that it is not socially acceptable to express one's fear; and when men are being perfectly honest, they may actually be more afraid of crime than women (Sutton and Farrall, 2005). On the other hand, the vulnerability hypothesis suggested that women are physically weaker than men and therefore they are less able to defend themselves against (typically male) perpetrators. A considerable amount of studies have also shown that that gender difference in fear of crime often reflects gender difference in physical vulnerability (e. g. Smith and Torstensson, 1997).

Apart from gender, age is another important factor that predicts fear of crime. However, the definition of elderly varies across different studies (Chadee and Ditton, 2003). For example, Sundeen and Mathieu (1976) defined elderly as 52 years or above, whereas Warr (1984) suggested 66

years and over. Yet the most common definition of "old" is aged 65 or above. Since there has been no agreement on the definition of what constitutes "old", mixed results were found on age. Some researchers argued that older people report higher level of fear than young people (e. g. On and Kim, 2009). In contrast, others suggested that elderly people are less likely to be victimized and thus they have the lowest level of fear (e. g. LaGrange and Ferraro, 1989; Chadee and Ditton, 2003). On and Kim (2009) explained that older people (aged 65 and over) often experience a drop in social networks (e. g. withdrawal from work, loss of close family members, increasing physical and psychological fragility), and their social isolation or feeling of loneliness intensifies fear of crime. Recently, it has been proposed that the relationship between fear of crime and age is non-linear and varies with crime type (Moore and Shephred, 2007). Past research has shown two different inverted U-shaped patterns in fear of property loss and fear of personal harm. Fear of property crime peaked at some time during middle-age, whereas fear of personal harm decreased with age (Chadee and Ditton, 2003; Moore and Shepherd, 2007). The oldest age group (75 or above) exhibited the lowest levels of fear for both property crime and personal crime (Chadee and Ditton, 2003). Prior research has shown that gender and age often interact with one another in producing the fear of crime differences (Ortega and Myles, 1987; Haynie, 1998; Pain, 2001). Significant gender differences in fear are observed among younger people. Nonetheless, this gender-fear gap has narrowed as men's reported fear of crime has gradually increased over time while women's has remained stable (Haynie, 1998).

Attitude towards prisoner and crime and life satisfaction

Much research on fear of crime has been focused on the perceived risk of crime; little is known about how people's attitude towards prisoners and quality of life link to their fear of crime. Informal social control, trust, and social cohesion are important factors that contributed to the feelings of security; hence, one might argue that fear of crime often reflects individual's life satisfaction and their perceptions of social control. Jackson (2006) puts forward the view that 'public attitudes toward crime raise fundamental sociological problems but with a twist: public perceptions of deviance, social order and social control' (p. 253) and he claimed that 'public perceptions of crime reveal how people conceive social order (including the norms, values, and morals that bind communities and constitute social glue) and what they see as hostile to that social (maybe specific groups or wider social changes regarding values and morals, ethnicity diversity, and transformations in the political and economic arenas)' (p. 261). Therefore, it has been suggested that high levels of community efficacy, social cohesion, and a tight social structure (with low levels of anonymity and distrust) might inhibit fear of crime (Farrall, Gray and Jackson, 2007).

In the last decades, researchers have questioned the validity of previous studies on fear of crime. LaGrange and Ferraro (1989) criticized that the experimental designs of previous studies were problematic. First, it has been suggested that measures of crime " risk" are often mistaken for measures of crime " fear". Second, several widely used crime survey do not measure fear of " crime", in which " implicit" questions are used in crime survey to measure fear (e. g. " how safe do you feel or would you feel being out alone

in your neighborhood at night?") instead of " explicit" questions. Hence, LaGrange and Ferraro (1989) have developed an 11-itemed crime fear survey to overcome the above shortcomings. The current study aims to use LaGrange and Ferraro (1989) crime fear questionnaires to examine gender and age effects on fear of crime in a Chinese sample.

Method

Sample

A total of 170 participants (77 males, 92 females and 1 without specifying gender) were recruited in this study. The sample consisted of both undergraduates and postgraduates. Participants aged from 18 to 48 year-old ($M = 21.94$; $SD = 4.07$). Descriptive statistics of the sample were presented in table 1. They joined this study on a voluntary basis.

Instrument

Attitudes towards Prisoners Scale (Melvin, Gramling, & Gardner, 1985) This scale contains 36 items. Participants were asked to rate on a 5-point Likert Scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The scale had a satisfactory reliability level, with overall $\alpha = .91$.

Life Satisfaction Scale. Life Satisfaction Scale, a five-item-scale developed by Diener and his associates measured general satisfaction towards life (Diener et al., 1985; Larsen, Diener, & Emmons, 1985; Pavot & Diener, 1993). It was validated locally (Wang, Yuen, & Slaney, 2009). Participants were asked to rate the items on a 7-point Likert Scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The overall α is satisfactory at .88.

Fear of Crime Scale (Ferraro, 1996) The ten items of this scale were rated on a 10-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (not afraid at all) to 10 (very afraid).

Unlike the Attitude towards Prisoners Scale, the Fear of Crime Scale had not been validated locally, thus prior to any analysis, a set of validation procedures was performed.

First, two items that could not match the current research purpose were removed: while the item " being raped or sexually assaulted" was removed due to its gender nonequivalence, the item " having your car stolen" was also removed because not many college students in Hong Kong owned their own cars.

After removing the two items, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) and the Bartlett's Test of Sphericity were performed to see if the originally factor structure could be employed in this study. The KMO value of the eight items was 0.80 and the Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was significant ($p < .001$), suggesting that these items were factorable. Thus a principal component analysis (with Varimax rotation) was conducted. Using the criteria of Cattell's screen plot, two dimensions were found, each with an eigenvalue exceeding 1, and could explain 49.90% and 25.69% of the variance respectively.

Dimension I contained 2 items that were related to the perceived fear of being cheated, and it was therefore named Fear of Being Cheated.

Dimension II contained 5 items that were related to perceived fear of being physically harmed, and thus it was named fear of physical harm. The item " Having your property damaged by vandals" was excluded because it loaded

on more than one factors. The overall alpha of the remaining 7 items were .88.

Results

Checking for Covariates

Based on previous studies, life satisfaction, religion, and living arrangement are all possible covariates. In order to be classified as a covariate, these variables should correlate with a) any of the independent variables (age and gender) and b) any of the dependent variables (total fear of crime, fear of physical harm and fear of being cheated). Preliminary analyses indicated none of these variables satisfied the above conditions, so they would be excluded in subsequent analysis.

Testing of Hypothesis

Prior to analysis, all variables excluding gender were mean-centred. This was done to reduce any multicollinearity and to facilitate model estimation when main effects and interactive effects were both present (Aiken & West, 1991).

To compare the relative influences of age and gender on total fear of crime, fear of physical harm and fear of being cheated, three sets of hierarchical regression were performed. Attitude towards prisoners was first entered into the equation as a covariate, followed by age and gender; the Age X Gender interaction term was entered afterwards.

Gender Difference in Fear of Crime: There was a main effect that gender had on all three types of crime fear, where female was always significantly more

fearful than male (see Table 2). See table 3 for the mean and standard deviation of the three dependent variables in each gender group.

Age Effect on Fear of Crime: While age positively correlated with fear of being cheated, no significant correlation was found between age and the other fear of crime constructs (see Table 4). Yet after controlling for attitude towards prisoner as the covariate, the predictive power of age on fear of being cheated disappeared (see Table 2).

Age X Gender Interaction Effect on Fear of Crime: Significant Age X Gender interaction effects on total fear of crime and fear of being cheated were found. However, such interaction effect did not happen for fear of physical harm (see Table 2).

To further investigate these significant interaction effects, two sets of hierarchical regression on total fear of crime and fear of being cheated were performed after splitting the sample into male and female subgroups. Attitude towards prisoners was first entered into the equation as a covariate, followed by age.

After controlling for the covariate, age was no longer a predictor of total fear of crime for both gender groups. Yet for fear of being cheated, while it could be predicted by age for female ($\hat{\rho}^2 = .14, p < .01$), it could not be accounted for by age in male (see Table 5).

Discussion

The present study aimed to look at age and gender effects on fear of crime and their relationships with attitude towards prisoner and crime, life

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satisfaction, living arrangement and religion in a Chinese sample. In general, women reported higher average scores on fear than men among all aspects of crime, indicating that women were always more afraid of crime than men regardless of how fear of crime was measured. Women in our sample also reported that they were most afraid of " being raped or sexually assaulted", followed by fear of " being murder" and fear of " being attacked by someone with a weapon". This pattern of results were in line with previous findings that women were more fearful than men because they were particularly vulnerable to crime and were less able than men to defend themselves physically; therefore, women perceived themselves to be at greater risk of crimes than men (LaGrange and Ferraro, 1989; Smith and Torstensson, 1997). The results were also consistent with previous studies that fear of sexual assault operated as a " master offense" among women, which in turn heightened their fear of other victimizations, e. g. murder, attacks, or burglary (Ferraro, 1995). On the other hand, fear of " being murder" was most common among males, followed by fear of " being attacked by someone with a weapon" and fear of " being raped or sexually assaulted". Interestingly, the current results replicated the findings of LaGrange and Ferraro (1989) in which men reported that they were afraid of being sexually assaulted (presumably by other men).

In the second part of the study, a factor analysis was conducted to investigate the relationship between gender and age of participants and their various crime perceptions. Results of the present study showed a gender effect on fear of crime, in which women had significantly higher score on total fear of crime, fear of being cheated and fear of physical harm than

men. These findings were consistent with previous research in which females might have lower threshold for fear than males. An evolutionary approach has been put forward by researchers to explain this gender difference in fear of crime (e. g. Campbell, Muncer and Bibel, 2001; Fetchenhauer and Buunk, 2005; Sidebottom and Tilley, 2008). In a Dutch study, Fetchenhauer and Buunk (2005) showed that females were significantly more fearful than males when presented with scenarios (both criminal and non-criminal events) that resulted in physical injury, and they proposed that " gender differences in fear of all kinds of events that involved physical injury may be the result of sexual selection that favoured risk-taking and status fights among males, and being cautious and protecting one's offspring among females" (p. 111).

The current study also found a significant positive correlation between age and fear of being cheated, suggesting that older people were more afraid of being cheated than younger people. The result reflects the varying importance attached to material wealth with age: the costs of property loss might have greater impact on middle-aged group since they are more likely to have accumulated property and have dependent children compared to younger age group (Moore and Shepherd, 2007). Based on data derived from the 2001 British Crime Survey, Moore and Shepherd (2007) concluded that fear of property loss was greatest at around 40-60 years, peaked at around 45 years, whereas a lower level of fear was observed at about 16-25 years. Another possibility for the age differences in fear might be due to socialization. Past research has shown that socialization may increase the amount of contacts with others, and thus people who socialize more often

may increase their likelihood of fraud victimization (Van Wyk and Manson, 2001). In a recent study, Schoepfer and Piquero (2009) demonstrated that risky behaviour and age were important factors that predicted the likelihood of fraud victimization: individuals who were open to financial risk-taking and engaged in more risky behaviours were more likely to be a victim of fraud (e.g. free prize fraud, credit or bank account fraud and being billed for more than what the product is worth). It should also be noted that "older" people in our sample are postgraduate students who might have higher income and socialize more often and thus they have greater opportunities to be victimized than "younger" people. Results in this study also showed that the relationship between age and fear of being cheated was influenced by individual's attitude towards prisoner. Since not much research has been done on fear of being cheated, more studies are needed to look at the relationship between age and fear of deception. Nonetheless, no significant correlation was found between age and fear of physical harm, indicating that that age was not associated with levels of fear of being physical harm.

Further analysis was performed in the next section to look at gender and age effects on various constructs of fear. Significant gender-age interaction effects were found on total fear of crime and fear of being cheated. After controlling the variable "attitude towards prisoner", age was a significant predictor of fear of being cheated in females, but not in males. There was a positive correlation between age and fear of being cheated among females, suggesting that older females were more fearful of being victimized than males. This may be due in part to the fact that personal victimization can have more serious consequences for women than men. Past research has

indicated that crime fear involve both emotional and evaluative components and it is shaped by the vividness of the image of crime and perceptions of the severity of the consequences of crimes, together with feelings of personal control and perceptions of victimization likelihood (Jackson, 2006). It has been found that some victims of fraud may experience more harmful long-term effects than those victimized by conventional crimes, and many of them continued to suffer from lasting problems with finances, self-esteem, embarrassment, and self-blaming even ten years after the incidents (Shover, Fox and Mills, 1994). Recently, Schoepfer and Piquero (2009, p. 210) argued that " some fraud victimizations have even been equated to those of rape since both crime are rarely reported by victims and both involved victim facilitation, and questions of guilt and responsibility are the burden of the victims"; hence, this makes females more fearful of being cheated than males. However, the current results did not support some of the past findings on fear of fraud victimization. Mixed results were found in previous studies concerning gender difference on fear of property loss. For instance, LaGrange and Ferraro (1989) found no gender different on fear of being conned or swindled out of money and fear of being approach by a beggar; whereas Moore and Shepherd (2007) showed that men were more fearful than women of property loss. One of the possibilities for the discrepancy in these findings might be due to the cultural difference in crime rates. Since fear of crime also reflects actual crime rate in society, results in the present study might also suggest that older women are more vulnerable to minor crimes, e. g. street or telephone deception, than men in the local area. Yet, no interaction effect on fear of physical harm was found in this study.

Additional study might be needed to investigate how women's fear of being cheated varies with age.

There are two possible limitations in the current study that should be taken into account. The first one relates to variables that were not included in the questionnaire, namely the mass media effect, crime prevalence and previous victimization experience. Due to the limitations of the standard questionnaire used in the present study, these factors were not included. It is well-established that the mass media plays an important role in shaping individual's attitude towards prisoner and the perception of crime and fear. According to the Social Amplification of Risk Framework (SARF), people may attend to information about criminal activities from a series of "amplified stations" (e. g. mass media and interpersonal communication), and the risk signals may interact with a wide range of psychological, social and cultural processes in ways that intensify their actual risks (Kasperson et al. 2003). Researchers have demonstrated that tabloid readers who have an extensive level of crime media exposure are about twice more likely to be worried than those who have limited exposure to crime source (Smolej and Kivivuori, 2006). Previous literature on media consumption and public attitude toward crime has also shown that offenders are often portrayed as "different" from the general population and viewed as psychopaths that prey on weak and vulnerable victims (Dowler, 2003). Recently, Reiner (2008) argued that crime stories often exaggerate the crime risks faced by higher-status people and always disproportionately representing women, children, or older people as victims, and this might heighten public's fear of crime.

Over the past decade, researchers have attempted to integrate fear of crime into 'macro' and 'micro' levels of analysis (Ferraro, 1995; Jackson, 2004). At the macro-level, public's fear of crime is related to crime prevalence in society and local communities; whereas, at the micro-level, neighbourhood characteristics and personal characteristics (e. g. previous victimization experience, anxiety and everyday worry) may interact to produce differential perception of risk which, in turn, produces either fearful or adaptive reactions to crime (or both) (Farrall, Gray and Jackson, 2007). In future research it might be interesting to examine how these factors interact with age and gender to produce different levels of fear of being cheated. The second possible limitation is that the current findings could not be generalized into diverse cultures with different age groups. In this study, subjects were undergraduates or postgraduates recruited from a local university and they might have similar age, background, living situation, and ethnicity; therefore, their crime experience will be alike. In the future study, participants from various age groups and cultures are needed in order to generalize the results outside the Chinese society.