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Gender, Race, Age and Fear in the City

Rachel Pain

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1. Introduction

Early on in the discovery of fear of crime as a phenomenon shaping the life of cities, significant social differences in its experience were recognised. Today, the empirical and theoretical development around the issue of social identity and fear is the subject of a sizeable literature in its own right, as well as being a focus of some policies which aim to make cities safer and better peopled places. However, an appraisal of both academic literature and policy approaches suggests that there are changing ideas about the patterning of social identities in the fear of crime; very different accounts of their role and importance in the construction and experience of fear; and little consensus over the sorts of policy intervention which are likely to be helpful in ameliorating fear. This paper aims to review debates on race, age, gender and fear in the city, as these are the social identities which have received most attention.

Much thinking about social identity and fear of crime has tended to be dichotomised. The sub-headings used in the paper reflect some of these dualisms. For example, different groups of young people are widely constructed either as threatening, or threatened; there are powerful discourses which position people of colour as offenders or victims; and in much of the literature men are viewed as fearless but fear-provoking, and women as fearful and passive. Such dualisms reflect a wider criminological fallacy that certain groups commit crime and other are victims of it (except for people in low-income areas who are widely viewed as involved in both). Recent research is pointing to the diversity and complexity of issues around social identity and fear; so that although theoretical frameworks can and should be developed (one which emphasises social exclusion is applied in this paper), the currency of stereotypes and even the usefulness of gender, race and age as social categories need to be critically appraised and the intersections between different identities in their relationships to crime and fear require further exploration.

Another set of dualisms which the geographical literature has begun to problematise is around the spaces and places in which fear is situated—for example, public versus private, safe versus dangerous, low-income estates versus suburbs—and the ways in which people negotiate them. In fact, most discussions of fear in the city deal only with public spaces which are shared with strangers. As recent research has shown, crimes such as domestic violence, acquaintance violence and elder abuse also have a role to play in the construction of fear. This paper includes in its scope homes, workspaces and other private and semi-private places, which are as much a part of ‘the urban’ as streets, shopping malls and parks. While many people strongly associate fear with specific places, reflecting wider
ideologies of public space as dangerous and private space as safe, fear and safety in different spaces are interconnected—for example, experiences of danger in private space affect feelings of security in public at an individual and societal level.

The rest of this introduction summarises some of the key themes in research on social identity and fear of crime, after which the de/bulletion and approach to the fear of crime employed in this paper are outlined. The paper then goes on to examine how these themes have influenced our understanding of the ways in which race, gender and age influence fear of crime and its effects on use of urban spaces. The aim is to structure and make some sense of the different ideas which are in currency.

1.1 Social Identity and Fear of Crime

A distinction can be drawn between discourses which have employed ‘gender’, ‘age’ and ‘race’ as taken-for-granted categories in analysis of who fears, how much and where; and later writings which have begun to question and unpack why and how these social identifiers have been employed in fear discourses. For example, in the earliest studies of fear of crime, gender and age were used uncritically in analysis of the social differentiation of victimisation and fear. Race has now joined them in the major crime surveys, but also continues to be employed in broader popular discourses in which people of colour are constructed as a threat to be feared. Ultimately, of course, the uses of social categories in popular and research discourses are not separable. As well as involving a host of methodological and epistemological flaws which have since been widely criticised, much early research on the fear of crime has been accused of making uncritical and sometimes unjustified assertions about the impact of social identity on fear.

In Britain, early accounts of fear of crime emphasised the importance of gender and age in structuring social experience of fear (Hough and Mayhew, 1983). In the first British Crime Survey (BCS), older people (aged 60 years and over) and women were found to be more worried about crime, despite having lower chances of victimisation than men and young people. This led to the conclusion, now notorious, that much fear of crime was irrational, especially among these two groups, and to the pronouncement that fear of crime is more of a problem than crime itself (Bennett, 1990; Hough and Mayhew, 1983).

Since the early 1980s, debates and differences have developed within research. These can be summarised by the five broad themes or positions outlined below—although this is not an exhaustive list and each position should not be read as having developed in isolation from the others.

(1) The conclusion that the concerns about crime of these two social groups are irrational was challenged, swiftly in the case of women (Stanko, 1987) and later in the case of older people (Ferraro, 1995; Midwinter, 1990).

(2) Related to these critiques, the fear of crime of women, older people and ethnic minority groups has been linked to their subordinate social, economic and political status—from the late 1980s, differences in fear of crime and its effects were discussed in the context of broader social inequality (Pain, 1991; Smith, 1987; Valentine, 1989). Part of this argument involved highlighting specific and discriminatory hate crimes of which women, older people and people of colour are at higher risk, including sexual and domestic violence, elder abuse, racist violence and harassment. These have not always featured in the main data sources on which mainstream analyses of fear have been based, such as the BCS and official crime statistics. That many of these crimes occur in private space has also been important, both in the subordination of these social groups and in explaining the absence of these particular forms of risk from criminologists’ equations (Stanko, 1987, 1988).

(3) More recently, the categorisation of
these groups and the ways in which they have labelled ‘fearful’ have been challenged (Koskela, 1997). For example, common images of women and older people as particularly fearful are damaging as well as inaccurate and may have the effect of increasing concern (Pain, 1995; Stanko, 1990b, 1996). Of course, both groups are large and extremely diverse, raising questions over generalisation, and fear of crime is also profoundly affected by a range of factors including income, class, area of residence, housing status, sexual orientation, disability, experiences of victimisation and many other life experiences. Recently, researchers have pointed to some of this complexity and have begun to highlight the multiple and shifting nature of social identities and to draw out implications for understanding the fear of crime.

Such critiques have been paralleled by questioning where the construction of ‘fearful’ and ‘feared’ groups originated—as a social problem, fear of crime has been widely used for political ends (Ditton and Farrall, 2000; Garland, 1996; Sasson, 1995). For example, why the sudden discovery of fear of crime in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and why the quick association with certain social identities? Why were women and older people uncritically identified as irrationally fearful, and people of colour assumed to be the object, rather than subject, of fear?

Following broader trends in the sociology of gender, researchers have recently focused on the role of masculinity in the fear of crime (Goodey, 1997). Methodological critiques of much previous research have raised and begun to explore some of the issues around men’s fear (Gilchrist et al., 1998). There has also been a discernible shift away from a concern with older people’s fear towards examining young people’s concerns about crime (Brown, 1995; Loader et al., 1998). Men and young people (and especially young men) are commonly constructed as provoking fear in others, yet when research is approached in new ways, allowing for the possibility that men’s and young people’s fear may manifest differently, both have been found to be significant problems. Such reappraisal is made more pressing by the gradual recognition that those groups who are most excluded (in terms of past research, policy-making and the impacts of urban planning) may be most at risk from victimisation and even most affected by fear.

Add to these different developments and interests in theorisation the knotty problems of defining and measuring fear of crime (see Farrall et al., 1997), and it is clear that there exist very different notions about the role of age, gender and race. The relationship between fear and social identity is a complex one, which belies many simplistic beliefs underlying certain aspects of community safety and crime prevention policy.

1.2 Defining Fear of Crime

To approach this task and, indeed, to support some of the points made above, a clear definition of the fear of crime is needed. This too has been subject of much discussion in recent years and it is very likely that the ‘fear of crime’ is framed in slightly different ways in each of the papers in this review issue. For the purposes of this paper, it is defined as the wide range of emotional and practical responses to crime and disorder made by individuals and communities. This definition emphasises that it is the impact of people’s concerns about crime on everyday social life which make it important, rather than ‘levels’ or ‘rates’ of fear which continue to be gauged in different ways by surveys, despite widespread critiques. The effects which people’s concerns about crime have are both measurable (although it may take quite sensitive, and even then imperfect, methodologies to draw them out) and significant in terms of quality of life and social inequality. They
provide some means of establishing whether, when and for whom fear of crime is a tangible social problem.

1.3 A Framework for Approaching the Fear of Crime

Following from this definition, and arising from the second theme listed above, fear is understood here within a theoretical framework which emphasises social exclusion (Pain, 2000). Fear of crime can be considered to create and reinforce exclusion from social life and from particular urban spaces in a number of ways:

(1) *Exclusion through the experience of crime itself.* Property crime makes poor people poorer, while violence increases the subordination of marginalised groups (Young, 1990). For example, feminists have suggested that sexual violence against women is the “structural underpinning of hierarchical relations; the ultimate sanction buttressing other forms of social control” (Hanmer, 1978, p. 229). In this reading, fear of crime reinforces the social control effected by crime. Both crime and fear of crime may be used to resist social oppression too.

(2) *Exclusion through sub-criminal acts.* These include abuses such as racist, sexist, homophobic or ageist harassment, and incivilities common in high-crime urban areas such as graffiti, all of which may affect social and spatial behaviour patterns (Painter, 1992). Clearly, experience and interpretation of these acts vary between social groups, areas of residence and, in the case of graffiti, distance from the cultures in which it is an accepted activity. However, sub-criminal acts remind some people of their vulnerability to crime and increase fear (Junger, 1987).

(3) *Exclusion through fear of crime and precautionary behaviour.* The effects of the behavioural precautions and spatial restrictions which are imposed in response to fear on social and leisure activities, employment opportunities and freedom of expression are well documented (Pain, 1997; Painter, 1992; von Schulthess, 1992; Stanko, 1990a). Frequently, it is those already socially or economically disadvantaged who are affected most by fear of crime, which has the effect of reinforcing their marginalisation.

(4) *Exclusion through being constructed as a threat.* Many people tend to fear stereotypical ‘others’ whose presence appears to threaten disorder to mainstream life and values (Sibley, 1995). In reality, the groups and places frequently demonised as a threat to law and order may themselves be at highest risk of violence and abuse of all, and so social ‘others’ such as children, young men, some ethnic minority groups, people who are homeless or have mental health problems may be simultaneously feared and fearful.

(5) *Exclusion through criminal justice and community safety policies.* Policies which aim to improve the safety of some groups may do so at the expense of others. As Garland (1996, p. 461) has outlined, the association of danger with “the threatening outcast, the fearsome stranger, the excluded and the embittered” is often invoked at the level of governance in order to excite fear and promote support for punitive strategies. Equally, Davis (1992) has argued that planning tactics to create ‘safe spaces’ lead to greater fear, isolation and social exclusion, rather than less, and that the disbenefits of planning urban space in this way are fewest for the rich and greatest for those already marginalised from urban life.
fears found among members of all social groups. Although it emphasises unequal power relations, we should not read from it either that ‘fearful’ members of certain social groups are passive in the face of fear. In contrast, as the discussion later in the paper will highlight, this is one more commonly reinforced stereotype which needs to be dispelled.

2. Femininity, Masculinity: Fear and Boldness

Almost every survey of fear of crime finds that women report being more fearful of crime than men. Whether in the home, the workplace or the city, it is fear of sexual violence and harassment from men which underpins women’s higher fear (Gordon and Riger, 1989; Valentine, 1989). Feminists have viewed women’s higher fear of crime as a manifestation of gender oppression and a damaging form of control of women’s lives, reproducing traditional notions about women’s ‘place’ in society (Hanmer and Saunders, 1984; Pain, 1991; Valentine, 1989). Sexual harassment in masculinist, heterosexual environments, whether they are public places or workplaces, has also been implicated in contributing to fear (Gardner, 1995; Junger, 1987). There is plenty empirical evidence about the spatial outcomes of this control, particularly the well-documented effects of coping strategies which many women employ to avoid harassment and violence in public spaces (Pain, 1997; Painter, 1992; Valentine, 1989).

However, there are some conflicts between theoretical development and empirical evidence around women’s fear of urban spaces. The most recent suggestion, that men’s fear may be considerably higher than previously thought, is dealt with later (in itself this does not challenge the fact that women experience high levels of fear of crime). Much relevant research on women’s fear has revolved around two key paradoxes.

The first and earliest is the paradox between levels of fear and violence discussed in the introduction—when women’s high fear of crime was first discovered, it appeared far greater than their actual risks of victimisation (Balkin, 1979; Hough and Mayhew, 1983). In crime surveys in Britain and North America, reported rates of violence against women in the earlier sweeps were extremely low, leading to the assumption that women’s fear must be irrational. This ‘vulnerability’ perspective has since been heavily criticised for implying that women are inherently weak and passive ‘born victims’ and for ignoring structural explanations of violence which focus upon men (Stanko, 1985). This paradox has since been shown to be misleading, produced by the unrepresentative way that criminologists have defined and measured crime against women (Stanko, 1988). More sensitive and intensive research continues to show that levels of violence against women are far higher (Crawford et al., 1990; Hall, 1985; Mirrlees-Black et al., 1998) and easily justify women’s high levels of fear of attack.

A second paradox has been identified and explored by geographers—most research shows a mismatch between the types of location in which physical and sexual violence usually occur (private space) and the locations in which most women fear (public spaces), calling into question the idea that levels of victimisation can explain fear alone. To resolve this spatial paradox, feminists have argued that women are misinformed about the main location of danger, through the institutions of the family, the education system and the media (Hanmer and Saunders, 1984; Valentine, 1989). More recent research has indicated that misinformation does underlie fear in public space; most women are aware that domestic violence is more common than stranger attacks, but this knowledge has little effect on their fear of crime unless they have personal experience of domestic violence (Pawson and Banks, 1993; Pain, 1997).

The fact that urban public spaces are relatively safe compared with the home has provoked attempts to reduce women’s fear through changing the physical fabric of city centres and housing estates. Earlier feminist
contributions to the literature on women’s experiences of public spaces tended to focus on negative aspects, including poor access to public transport, long distances between residential and shopping areas, and poor design which can make movement around the city difficult for mothers out with prams or young children as well as contributing to women’s fear of assault (Little, 1993; Matrix, 1984; Valentine, 1990; Whitzman, 1992). While raising important issues which had previously been neglected by planners and architects, some of this literature has been criticised for taking an unintentionally essentialist perspective on women and urban design. Where the arguments have been extended to women’s fear of crime, the overemphasis in policy on design solutions, as well as having little chance of success, ignores the wider social causation of women’s fear outlined above (Koskela and Pain, 2000). Meanwhile, feminist writers such as Wilson (1991) have emphasised that the city is frequently a place of excitement and opportunity for women, not just a place to be feared. City centre spaces at once have varying meanings to different people (Pain and Townshend, forthcoming).

Different notions of femininity are also entwined with different constructions of the fear of crime. For example, some have suggested that the emphasis on ‘fear’ and its negative consequences in writing about women and crime reproduces notions about feminine weakness (Segal, 1990). It has also been suggested that responses to the newly identified problem of women’s fear from police forces and government departments tend to entrench stereotypes further, rather than challenge them (Stanko, 1990b). Koskela’s (1997) analysis of women’s fear of attack in Finland emphasises that women respond to the threat of crime with ‘boldness’ as well as fear and ‘spatial confidence’ as well as spatial avoidance. She highlights the influence on women’s fear of the particular cultural and geographical context of Finland, which has a better record on gender equality than many other European or North American countries. She presents the stories of those women who are not afraid but respond to the threat of violence with boldness and defiance rather than fear and the fact that, just as some women become fearful at certain times, others lose the ‘space of fearfulness’ through certain life experiences. In so doing, she challenges the unintentional portrayal of previous research of fearfulness as an essentially female quality:

It has been pointed out in this study that women do not passively experience space but actively produce, define and reclaim it. Many women in Finland reclaim space for themselves through consciously routinised use, and are able to ‘tame’ space by various expressions of courage. They have several ways of negotiating danger, reading the signs of danger, taking possession of space, and using power on urban space: women show ‘spatial expertise’. This demonstrates that women’s everyday spatial practices can be practices of resistance. By their presence in urban space women produce space that is more available not only for themselves but also for other women. Women’s spatial confidence can be interpreted as a manifestation of power. Hence, at the level of the whole society, women’s safety in public is arguably improved more by women going out than by them staying inside (Koskela, 1999, Epilogue p. 3; original emphasis).

Clearly, there are changes over time as well as differences across space in the opportunities and freedoms women experience. Fear of male violence was identified in the 1970s as a key plank of patriarchal oppression (Brownmiller, 1975; Walby, 1989) and yet massive social changes have taken place since, for some women in the domestic sphere and for many in the workplace. Despite these changes, my own study of women in Edinburgh in the early 1990s showed that middle-class, professional women still experienced high levels of social and spatial restriction due to fear of violence (Pain, 1997). However, for younger women, the city may increasingly be a site of risk-taking.
and adventure as well as of fear (Walklate, 1997).

In direct contrast to women, men’s low reported fear of crime appeared anomalous from the earliest crime surveys because they experienced relatively high rates of violence. Aggregate data suggest that men are largely at risk from strangers and acquaintances in public places including streets, pubs and clubs, but there is also a risk from partners in the home. In the 1998 British Crime Survey, 23 per cent of women and 15 per cent of men reported having been assaulted by a partner at some time in their lives, with women more likely to be seriously injured and to suffer repeat victimisation than men (Mirrlees-Black et al., 1998). Why, then, the relatively low fear of crime? Part of the problem is methodological, as male respondents seem reluctant to give answers to surveys where this might challenge the image of male invulnerability (Crawford et al., 1990). Where men have been the subject of qualitative research, this has suggested that, at least for some, the effects of fear may be just as great as for women (Gilchrist et al., 1998; Stanko and Hobdell, 1993). Gilchrist et al. (1998) examine the cases of fearful men and fearless women in order to demonstrate that fear and boldness, although they may be gendered, are not essentially female or male qualities. Their interviews suggest, as do those carried out by Stanko and Hobdell, that men who are fearful of crime tend to worry about similar factors in similar ways to women. They conclude that

We now know that some women are not fearful, and that some men are fearful: yet we are some way from knowing why this should be (Gilchrist et al., 1998, p. 296).

Goodey’s (1997) research gives some clues to this last question, as it highlights the importance of other social identities in structuring men’s fear, especially age, race, sexuality and class. While young boys may admit to concern about crime, as they grow up male fearfulness “is progressively downplayed as normative adult identities are adopted” (Goodey, 1997, p. 402). The dominant culture of heterosexual masculinity makes ‘fear’ a less acceptable response for men, but at the same time means that those perceived as being outside it—for example gay men—are more at risk from violence.

A recent study of fear of crime in the city centre of Newcastle upon Tyne, England, suggested that young men took more precautions against crime while using the city centre than other social groups such as women and older people (Pain and Townshend, forthcoming). As they had most first- and second-hand knowledge of crime and hassle, and were far more likely to be in the city centre at ‘dangerous’ times, young men were the most aware of danger and the most careful. However, they perceived and dealt with ‘risk’ with different types of coping strategies and constraints (Walklate, 1995). This conception of risk arises from a masculinity which values excitement, adventure, power and control as what men do. This is a masculinity to which all men relate to a greater or lesser degree (Walklate, 1997, p. 41).

Risk-taking behaviour is part of the attraction of the city centre at night for some young men (and, increasingly, some young women).

However, the differences between young men in the study were as important as the commonalities. For example, respondents identified the risks associated with being a football fan, of student bashing and of having an accent from other parts of Britain.

They get absolutely tanked up [drunk] and then it’s like, ‘Oh, there’s a bunch of students, we’ll go an’ harass them for a laugh!’

I think it’s your accent as well, like, em, when you’ve got a foreign accent it’s alright, but em variations of the English accent. People who are, like, from down south are getting picked on.

Some of the young men had experience of being viewed as potentially dangerous or criminal themselves because of their age and
gender. Some had been harassed by the police, and others were aware of how they might be perceived by older people.

If you’re in a group of, like, eight lads, the police always come over and ask what you’re doin’. And, like, yer, just goin’ for a drink—but they automatically assume that you’re killin’ somebody!

I think with old people it’s what they read in the papers as well. I mean, they seem to think that everybody that’s young’s got … a drug habit.

They think that we all go to nightclubs and take ten ‘Es’ [ecstasy] every night (quotes from discussion groups with young men; Pain and Townshend forthcoming).

Despite the usual stereotypes about young men as offenders rather than victims, there are many ways in which young men may be positioned in relation to crime, risk and fear. They also have varying perceptions of and means of negotiating urban spaces. The findings in this study have some transferability to other urban areas, but constructions of risk and fear were affected by particular aspects of the city of Newcastle—the fact that it has a compact city centre and so different groups are in close proximity; the fact that there is a strong local tradition of masculinity associated with drinking, sport and sometimes fighting; the fact that the city centre has transformed from the hub of a local economy dominated by heavy industry to a popular party and student city. Fear of crime and its relation to social identity are profoundly affected by locality (Evans et al., 1996; Loader et al., 1998; Taylor, 1995).

3. Fear of Race and Fear of Racism

Young men and strangers are not the only ‘others’ to be linked with crime and fear in the public imagination. Race is also a strong predictor of fear of crime. Research has shown that white people’s fears frequently focus on other ethnic groups (Chiricos et al., 1997; Merry, 1981; Smith, 1986; Taub et al., 1984); in British and US studies, the most fearful white people have been identified as those living in mixed-race neighbourhoods. These fears are based upon powerful stereotypes existing around race and crime (Lea and Young, 1984; Smith, 1982). Media coverage disproportionately reflects images of people of colour as criminals (Smith, 1984a) and just as women focus their fears of male violence onto stranger danger, targeting people of colour provides one way of managing and negotiating danger (Smith, 1984b).

The association of race and crime does, however, have different manifestations in different places. In the US, it is the black population which is most strongly imagined as prone to crime. Ditton and Farrall (2000) suggest that the emergence of fear of crime as an issue in the 1970s was related to a backlash against the civil rights movement. Equally, in Britain, concerns about race and crime have reflected strained race relations for several decades (Lea and Young, 1984).

Racial stereotypes about crime are also gendered and sexualised. Many studies have shown that white women living in ethnically mixed areas tend to view rape in racialised terms. Valentine (1989) relates her interviewees’ fear of black men to the historical racist image of black men having an uncontrolled and violent sexuality. Day’s (1999) research on women’s fear investigates women’s ‘race prejudice and race fear’ in public spaces in an urban area of California. White women’s perceptions of their vulnerability were constructed partly in relation to the perceived threat of rape from men of colour. The fears of women of colour were also structured by race but, in addition to concerns about sexual assault, they saw themselves at risk from racist harassment and violence. Day demonstrates how women’s racialised fears map onto a range of public spaces. For example, women avoided places which they associated with people of colour and hence risk, ranging from certain neighbourhoods to particular shops:

I wouldn’t go spend a day in the middle of downtown Santa Ana if I knew that it was, again, for example, a Hispanic area, that
Day makes the point that neither a person’s gender, race nor class can explain fear of crime alone. Rather, different aspects of social identity work together in different ways to impact on the nature and geography of fear of crime.

The interlocking systems of race, class and gender generate experiences that differ materially for each combination of traits … each such experience is situated differently in public space, where encounters shape and reveal one’s ideas about race (Day, 1999, p. 307).

In reality, white women are more at risk from the white men they live with or are acquainted with than the men of colour whom their fear of crime may be associated with. However, studies in most Western countries show that people of colour themselves have significantly higher risks of victimisation than white people (Mayhew, 1989). Some of this risk is explained by social and demographic factors, but much is experienced because of racial or ethnic background, particularly racist assault and harassment (Commission for Racial Equality, 1987).

Women of colour may experience extra vulnerability to sexual violence and harassment (MacKinnon, 1979). In Hall’s (1985) London study of sexual violence, she found that many black and immigrant women had been targets of abuse because of their race or nationality: half had been verbally abused and over one-quarter physically assaulted because of this reason. Seven per cent of the black and immigrant respondents reported that they had been sexually assaulted because of their race or nationality. These higher risks stem from stereotypes about the sexual availability of women of colour and men’s (particularly white men’s) rights to their bodies—black women’s oppression lies within an imperial as well as a patriarchal context (Mama, 1989). As a consequence of this compounded oppression, women of colour tend to report higher levels of fear of rape (Gordon and Riger, 1989).

Many surveys show that people of colour have higher fear of crime than white people, which has impacts on use of space and quality of life (Day, 1999; Hough, 1995; St John, 1995; Stanko, 1990a; Walker, 1994). Where racial violence is an ongoing feature of local neighbourhoods, danger is less random, risk appears less controllable and fear has more severe effects (Commission for Racial Equality, 1987). In some localities where levels of racism are high and manifested in violence, it provides another dimension of fear which consolidates spatial boundaries and control. Webster (1996) describes an ethnic apartheid in young people’s use of space in a West Yorkshire town, where racist attacks reflect the defence of local territories. Constructions of criminality and race vary according to locality, reflecting local demographics and histories of race relations (Smith, 1986). In a smaller town in south-east England, Watt and Stenson (1998) describe problems of racist violence and white fears of ‘other’ areas, but suggest that these are less marked than in Webster’s work because of more ethnically mixed neighbourhoods and the commonness of school friendships between young people of different ethnic backgrounds.

4. Fearing Youth and Fearing for Youth

Issues of age have been the most contested area in the literature on social identity, fear of crime and use of public space. There has been a shift from focusing on older people’s fear of crime, to more recent recognition that young people are more at risk from and more
affected by victimisation and fear. However, the two groups should not be studied in isolation, either from other social identities (as gender, class, race, sexual orientation and so on, structure differences in fear within each group) or each other. Age relations underlie many issues pertaining to both older and young people’s fear; it is not possible to understand children’s experiences of fear and space without reference to their parents and other carers, and older people’s use of space is influenced by discourses around youth and the behaviour and attitudes of younger people.

One of the most long-standing of these concerns is young people’s use and apparent domination of many urban public spaces. The presence of children and young people ‘hanging around’ in public places such as streets, parks and shopping malls is a widespread and recurrent moral panic in Western societies (Loader et al., 1998). It relates to the common association of youth with crime, and crises over rare but highly publicised incidents where children are involved in very serious violent crimes. But it also reflects deeper concerns about an apparent lack of social control over young people in contemporary society (Brown, 1995).

Such concerns feed into older people’s fear of crime, which was ‘discovered’ as a public issue by national crime surveys in Britain and North America. The crime surveys appeared to show that older people were more afraid of crime than younger people, despite being significantly less at risk. For example, people aged 16–24 are four times more likely to be burgled than people aged over 65, and three times more likely to be victims of vehicle-related theft (Mirrlees-Black et al., 1998). The differences in rates of violence are far greater still. Official crime statistics for Britain based on incidents recorded by the police show that people over 60 make up just 2 per cent of victims of violence against the person, 1 per cent of victims of rape and indecent assault, and 23 per cent of female victims and 7 per cent of male victims of robbery and theft from the person (Watson, 1996).

More recently, the orthodoxy that older people experience high fear of crime (Clarke and Lewis, 1982; Hough and Mayhew, 1983) has also been challenged. There is now widespread agreement that the issue has been misrepresented and that older people are not in general more fearful than anyone else (Ferraro, 1995; McCoy et al., 1996; Midwinter, 1990). As in other areas of fear of crime research, survey methodologies are partly held to blame for these mixed conclusions (see Farrall et al., 1997); they have failed to investigate the meaning of crime for older people in any depth, or the various ways in which they identify or situate themselves in relation to crime (Ferraro, 1995; Midwinter, 1990; Pain, 1995). With more careful questioning, the British Crime Survey has shown that older people of both sexes worry less than younger people about most crimes.

As with stereotypes around race and fear, it is interesting to reflect on where the discourse of older people as particularly vulnerable and fearful comes from. Cook and Skogan (1990) have charted the rise and fall of the victimisation of older people as a policy issue in the US in the 1970s, arguing that once empirical evidence began to appear which showed that older people were actually at lower risk of crime than younger people, the idea that they had higher fear of crime and were more likely to be adversely affected by fear took over as a prominent concern in research and in Congressional debates. Others have been more explicit about the basis of the common connection of fear of crime and older people in societal ageism; it reflects wider images of older people as weak, dependent and at the mercy of the young (Midwinter, 1990; Pain, 1995).

However, given the diversity of older people, who make up 20–25 per cent of most Western societies, differences in exposure to victimisation and fear are to be expected and aggregate evidence should not be interpreted as meaning that there are not specific risks for some older people in certain places. Frail older people living alone in high-crime, low-income areas have higher risks of street violence, as well as community harassment—“a
growing problem in which older people are scapegoated and victimized in community settings” (Biggs, 1996, p. 78). Moreover, evidence is growing about the extent of elder abuse, the physical, sexual, psychological and financial abuse of older people taking place in domestic or institutional contexts (McCreadie, 1996). As is the case for young people and women, older people are statistically more at risk in private rather than in public space, and those who suffer social exclusion because of low income, ill health or area of residence are most at risk of all. For the majority of older people, however, lower fear reflects their lower victimisation, as well as the fact that they are less likely to use the public spaces perceived as risky at the times considered most dangerous.

Young people, on the other hand, not only face higher risks of victimisation but also greater socialisation into fear, having grown up in a era when crime has become a major reason behind parental controls on children’s spatial and social experiences. A number of studies have highlighted high levels of child victimisation, both from adults and other children and young people, most of which is not reported to the police (see, for example, Anderson et al., 1990; Hartless et al., 1995). It has become clear too that the impacts of fear of crime are greater on children and young people.

In childhood, the main way fear impacts on use of space is through parental control. A sizeable body of work has focused on the restrictions which are increasingly placed on children’s access to public space because of parents’ worries about strangers and traffic. Along with the growth in domestic-based popular culture and the erosion of outdoor playspaces for children, this means that children explore the outside world far less and many do not have freedom to do so at all until a significantly later age than in the past. A number of implications have been noted (for example, see Hart, 1979; Hillman et al., 1990; Moore, 1986; Valentine and McKendrick, 1997). Children are considered to have less environmental knowledge, competence and confidence as a result. Their movements are becoming increasingly restricted, with consequences for physical development and health as fewer walk or cycle, and for their social and emotional progress as it is argued that they are losing the chance to develop coping skills, a sense of responsibility for themselves, and to use their minds creatively.

By the time they are allowed autonomous mobility, adolescents have learned powerful lessons about safe places and spaces and safe times to be outside the home. Anderson et al. (1990) found that many of the children in their study had taken on their parents’ ideas about danger and that girls in particular would comply with their parents’ rules after a certain age and begin to regulate their own exposure to the places they had learned were dangerous. In the past, girls have been considered more at risk in public space than boys, and have been more heavily restricted, but awareness of bullying, paedophilia and other types of violence means that boys are increasingly subject to parental restrictions and fearful of crime in their own right (Goodey, 1994, 1997). Ironically, most accidents and most of the violence which children suffer take place in the home, so warnings about danger which revolve around public space are spatially inappropriate. Media reports of crimes against children and advice from formal agencies such as police forces and governments tend to legitimate the location of these concerns (Walklate, 1989).

Not all responses to fear of crime involve avoiding or carefully negotiating places perceived as dangerous, however. Young people in particular may respond to risk in other ways. Many resist the rules which govern their use of space referred to above, instead choosing to go out in groups with other young people, because they feel in danger themselves either from other young people or from adults (Loader et al., 1998; Pain and Williams, 2000). Ironically, this response creates suspicion and fear among other young people, as well as among other social groups. The following quotes taken from discussion groups carried out in North
Tyneside in north-east England emphasise the mutual lack of understanding of the behaviour and concerns of those in different age-groups relating to conflicts over space.

**Adults’ Views of Teenagers**

Q: Do you think people around here are worried to approach teenagers?

**GENERAL AGREEMENT**

— In case they get their windows broke or something like that you know.
— You don’t know if they’re full of drink (Mothers).

**Teenagers’ Views of Teenagers**

I mean all of us have probably done it as well, hang around on, because there was nowhere to go and nowhere to do, and so you just hung around (Young Women).

The people who are standing round in groups are just as scared of getting mugged by the other groups as anyone else is (Young Men).

**Teenagers’ Views of Adults**

Everybody up on Finton Park who lived there used to phone the police, even if you were just sitting on the wall. And they’d be like “Will you move them, they make the place look bad.” … Just the fact that you’re sitting there, everybody feels like “Oh God what are they going to do, break the windows and stuff”. It’s stupid. Nobody understands (Young Women).

— I think the older ones need more awareness that it’s going on, because it never happened in their generation so they don’t understand. And maybe if they did, then they’d get something sorted out.
— I think people should have awareness to be able to do something about it.
— My Grandma’s like “Why don’t you go down Spanish City [local amusement park]. You and your friends go down”. And I’m thinking “I wouldn’t dare do that”. That’s where they used to go when they were little (Young Women) (taken from Pain and Williams, 2000).

The experiences of different age-groups of particular public places, then, are interrelated and contingent.

**5. Conclusion**

This paper has attempted to show something of the complexity of the relationships between fear of crime in the city and the social identities of age, race and gender. It provides no easy answers to the question of who is most likely to fear public urban spaces. Many people fear different spaces at different times and these fears are expressed in different behaviour patterns. This includes men as well as women, young people as well as older people and people of colour as well as white people. The research agenda is currently changing. Women are still acknowledged as experiencing a high level of fear of crime, largely because of fear of sexual violence, but men’s low fear and the nature of the relation of different masculinities to fear of crime are being questioned. With the exception of very excluded groups, older people suffer the consequences of fear less than was once thought and younger people are increasingly recognised as more at risk from victimisation and fear. The fears of white people are increasingly recognised as being racialised, while the fear of crime of people of colour is partly structured by racism, racist violence and harassment.

Thus it is inappropriate to deal with race, gender, age and other social identities simply as descriptive categories in analysis of the fear of crime. Rather, in each case, fear of crime (and the crimes feared) are often structured by age, race and gender, as this paper has outlined. When gender, age and race are viewed as social relations which are based upon unequal distributions of power, they begin to explain who is most affected by fear, and where. Central to this argument is the consideration of ways in which these and
other social identities intersect, so that male–female, black–white, old–young are not enough alone to predict people’s position in relation to fear. Some of these intersections have been illustrated: for example, in the racialisation of women’s fear of rape; the differences in responses to fear between young men and young women; and the heightened risks of victimisation for frail and excluded older people. This framework helps to get beyond some of the dichotomised thinking around ‘victims–offenders’ and ‘feared–fearful’ which has influenced so much literature on the fear of crime. Some of those groups traditionally labelled as ‘feared’, such as young men, homeless people and those with mental illness, may also be ‘fearful’, and these fears are in many cases justified by the risks of personal crime against them.

Equally, the particularities of place are a further axis of differentiation and are helpful in constructing a more diverse and realistic account of the fear of crime of certain social groups. Place affects fear in the city at a number of scales: for example, in micro-scale environmental features; the avoidance of neighbourhoods or city centres perceived as dangerous at certain times; and the influence of local constructions of identities such as masculinility, femininity and race. In the Newcastle study, young men’s safety depended not only on their social positioning, but also on their area of origin, while different studies of racist violence have emphasised the importance of local historical and contemporary race relations, patterns of segregation and conflict.

This paper has hinted at the social construction of different discourses of fear and the fact that these discourses have been widely employed for political ends. However, it has also shown that fear of crime has tangible and serious effects on social interaction, use of space and quality of life—especially among those who experience some level of exclusion from mainstream social spaces, amongst whom fear is often a reaction to significant risks of violence and crime.

**References**


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