

# TWO

## Researching the fear of crime

In researching any topic, there are two overarching questions that have to be addressed: *what* is the object of enquiry and *how* can it be enquired into? In respect of the fear of crime, these translate into 'What is the fear of crime?' and 'How can it be measured?' For the sake of simplicity, in what follows we shall refer to 'what'-related questions as *theoretical*, and 'how'-related ones as *methodological*. In research into the fear of crime there have been far more attempts to measure the fear of crime than to ask what it is that is being measured. Although this problem has been recognised by some authors,<sup>1</sup> even these have failed to notice the importance of a further question: namely, *who* is the assumed subject of research? In this respect, research into the fear of crime is typical. As we intend to show during the course of this chapter, the problems this common oversight poses for research are as grave as the failure to define the fear of crime.

### 'How safe do you feel ...?'

It may seem remarkable now that, without defining what the fear of crime was, early researchers in the field, such as those conducting the first British Crime Survey (Hough and Mayhew, 1983), felt able to measure it. They found that women, especially elderly women, are more fearful of crime than men. Because this finding was 'discovered with monotonous regularity' (Gilchrist et al., 1998), the fearful old lady, afraid to venture out after dark, has become a common stereotype, as the authors of the 1996 British Crime Survey came to bemoan (Mirrlees-Black et al., 1996: 55). Yet, when we remind ourselves of the original source of this knowledge, we find it stems from the answers of large national samples to the following question: 'How safe do you feel walking alone in this area after dark?' Moreover, the answer was required to fit into one of four categories: 'very safe', 'fairly safe', 'a bit unsafe' or 'very unsafe'.

Survey research interviews of this kind, where answers can be quantified on a Likert scale, are so prevalent that their capacity to produce evidence is taken for granted. Mishler's extensive consideration of research interviewing concluded that the 'standard approach to interviewing [the survey interview] is demonstrably inappropriate for and inadequate to the study of the central questions in the social and behavioural sciences' (1986: ix). The main reason for this is because the approach fails to address the way in which respondents' meanings are related to circumstances. Reliance on coding isolated responses strips any remaining context from these responses:

The problem raised by so radical a decontextualization of the interview at so many different levels ... is that respondents' answers are disconnected from essential socio-cultural grounds of meaning. Each answer is a fragment removed from both its setting in the organized discourse of the interview and from the life setting of the respondent. (Mishler, 1986: 23)

Of course, these responses, duly coded, have to be reassembled so as to make sense of them. However, 'when these [fragmented] responses are assembled into different subgroups by age, gender and the like, the results are artificial aggregates that have no direct representation in the real world' (Mishler, 1986: 26). These are the processes which have generated the findings about gender and age differences in the fear of crime. As Josselson puts it: 'when we aggregate people, treating diversity as error variable, in search of what is common to all, we often learn about what is true of no one in particular' (1995: 32).

Another way of examining the problems with survey research questions is to look at the methodological and theoretical assumptions underlying them. Let us look at the assumptions about the fear of crime that underpinned the framing of the fear of crime question in the British Crime Survey (BCS).

### Methodological assumptions

- It is a basic assumption in much social-science research that if the words used are the same, and if they are communicated in the same manner, they will mean the same thing to numerous people in a sample. On this principle a great deal hangs: the possibility of reliability, and the validity of quantification, comparison and generalisation.
- If the same words do not guarantee the same meanings, the 'alone in the dark in a public space' scenario of the BCS raises some interesting questions about what the scenario conjures up differently for different groups. For young men, it might suggest fighting; for older people, mugging; for women, sexual assault.
- Abstract and closed questions of this sort delimit a horizon of thought. If you do not frame a respondent's agenda in these formless terms (Ferraro and LaGrange, 1987), they will talk about specific crimes which they fear: burglary or mugging or car theft. Women often talk about their fear of rape, for example (Pain, 1993).



## Theoretical assumptions

- By asking about safety, but making claims about fear, the research is assuming a relationship between these two that is not spelled out; that is, a relationship that is taken for granted. It looks as if safety and fear are assumed to be opposite ends of a continuum, where feeling safe is equivalent to not feeling fearful and vice versa.
- The scenario presented is not one depicting crime but one in which some potential threat to safety must be imagined. Fear of some imagined threat is thus assumed to correspond to fear of crime. But 'threat' can correspond to a whole range of fears and anxieties. For example, Freud suggested that three images define human anxiety: being alone, in the dark, and in the presence of a stranger.<sup>2</sup> The BCS's question on the fear of crime reproduces the first two of these and the third would be represented by the imagined criminal. In conjuring up these images, then, the question may be eliciting more about general anxiety than the fear of crime.
- By asking people to imagine themselves 'walking alone', 'after dark', a frightening scenario is depicted. Does this scenario derive from commonplace situations that people routinely find themselves in? Not really, when people are more commonly in groups and under street lighting. It is the stuff of horror fiction, though, and nightmares.
- The generalised framing of the question assumes that a person's feeling of fear is consistent over time. That is to say, it forces someone to claim, in effect, that every time, or never, they feel safe or unsafe, irrespective of contingent events or mood.

As we suggested earlier, these sorts of methodological and theoretical criticisms of existing survey-based work in this area are now more common. For example:

Taken together, these criticisms suggest that crime surveys ignore the meaning of events for respondents; turn 'processes' into 'events'; neglect that the fear of crime can be a multi-faceted phenomenon; poorly conceptualise the fear of crime; ignore important contextual variables (such as time and space); greatly influence the reported incidence of the fear of crime and rely too heavily on respondents' recall. (Farrall et al., 1997: 662)

While we agree with this conclusion, these criticisms of the 'what' and the 'how' of survey-based research are not accompanied by an equally critical look at the 'who' of such research. It is this blindness to the issue of what research subject is being assumed which compromises not only efforts to develop a 'more sensitive qualitative understanding' of the fear of crime (Gilchrist et al., 1998: 296), but all the other attempts by qualitative researchers to rectify the problems of quantitative, survey-based approaches in this field.

## 'Telling it like it is'

In response to these limitations of survey and other questionnaire research in addressing questions of meaning and causality, many researchers have looked





to qualitative research. For example, researchers influenced by feminism, who criticised early work on the fear of crime for not taking into account the routine sexual harassment of women or the particular vulnerability of women to rape, often used in-depth or semi-structured face-to-face interviews to ask women (and men in some cases) about their fears.<sup>3</sup> One result of such feminist critiques of traditional 'scientific' methods was a situation in which 'it began to be assumed that only qualitative methods, especially the in-depth, face-to-face interview, could really count in feminist terms and generate useful knowledge' (Maynard, 1994: 12). More generally, face-to-face interviewing has become the most common type of qualitative research method used in order to find out about people's experiences in context, and the meanings these hold. Considerable effort has been directed to adapting the traditional interview format so that it is adequate to these purposes (see Mishler, 1986; Berg and Smith, 1988; Maynard and Purvis, 1994). But, despite the energy expended, the idea that an interviewee can 'tell it like it is' still remains the unchallenged starting-point for most of this qualitative, interview-based research. One revealing effect of this is that the questions the interviewer asks in order to get respondents to 'tell it like it is' are often not considered worthy of mention.

For example, Gilchrist and colleagues' (1998) own qualitative follow-up to their critique of the survey-based literature on the fear of crime (Farrall et al., 1997) has several pages of men and women, the fearful and the fearless, talking about their fear of crime. We learn that these extracts have been taken 'from 64 qualitative interviews with (equal numbers of) men and women in Glasgow' (Gilchrist et al., 1998: 286). We learn also that, allowed to speak for themselves, the importance of the gender divide diminishes since 'there are striking similarities between men's and women's fears about crime' (1998: 296). But what we never learn is what it is that respondents are responding to: how they were invited to tell about their fear of crime.

This failure to examine the role of the interviewer's questions in the process suggests that they believed that the problematic assumptions that they identified in relation to survey-based research disappear when the 'meaning of events for respondents' is taken into account. We cannot agree. Even if no theoretical assumptions are being made about the fear of crime since this is left for respondents to define, and even if the question asked is no longer a closed one, at least one problematic methodological assumption of survey research still applies. This is that words mean the same thing to the interviewer and the interviewees. In other words, the researchers, in taking this for granted, are still assuming that a shared meaning attaches to words: that the question asked will be the one that is understood.

This assumption relies on a discredited theory of the transparency of language. Current theories of language and communication stress that any kind of account can only be a mediation of reality. Hence there can be no guarantees that different people will share the same meanings when it comes to making sense of an interviewee's account. In taking into account the context of the interview, clearly the



role of the interviewer is a central mediation in the making of meaning. A further reason for assuming shared meanings between interviewer and interviewee is connected with the taken-for-granted notion of the subject of research in qualitative research. In essence, this is the same subject as that assumed by survey researchers.

## A shared subject

So far, we have pointed out some of the theoretical and methodological assumptions built into the wording of the original fear of crime question in the BCS, and shown how the shift to qualitative research surmounts some, but not all, of these problems. The similarity between qualitative and quantitative approaches becomes evident when we focus specifically on the presumed subject in each research tradition. The subject assumed by the BCS question and by all survey-type research assumes that the respondent is one who:

- shares meanings with the researcher;
- is knowledgeable about his/her experience (in this case an emotional experience of feeling safe);
- can access this through an imaginary scenario (which he or she may or may not have experienced);
- can capture it satisfactorily in a single concept;
- can make distinctions in amount, such as the difference between 'fairly safe' and 'a bit unsafe'.

The fact that respondents routinely do provide answers as part of their cooperation in the research does not validate these assumptions.

Taking a research subject's account as a faithful reflection of 'reality' similarly assumes that a person is one who:

- shares meanings with the researcher;
- is knowledgeable about him or herself (his or her actions, feelings and relations);
- can access the relevant knowledge accurately and comprehensively (that is, has accurate memory);
- can convey that knowledge to a stranger listener;
- is motivated to tell the truth.

In short, whatever their other differences on the 'what' and 'how' of research, on the matter of the 'who' of research, quantitative and qualitative research traditions converge. This is one central reason why research into the fear of crime cannot resolve the two issues it persistently raises, namely:

- Is the fear of crime realistic or irrational?
- Are differences in the fear of crime explained by social factors?

### Is the fear of crime realistic or irrational?

The finding that women's and older people's fear of crime was greater than that of men and younger people, even though their risks were less (the fear-risk paradox), was generally greeted with the response that women's and older people's fear of crime was therefore irrational (Hough and Mayhew, 1983). This interpretation took the relative fearlessness of men and younger people as normative and rational. The rational-irrational dichotomy is pervasive well beyond social science and is indicative of the widespread assumption of a 'rational' subject, where deviations are then regarded as irrational. The policy response was to try to encourage people to become more rational by giving them information about 'real' risks, which would help them to become less fearful (Home Office Standing Conference on Crime Prevention, 1989). This response reveals another assumption about the human subject: that rationality includes the ability to calculate the probability of risks and make decisions on this basis (about safe times to go out or when to catch a taxi home rather than walk). These kinds of capacities are central to the idea of the information-processing individual, which is at the heart of cognitive psychology's and social science's assumptions about the human subject.<sup>4</sup>

When this interpretation of irrationality was challenged it was to advance a realist model of the fear of crime; that is, it defended the rationality of various groups' higher fear. Jones et al. (1986) argued that people living in certain kinds of neighbourhoods based their fear on real risks, a fact that was obscured in the averaging of experiences in large national samples like those of the BCS. Stanko (1990) has pointed out the real risks for women of harassment, assault and rape by men in public and domestic spaces. She argues that risk calculation is sensibly about the seriousness of the potential threat (notably rape) as well as its probability. Later, realist explanations have explored a new paradox, namely, that women are at much greater risk of physical and sexual assault in their own homes than in public spaces, but that their fear does not reflect this (Pain, 1995: 590). In this debate, the rational, information-processing subject (whose 'other' is irrational) has prevailed to the extent that none of these authors has tried to theorise what might lie behind the so-called irrationality of people's fear – the 'method in their madness'.

### Are differences in the fear of crime explained by social factors?

While sociologists and criminologists assume a rational, information-processing, psychological subject when trying to explain the fear-risk paradox, they are happiest assuming a socially constructed subject; that is, a subject who is largely determined by demographic factors. This dovetails with their reliance on statistical analyses that divide respondents into demographically based groups: class, sex, race, age and neighbourhood type being the most commonly used.<sup>5</sup> When differences are found, for example, between men and women, old and young, or different ethnic groups, these dominate the interpretation. Not surprisingly, then, the fear of crime debate has been fixated on these differences.

More recently, it has been acknowledged that, whatever it is that social factors explain, it falls far short of a complete explanation. This is because, for example, the differences in fear levels between the sexes 'is not that startling' (Gilchrist et al., 1998: 283) and, as we saw earlier, 'there are as many similarities across gender groups as differences between them' (1998: 296). This 'individual–social paradox' (how individuals come to have experiences supposedly at odds with the norm for their social position, the fearless woman, the fearful man, etc.), begs the question of how social differences are reflected in an individual's fear of crime.<sup>6</sup>

The premiss of a socially constructed subject, albeit one capable of rationally or irrationally judging risks, makes it impossible to encapsulate fully the diversity of individuals' lived experience. This becomes increasingly apparent when methods other than survey methods are used, as Gilchrist and colleagues found: '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, and we are a long way from knowing whether or not fear (or fearlessness) encompasses shared meanings' (1998: 296). Despite their insightful criticisms of survey-based work, and despite their efforts to supplement these shortcomings with qualitative research, this rather forlorn conclusion is, we suggest, the inevitable result of the failure to problematise the subjects of research (researchers as well as researched). Once methods allow for individuals to express what they mean, theories not only have to address the status of these meanings for that person and their understanding by the researcher, but they must also take into account the uniqueness of individuals. What such a theory of the subject entails is addressed in the next section.

## Understanding subjects as psychosocial

We have identified two persistent issues in the sets of assumptions that are made about people who are fearful of crime: how realistic or irrational are these subjects; and to what extent are they explained by their shared social circumstances, as opposed to something irreducibly unique to them as individuals? Both of these questions are central to how we are trying to understand the subject as 'psychosocial' (that is, simultaneously psychic and social). In what follows we will be more specific about what we mean by these terms and their interrelation, using two case examples, Roger and Joyce, from our research into the fear of crime, to illustrate our approach.

### The turn to language and the discursive subject

If people's fear of crime has really grown disproportionately to their risk of crime, what intervenes between people's risks of criminal victimisation and how these are experienced? In the past few decades there has been a massive shift of emphasis in social theory away from assumptions that the external



world can be apprehended accurately through the senses and via information processing mechanisms to one which claims that it is impossible to know that world directly. This is because everything we know about it is mediated by language, and the meanings, which are available through language, never represent the world neutrally. This shift is variously referred to as the shift from 'world' to 'word', the 'turn to language' or the 'hermeneutic turn' (that is, a move to emphasise meanings and their interpretation).

How then do meanings affect people's fear of crime? We use the term 'discourse' in preference to 'language' because it refers beyond language to sets of organised meanings (which can include images as well as words) on a given theme. The term 'discourse' has been used to emphasise the organised way in which meanings cohere around an assumed central proposition, which gives them their value and significance. For example, the 'permissive discourse' (Hollway, 1989) refers to a central proposition about sex based on the belief that sex with many partners can be both pleasurable and harmless. People's claims and practices refer to this, whether in agreement or not, as one of the dominant contemporary Western sets of meanings about sex.

Discourses of crime are widespread. They may be met with in the form of media news, media fiction or local talk of crime. Commonly, victims are represented as defenceless and hapless and, since these discourses are everywhere, people become fearful, it is argued, as a result of imagining themselves in these positions. This is one explanation of the finding that people's fear of crime has grown disproportionately to their real risks of victimisation. It is easy to extend this argument to account for women's and older people's greater fear of crime since these crime discourses typically position women and older people as the vulnerable ones, whereas the criminal is usually depicted as a young man. A label for this idea – of how people are formed by discursive representations – is 'the discursive subject'. It is one version of a socially constructed subject.

### Roger, fear and crime discourses

It follows from this line of argument that being fearful of crime could be explained by being positioned in a fear of crime discourse.<sup>7</sup> If this were the case, however, there would be no variation within a group, say, of old women, yet not all the old women we interviewed were fearful, nor all the young men fearless (see Gilchrist et al., 1998).<sup>8</sup> We need to account for individual differences in the way in which people make sense of the available information; that is, the discourses or systems of meaning within which they may be positioned. We will first use the example of Roger, a 58-year-old, unemployed man living on a high-crime council estate, and look at his fear in relation to crime discourses and then try to make sense of why he, in particular, comes to fear crime, unlike some other men of his age on the same estate. To understand his fearfulness, we shall argue that we need to attend to his particular biography and how this



relates to the question of his investments in crime discourses. By investments, we mean someone's desires and anxieties, probably not conscious or intentional, which motivate the specific positions they take up and the selection of accounts through which they portray themselves.

Roger spends much of his time hanging over his gate, watching local comings and goings. He sees the local kids joy-riding or transporting stolen parts in carrier bags, and hears stories of local burglaries and police impotence, but he has not personally been a victim of crime.<sup>9</sup> He puts this down to knowing the local kids, and they him. He also mentions his good house-dog, and we could add that he has never owned a car. He is, none the less, quite fearful. When on his own at home he is easily startled ('least little noise, I'd jump, me') and doesn't sleep well. When opening the door late at night he would always 'put catch on and open it just to 'ave a look to make sure who it were'. Before going on holiday, he leaves the TV, video and his wife's jewellery with his daughter, despite the dog remaining in the house ('you 'ear 'em doing things to dogs ... best to be safe than sorry').

Though he is not frightened of walking round the estate after dark, "cos I've been brought up round 'ere', he wouldn't now cut through local woods or parks after dark, since he heard of a man being mugged by three Jamaicans 'about eight year ago' while doing so. Nor would he walk around certain areas, though he would have done so when young, "cos there were no – I know it's 'orrible to keep saying it – but there were no coloureds hardly down there then.' 'Coloureds' are not the only group to which he links the decline of the estate: there's 'some right riff-raff up 'ere na ... you've got Scots ... and all sorts living ... up on [the rough end] ... there's ... gypsies on. Mind you, like I say, they 'aven't done owt to me, but I don't know I care for 'em much.'

He regards the pub as unsafe, though it used to be 'great' when he first moved on to the estate, full of 'rough and ready' lads.<sup>10</sup> This 'then' and 'now' contrast recurred throughout the transcript: when they first moved on to the estate it was 'smashing': 'tha could 'ave left thee doors open or owt ... you never got no trouble then.'

There is in all this a disjunction between Roger's knowledge of the mundane reality of local crime (joy-riding, fencing stolen goods, burglaries) and the lurid tales of vicious violence that he avidly recounts: 'you read in paper na, they'd kick you in for five quid or less, won't they' (a reference to an 80-year-old man murdered by two teenagers in the city centre). Why do such media-based stories resonate with him? Why does his local knowledge not serve to put these violent events in proportion, as it did with others, to recognise them as the rare events they are, especially on the estate where he lives?

### Roger's investments in the past and patriarchal authority

To make full sense of Roger's fear of crime, then, we need to explore why contemporary tales of murder and mayhem animate him despite the contrary evidence

of his own experience, and how these are connected to his perception of the decline of the estate. The past he harks back to was certainly not free from crime, nor violence, but it was, he insists, controlled. When he talks of fights, he remembers that, unlike today, they were never allowed to get out of hand: 'nobody would join in and kick everybody in. Two lads who were gonna fight, they'd fight', but would be stopped if one were getting 'a good 'iding'. Today 'they don't, they use glasses, knives and everything, don't they ... Now when you pick up paper or read news or owt – every time there's a fight, somebody's been knifed or summat ... Same wi' – wi' guns in' it?'

What kept violence and misbehaviour in check then was patriarchal authority: 'when I were a kid – only brought up rough and ready, but daren't do owt wrong ... tha'd 'ave got – well tha'd 'ave got pasted – got a right 'ammering'; a philosophy that extended from beltings at home and canings at school to 'glove across ear'ole' from the local policeman if caught playing football in the street. Such harshness allegedly produced respect: 'though you were only rough and ready, you respected 'em' (your parents). This was despite hating his dad ('e were cruel old sod'), especially for his treatment of Roger's mother ('e were 'orrible wi' 'er'). Now patriarchal authority and respect have disappeared: you see 'bits of kids at 13, 14 or 15 walking around estate at 12 o'clock at night and that ... In my days I wouldn't 'ave been allowed.' Roger can only watch helplessly when local joy-riders 'go past and do two fingers to ya' because his wife won't let him report them for fear 'they'll come and put all your windows through'.

How is Roger making sense of his fears about crime? The main discourse appears quite familiar: its themes are the failure of law and order, a decline of respect for authority in young people, and the consequent rise in criminality around him. These claims rely on comparisons with a better time, and Roger, like many older people, constructs his past, as well as his current life, within this discourse.

On the face of it, it is surprising that Roger frightens himself by imagining the worst. It may well be true that certain things are worse than they were; that certain kinds of violence are more gratuitous or less controlled. But we still need to explain why Roger (unlike Joyce, as we show below) is drawn to this reading of the present and not a more nuanced account. We believe that it is only possible to understand people's use of particular crime discourses by attending to their personal investment in them. What is it about a given discourse, like that in which the past constitutes a 'golden age', that attracts some, but not all, of us? In Roger's case, we will show how this investment is connected to his identity, and how this can be enhanced or made more secure, rather than undermined or threatened, by the self that it is possible to produce in the accounts that one gives of oneself and one's life. To do this we need first to know a little more about Roger's life.

At 58, Roger is a prematurely aged man in poor health. Married, with four married children and 11 grandchildren, he and his wife have lived on the respectable side of the estate for 26 years, moving twice in that time. The first-born of



five, he was brought up on a 'rough and ready' nearby local estate by a strict, wife-beating father who he 'ated', and a mother who he 'thought the world of'. At 19, he got 'right satisfaction' out of giving his dad 'a good 'iding' for all his years of wife-battering and other cruelties. He got employment as a miner.

At 21, a pit-shaft accident kept him off work for two years, leaving him temporarily depressed (although electric shock treatment left him 'as right as rain after') and permanently disabled. Though he did do labouring jobs subsequently, since 'light work' never paid enough, he was laid off in his late 30s and has never worked since.

A conflict in his account suggests why he is invested in an idealised version of parts of his past. On the one hand, he hated his father for his cruel exercise of power over the family. On the other, he 'respected' him for the exercise of authority (also through brutal means). A discourse of a 'golden age' when patriarchal authority still worked legitimates, and thereby mitigates, an aspect of his past that caused him suffering. It also allows him to secure a moment when patriarchal authority counted for something. This is in contrast to its loss in the present, especially in his own life, where his ability to exercise patriarchal control has been brief and limited. Whatever control he might have exercised as an adult man was quickly undermined by the disabling accident, depression, an upsetting failure to make National Service and a subsequent work life dictated by the Labour Exchange ('them days, they said "go for a job" and you went'). This was cut short by the onset of recession in the 1970s, and then by serious health problems.

Despite the decline of patriarchal authority signalled by these social changes, he – like other men – still expected to exercise that same authority in his own home as his father had. As a family man he was strict, but times had changed. Once he hit his daughter (the one time she was late home): 'I grabbed 'er and knocked 'er through 'edge, didn't I.' The result was that he felt 'orrible' and his wife 'went mad'. As a granddad, he is reduced to saying what he'd have done to his 16-year-old granddaughter who stopped overnight somewhere other than where she'd said she would: 'if that 'ad been my ... know it's only my granddaughter ... I'd 'ave got 'old of 'er an' pasted 'er.' Even his imaginings of exercising such power are faced with a changed reality when his wife reminds him: 'you don't do them things today, you've got to give and take.' Even as an old-established resident of the estate, his age-based authority counts for nothing. He feels he can only endure impotently the cheeky disrespect of joy-riders. Given this lack of control, it is small wonder that Roger's identity is so invested in a nostalgia for a 'golden age' of traditional, patriarchal authority.

We are trying to demonstrate through this example that it is because of his investments that Roger takes up the particular theme about crime that he does, that of a lost 'golden age' of law and order based on respect for patriarchal authority. This use of a common discourse is rendered unique by being inflected with meanings in which he is invested because of the tensions and conflicts in



his own biography. Paradoxically (given that the effect is to amplify his fear), the pain of his experiences can be rendered more benign by adopting this discourse. The meanings are both common and unique, social and biographical, discursive and defended. In what follows, we will explore further the nature of these investments, theorising them as unconscious, defensive and intersubjective.

### Klein, anxiety and the defended subject

We have argued that Roger had an identity investment in his positioning in this particular crime discourse. We now need to explore how to theorise such an identity or 'self'. In particular, we need to show how conflict, suffering and threats to self operate on the psyche in ways that affect people's positioning and investment in certain discourses rather than others. This will help us to understand the workings of the psyche and the social simultaneously. For this purpose we must explain our theory of the 'defended' subject.

We have suggested that Roger's investment in a discourse of an idealised past serves a defensive function: it legitimates and therefore mitigates his experiences of his father's brutality, and more generally of the harshness of his earlier life. In so doing it serves to defend his self. This argument assumes that threats to the self create anxiety, and indeed this is a fundamental proposition in psychoanalytic theory, where anxiety is viewed as being inherent in the human condition. For psychoanalysis, anxiety precipitates defences against the threats it poses to the self and these operate at a largely unconscious level. The shared starting point of all the different schools of psychoanalytic thought is this idea of a dynamic unconscious that defends against anxiety and significantly influences people's actions, lives and relations.

We use the theories of psychoanalyst Melanie Klein (1988a, 1988b) about how the self is forged out of unconscious defences against anxiety. Her account starts at the very beginning of life. According to Klein, early experience is dominated by anxiety in the face of the infant's state of complete dependency. Because the infant has no conception of time, it is incapable of anticipating the satisfaction of a feed when it is feeling the frustration of hunger. Thus it experiences polarised emotions of 'bad' (when hungry) and 'good' (when fed). Gradually, the infant becomes capable of recognising the breast, and later the mother, as a whole object containing both the capacity to fulfil and frustrate. However, the bad and good will, when necessary, be kept mentally separate for defensive purposes in order to protect the good from the bad.

The concept of splitting originated in Freud's view of the mind as conflicted and capable of producing inconsistent thoughts and beliefs. In a late paper (Freud, 1938), he described the way in which the mind could adopt two separate points of view. Klein's work on splitting of the object developed this, emphasising how objects are often given unrealistically good and bad



characteristics. Later Klein emphasised the splitting of the ego, where parts of the self that are feared as bad are split off through projection and usually identified as belonging to an outside object (or person) (Hinshelwood, 1991: 433–4). This splitting of objects into good and bad is the basis for what Klein terms the ‘paranoid-schizoid’ position; a position to which we may all resort in the face of self-threatening occurrences because it permits us to believe in a good object, on which we can rely, uncontaminated by ‘bad’ threats, which have been split off and located elsewhere.

The discourse through which Roger expresses his fear of crime is consistent with a paranoid-schizoid splitting of good and bad in two striking ways. The first is the historical splitting between then and now by which an idealised estate is split off into the past, leaving a denigrated estate in the present characterised by the breakdown of traditional authority. The second is the splitting of people into groups of ‘us’ and ‘them’: splitting between people like Roger and ‘others’ (‘coloureds’, Scots, gypsies). This locates the bad (danger, threat and criminality) in people who are not his kind. His kind (and himself) can thereby be experienced as good. Following this logic, these splittings would unconsciously serve to protect Roger’s self in his current circumstances, the responsibility for which he can locate elsewhere.

In this notion of unconscious defences against anxiety, Klein departs radically from the assumption that the self<sup>11</sup> is a single unit, with unproblematic boundaries separating it from the external world of objects (both people and things). Her proposition (based on clinical work) is that these defences against anxiety are intersubjective, that is, they come into play in relations between people. The separation of good and bad (splitting) is achieved through the unconscious projection (putting out) and introjection (taking in) of mental objects. We have illustrated this idea of unconscious intersubjectivity in Roger’s account.

However, according to Klein, the paranoid-schizoid position is not the only way in which people face a threatening world. In contrast, the depressive position involves the acknowledgement that good and bad can be contained in the same object. Being able to recognise the mother who both fulfils and frustrates is the earliest example. This can be a hard position to sustain when faced with external or internal threats to the self. Then the good needs to be preserved, at the cost of reality if necessary. We all move between these positions. We sometimes react in a paranoid-schizoid fashion and split off the bad. At other times, or in a different area of our life, we are able to respond from the depressive position and acknowledge the mixture of good and bad in the same object, person or group.

For example, the fact that Roger felt ‘orrible’ and his wife ‘went mad’ on the only occasion he hit his daughter suggests a capacity for empathy more compatible with an ambivalent than a split relationship to his father’s early cruelty; that is, an ability to keep simultaneously in mind both the (respected) authority and the (hated) cruelty, and not simply idealise the former split off from the latter. This reading is reinforced by his willingness to respond to the new, non-patriarchal



discourse articulated by his wife: 'you don't do them things today.' This evidence of Roger's ambivalent, more depressive, relationship to his past means that our argument about Roger's defensive splitting should be understood as something both context and content specific; that is, produced in the interview context in relation to the fear of crime, not as a general characteristic of Roger's defensive organisation; and as tendential rather than absolute. None the less, different people will be characterised by a predominance of one or the other defensive organisation – the paranoid-schizoid and depressive – as their typical response.

### Joyce, crime and the depressive position

Among our 37 interviewees, Joyce (who you will meet again in Chapter 6) was an example of someone who, in the area of fear of crime, seemed to be responding from the depressive position; that is, she was mostly able to acknowledge good and bad in the same object. Here we illustrate briefly her ability to acknowledge a fairly threatening reality without splitting.

Joyce, aged 36, was born in the same house in which she now lives with her four children, on the rough end of the same high-crime estate as Roger. Her husband left three years ago. Although her brother is living with her temporarily and she has a man 'friend' who sometimes stays, she has become accustomed to being on her own in the house, all the more so since the children spend a proportion of their time with their father. Her history of criminal victimisation, like Roger's, is low: the lawn mower and two children's bikes were taken from her garden shed (which she had forgotten to lock up). Unlike Roger, she is not fearful: 'I don't think I've been unsafe ... [or] felt unsafe.' Despite her worries about crime, drugs and her children getting in with 'riff-raff', her own identity and that of her children does not depend, as does Roger's, on splitting the estate of her childhood and the current situation. In the middle of boarded-up windows and stolen scrap metal in front gardens, her house and garden are immaculate, her children well behaved. Her response to the estate's problems is: 'I'm gonna show everybody that good does come off this estate.'

Joyce believed that her safety from crime depended on the fact that she and her large family were local and known and the local criminal ethic was that you do not steal from those like yourself. This principle, however, appeared to be under threat from local drug addicts. She knows this because drugs are the reason for her nephew, who lives locally, having 'gone off the rails'. Her feelings of safety, depending as they did on the belief in the local criminal ethic, were threatened by the theft from her garden shed. In what follows, we can see the defensive struggle between her wish to split off bad criminals as outsiders and her acknowledgement of a more ambivalent reality. She wished that the thief had been a non-local because she was disturbed by the threat a local posed to her local identity: 'When I were robbed, I was 'urt ... I just thought, right the rotten bastards ... I knew that



me shed were robbed by someone round 'ere';<sup>12</sup> 'it'd 'ave been better for me if the person that robbed me would 'ave been one of the newcomers.' However, she manages to minimise the threat to her identity of criminals being local by emphasising their good side: 'Even your ... burglars what we 'ave round 'ere ... they're big softies, honestly ... Two of biggest thieves round 'ere ... they used to be in my year at school ... When me 'usband left ... they were smashing.' In her case, her investment in these local connections protect Joyce from constructing a dangerous 'criminal other', which could provide a receptacle for her fears. However, she does not identify with the criminals since she has worked hard for what she has got: 'to know that the person that robbed me ... knew that to pay for them two bikes ... besides my job, I worked at a ... factory for three months.'

There is, then, a fair bit of evidence that Joyce's estimation of risk is quite realistic. She does not deny the problem, and even recognised, like Roger, that things have got worse.<sup>13</sup> But she is able to make certain distinctions and thereby avoids amplifying the problem: 'There's always been crime, but it's never been as bad as what it is now ... I've never honestly 'eard of anybody round 'ere being mugged ... I don't think it's as bad as what people make it out to be.' We believed this to be a fairly balanced and realistic view of local crime, and thus indicative of the depressive position being accessible to Joyce in this arena. There are threats to her identity involved in facing this reality, however, as Kleinian theory would predict: 'I don't want to ... know about [drugs] ... I just don't like to think of it in area.' Since this is her greatest fear for her own children (it has happened to her sister's son), it is threatening to contemplate.

Further evidence of Joyce's moves between a depressive and a paranoid-schizoid position came in response to the question 'Is there anything you're frightened of?' She replied 'I know this is awful to say it, but blacks in area frighten me. Not that I'm frightened of 'em as such, 'cos when I went to school we'd got lots of coloureds in our class. But they do frighten me ... I don't know why they frighten me because probably they're ... nice people', and she went on to give an example of a 'smashing' neighbour of hers who is black. In this sequence, she started by splitting off characteristics to be feared in generalised black others and then engaged with the reality of the familiar and safe black neighbour. In a similar move, Joyce identified 'lone parent families' as spoiling the estate and then qualified this by pointing out her own status and asserting that it's not about being a single mother, but about how you bring up your children. In both cases she was momentarily taking up a position in a common discourse, which would afford her a ready-made, but unrealistic (because split) set of meanings about crime. In both cases, she modified this discourse from her own experience of local reality.

### Overview of Roger and Joyce as psychosocial subjects

To illustrate our ideas about psychosocial subjects, we chose two people, Roger and Joyce, who share many social characteristics. Although dissimilar in age,



they both come from big, local families and have both spent most of their lives on the same high-crime estate. Yet their fear of crime is very different and, to some extent, counter-intuitive: Joyce, living alone on the rougher (and arguably riskier) end of the estate, is less fearful than Roger, who lives with his wife on the more respectable end. However, by positing them as biographically unique 'defended subjects', we have produced an understanding of differences between people that are not explicable by a theory of a discursive subject. The idea of a defended subject shows how subjects invest in discourses when these offer positions that provide protections against anxiety and therefore supports to identity. When ambivalent feelings about the same mental object can be acknowledged (like Joyce's way of regarding 'blacks'), investment in a discourse – here a racist discourse – is moderated (unlike in Roger's case).

We have chosen the cases of Roger and Joyce partly in order to unsettle gender stereotypes about fearful women and fearless men. The differences between them can also be used to reflect back on the distinction made in the literature on the fear of crime between individuals' fears being 'rational' or 'irrational', which we discussed above. Our approach transcends this distinction because it can offer a sustained theoretical account of defences against anxiety by which both rationality and irrationality can be explained. Within this approach, rationality depends on a capacity to acknowledge the mixed good and bad characteristics of the external world without compromising reality by internal defensive needs which distort it through splitting.

In our cases, Roger's fear of crime appeared to be more irrational, where Joyce's could be regarded as largely (with oscillations) rational. However, Roger's so-called irrationality is rational to the extent that it serves more pressing unconscious self-protective needs than the need not to frighten himself with images of murder and mayhem. This is the 'method in his madness'.<sup>14</sup>

In this account, unlike some psychoanalytic usages, anxiety is not treated simply as a psychological characteristic. Though it is a feature of individuals, it is not reducible to psychology: anxiety and the defences, which it precipitates, are complex responses to events and people in the social world, both present and past. Defences against anxiety affect the discourses through which people perceive crime and this affects people's actions. The concept of an anxious, defended subject is simultaneously psychic and social. It is psychic because it is a product of a unique biography of anxiety-provoking life-events and the manner in which they have been unconsciously defended against. It is social in three ways: first, because such defensive activities affect and are affected by discourses (systems of meaning that are a product of the social world); second, because the unconscious defences that we describe are intersubjective processes (that is, they affect and are affected by others); and, third, because of the real events in the external, social world that are discursively and defensively appropriated. It is this psychosocial conception of the subject that we believe is most compatible with a serious engagement in researching the 'what', 'how' and 'who' of issues such as the fear of crime and sexuality.



## Summary

- We argued that traditional survey research into the fear of crime is based on a series of unwarranted methodological and theoretical assumptions; namely, that the fear of crime is a single entity that can be accessed through one, hypothetical, closed question. However, although qualitative research into the fear of crime aims to give voice to respondents, it continues to assume shared meanings.
- It was concluded that both research traditions fail to problematise the research subject who is seen, in consequence, as either socially constructed and/or rationally driven.
- The idea of the psychosocial subject (combining the ideas of the discursive subject and the defended subject) explained why some, but not all, from particular social categories might be fearful of crime.
- Applying the idea of psychosocial subjects, we explained why the less-at-risk Roger was more fearful of crime than Joyce.

## Notes

- 1 Notably Ferraro and LaGrange (1987), Sparks (1992), Ferraro (1995) and, most recently, Farrall et al. (1997).
- 2 Bowlby cites Freud, who classified as basic phobias (i.e. irrational fears) the three elements: 'alone', 'in the dark', 'without a familiar person, or rather with an unknown one' (1970/1: 83).
- 3 See Junger (1987) and Stanko (1990) for critiques of the early research into the fear of crime for not taking into account the routine sexual harassment of women, and Riger et al. (1978: 278) on the particular vulnerability of women to rape. Stanko (1990), Stanko and Hobdell (1993) and Gilchrist et al. (1998) used in-depth or semi-structured face-to-face interviews to ask either men, or women and men, about their fears.
- 4 See Mary Douglas (1986) for a thorough critique of these assumptions.
- 5 Nowadays, the number of social categories into which respondents could be grouped – sexual orientation (at least three), particular disabilities, specific ethnicities, etc. – has grown so large that sociology is faced with the problem of the *et cetera* clause. Moreover, since each of these groups can cross-cut or intersect with each other, there is no mathematical limit to the number of groups imaginable (Hood-Williams, personal communication).
- 6 Addressing a different problem, but recognising the same paradox, Kroger concludes that 'the mechanisms by which individuals in their different identity statuses create their own life contexts within the broader socio-historical milieu await further description' (1993: 160).
- 7 Are people 'positioned by' available discourses or do they 'take up positions' in them? A fundamental philosophical disagreement about the nature and extent of people's agency is contained in this question. It is often referred to as 'structure–agency' dualism. The subject we referred to earlier as 'socially constructed' is either seen as one whose identity is more or less determined by external structures or one whose meanings are more or less determined by external discourses.
- 8 These within-group variations only appear in statistical analyses of survey data in the size of statistically significant differences. Thus we depend on other methods to give meaningful access to them.



- 9 However, his daughter, who lives on the estate, has had golf clubs and a lawn mower stolen from a garden shed, and his wife was mugged, off the estate, some eight years ago by 'coloured 'uns'.
  - 10 Roger's constant, almost mantra-like, use of the term 'rough and ready' to describe aspects of his past appears to hint at a more contradictory reality: 'rough' seems to be an acknowledgement of something less than ideal, even as the term 'ready' (willing) seems to cast such aspects, overall, in a positive light.
  - 11 Klein consistently used the term 'ego' and never the self. In this book, we have tried to use the term 'self' consistently to overcome problems with overlapping and rather generalised usages of such terms as self, subjectivity, individual and ego. This does mean leaving aside certain theoretical niceties, for example, in Klein's use of the term 'ego'.
  - 12 She was right: in three days she was told who it was, along with an offer of the goods back.
  - 13 Her non-use of a 'golden age' discourse can partly be accounted for by age: Roger has an extra 22 years to look back on. However, this does not obviate the need for a psychological account in addition to this social one.
  - 14 Although we interviewed both Roger and Joyce (and our other interviewees) twice, our knowledge of their lives is too limited to answer fully the question as to the origins of their particular defensive organisations (in relation to the fear of crime). However, since people split that which is too painful to acknowledge or too difficult to assimilate, taking up paranoid-schizoid rather than depressive positions will tend to be associated with trauma. Since Roger's early life, as recounted, seems to have been more traumatic than Joyce's, his greater tendency to adopt splitting defences should not surprise us.
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