Fear of Crime and Older Adults: A Metanarrative Review of the Literature.

A number of criminologists and sociologists have stated that the construct fear of crime was “discovered” in the U.S. in the mid-1960’s\(^1\) and coincided with rising crime rates and significant social change created by events and social movements such as the Vietnam War, the civil rights movement, and feminism (Ferraro, 1995; Lee, 2007; Lee & Farrall, 2009). By the mid-1970’s, the fear of crime literature was strongly suggesting that older adults as a group experienced a higher, disproportionate, and irrational fear of crime relative to their actual victimization rates. This issue was believed to be critically important because the excessive, irrational fear expressed by older adults was held to have a debilitating impact on their quality of life. It was argued that older adults reacted by restricting their lifestyles in ways that led to negative physical and psychosocial outcomes (Butler, 1975; Hahn, 1976; Lawton et al., 1975; Sunderland et al., 1980). A rather typical description of the predicament of older adults due to fear of crime at this time is captured in the following description: “Afraid someone will rob or hurt them, older citizens increasingly remain behind bolted doors and forego many of the experiences that give joy and meaning to life” (Braungart, Hoyer & Braungart, 1979, p. 15). This phenomenon was quickly labeled the fear-victimization paradox in the academic literature and popular press.

However, by the 1980’s the existence of the paradox was being contested. While greater fear by older adults continued to be reported in the literature, a number of researchers were suggesting that there were significant problems in the construction of fear of crime as experienced by older people. These problems included the lack of a precise meaning for fear of crime, questionable survey methods, the use of inconsistent and misleading empirical measurement instruments, and conflicting theoretical explanations (LaGrange & Ferraro, 1987;\(^\text{1}\)

\(^{1}\)The 1960’s marks the “discovery” of fear of crime in the U.S. See Sessar, K. (2008) who quotes Ditton from 1998 that “there was no fear of crime in Britain until it was discovered in 1982.”
Lawton & Yaffe, 1980; Lebowitz, 1975; Yin, 1980). In fact, the existing research was pointing to a number of variables other than age that appeared to be more strongly associated with the fear of crime such as victimization rates, housing, gender, and income (Akers, LaGreca, Sellers & Cochrane, 1987; Burt and Katz, 1985; Gomme, 1988; Janson & Ryder, 1983; Jeffords, 1983; Sacco & Glackman, 1987; Yin, 1985). These conflicting results led to a sense of increasing scepticism towards the early literature on fear of crime and aging. For example, in an analysis of the existing survey data up to the 1980’s, Yin (1982) found that fear of crime was a less severe problem for the elderly than had been previously reported. In another study, Clarke and Lewis (1982) found that fear of crime did not increase with increasing age. By the late 1980’s, Ferraro and LeGrange were suggesting that fear of crime in the elderly had been exaggerated in the gerontological, sociological, and criminological literature due to “conceptual cloudiness and operational obfuscation of the fear of crime concept” (Ferraro & LaGrange, 1988, p. 278).

Criticisms of both the early and ongoing research continued during the 1990’s culminating in Chris Hale’s important review of the fear of crime literature in 1996. While addressing the fear of crime literature in general, Hale summarized what was known then about fear of crime and older adults by stating that “clearly the notion that the elderly are more fearful of crime is one which needs further study” (Hale, 1996, p. 103). This sentiment was also echoed by McCoy in 1996, when he suggested that “researchers might find it profitable to review the social construction of the social problem of fear of crime experienced by the elderly” (McCoy, 1996, p. 202) and this, in turn, was followed by a more strongly worded recommendation appearing in 2003 suggesting that it might in fact be time to “scotch the myth that the old are fearful of crime” (Chadee and Ditton, 2003, p. 443).
These contradictory findings have continued to generate a significant body of literature on the topic of fear of crime and older adults. This is perhaps not surprising. As Greenhalgh and colleagues have noted in their review of the outcomes of systematic literature reviews such as Hale’s (1996), ambiguous and/or contradictory results in an area of research are typically resolved with claims of methodological flaws that can only be addressed with additional research (Greenhalgh, Macfarlane, Bate, & Kyriakidou, 2004; Greenhalgh & Peacock, 2005; Greenhalgh, Macfarlane, Bate, Kyriakidou & Peacock, 2005). Certainly, the majority of the articles published since early 2000 on the topic of fear of crime and older adults have been written in response to calls for additional research to address methodological weaknesses. While there are strengths in this kind of response, it can also lead to highly repetitive research and results - outcomes that have been described as watching research “travel long distances down narrow paths” (Walklate, 2008, p. 221). Walklate has clearly captured an important trend in the research addressing fear of crime and older adults. However, I believe that the research has travelled a wider path than Walklate credits it with and this can be seen clearly when a “multi-narrative perspective” is utilized to analyze and synthesize the research results of the last 45 years.

As a number of researchers are increasingly recognizing, an over-reliance on a standard systematic literature review, described as an “objective and dispassionate summary of all the published research on a particular topic area (Greenlalgh, 2004, p. 350), can inadvertently obscure the ways in which research actually evolves. As these authors have suggested, all research occurs in a particular historical, ideological, political, and social context and this insight is helpful in understanding the addressing fear of crime and older adults in the preceding decades. After 45 years of research, I believe that the study of fear of crime and older adults has now reached maturity (Ioannidis, 2006) and it is time to reflect on, and synthesize, the results
from this large body of international research utilizing the meta-narrative perspective suggested by Greenhalgh and colleagues (2005). This perspective, recommended as a tool to analyze and then synthesize complex bodies of research, is defined as a process which takes the “unfolding storyline of a research tradition over time” as the unit of analysis, and then traces the impact on the storyline of key theoretical and empirical work contributed by different groups of scientists investigating the same problem (Greenhalgh, Robert, Macfarlane, Bate, Kyriakidou & Peacock, 2005, p. 417). I want to argue that a meta-narrative perspective is more effective than a standard systematic literature review in revealing the historical, political, ideological, and social context of the key theoretical ideas that have contributed to our understanding of fear of crime and older adults. As importantly, I believe a meta-narrative perspective will reveal the ways in which research on fear of crime and older adults has culminated in the development of a more nuanced and less stereotyped and ageist understanding of the place and meaning of fear in the lives of older adults.

**Method**

In the last 45 years, hundreds of articles have been written on fear of crime and older adults from a number of different theoretical perspectives. Nine electronic data bases were searched up to 2013 including Ageline, PsychInfo, Wiley Library, PsychArticles, Avery Index, Cochrane Central, ProQuest Dissertations, Web of Science, and SFU Library. Fear of crime, ageing and aging were selected as the generic search terms. Relevant journals and Websites were hand searched for additional studies, as were bibliographies of key articles. Key experts in the field were contacted (Chadee, Farrall, Greenhalgh, Hummelsheim, Jackson) and only English language terms were searched. The search returned 2,643 references with 367 included in the review that specifically addressed fear of crime and older adults. Seminal conceptual and
empirical papers addressing key theoretical aspects of the fear of crime literature were also included when judged to be relevant.

While the perspectives and approaches have differed by discipline and sometimes within a discipline, the research issues and questions have remained remarkably consistent and include the following: 1) the need to understand how measurement decisions impact the understanding of the construct of fear of crime; 2) identifying the nature, frequency, and intensity of fear of crime experienced by older adults; 2) determining if fear of crime is a significant social problem for older adults, with characteristics unique to the aging process and, 4) exploring the impact of fear of crime on the quality of life experienced by older adults. However, while the same “problem” has been analyzed, contradictory results have been frequent and according to Greenhalgh and colleagues, the “meaning” of these contradictory results can be better understood when approached from a metanarrative perspective.  This review of the literature will follow the steps of the meta-narrative process as outlined earlier, in order to explore the particular historical, ideological, political, and social context of the key narratives used to explore these four research questions. In addition, the specific research parameters and questions, and seminal conceptual and empirical papers will be presented, along with an analysis of each narrative’s relationship to earlier research. The review will conclude with a review of the strengths and weaknesses of each narrative and an assessment of the overall contribution of each to our understanding of fear of crime and aging.

**Data-Extraction Phase (for empirical studies)**

Utilizing a data extraction approach similar to that developed by Greenhalgh and colleagues, quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods based empirical studies within each identified narrative will be summarized by research question and theoretical basis (when possible), study
design, validity or credibility of research method, sample size and power if quantitative, nature and strength or relevance of findings, and validity or significance of conclusions and recommendations for future research.

Data Extraction Table for Empirical Studies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reference</th>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Conceptualization of Fear of Crime</th>
<th>Study Design</th>
<th>Sample Size and Power</th>
<th>Research Results</th>
<th>Limitations</th>
<th>Significance of Results</th>
<th>Future Research Recommendations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Data-Extraction Phase (for conceptual papers)

The data extraction approach for conceptual papers will include identifying the main theoretical or practical issue(s) under review, as well as identification of the specific constructs selected for analysis when applicable. In addition, the introduction of new conceptual models will be identified and analyzed, the nature, strength and relevance of conclusions will be assessed, and new directions for research reviewed.

Data Extraction Table for Conceptual Papers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reference</th>
<th>Theoretical Issue Reviewed</th>
<th>Construct Reviewed</th>
<th>Conceptual Contribution</th>
<th>Significant Conclusions</th>
<th>Future Research Recommendations</th>
</tr>
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Synthesis

The literature review will develop a synthesis of the research conducted over the preceding 45 years, and will summarize both the diversity and complexity associated with understanding fear of crime and older adults. As suggested by Grimshaw, “the evidence base in any field needs to mature and be synthesized before an observer can reliably understand its implications” (Grimshaw, 2012, p. 3). By identifying the range of research questions addressing fear of crime and older adults, and the different research traditions utilized over the past 45 years, we can
move closer to understanding the key findings and their implications for policy development, and suggest possible future directions for research.
References


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