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**Fear of crime among the elderly:
Beyond simplifying paradoxes**

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1 Are the Elderly Less Often Victims of Criminality? More Than One Answer to a Simple Question

The well-established finding that older persons are relatively seldom the victims of crime can be confirmed for the FRG. Just recently, Ahlf (1994) quoted official crime statistics which generally support this trend (see also Kawelowski, 1995).⁴ At first hand, one could suspect that this pattern only reflects a lower readiness of the elderly to report criminal victimization to the police. However, the KFN-survey reveals that to the contrary older people tend to call the police more often than younger ones (Wetzels et al., 1995, S. 89ff.). Accordingly, the victim-survey data – in line with the official statistics – clearly show that the prevalence rates for just about all criminal acts involving personal victims sink with increasing age: Person over 60 years of age are due to their own reports less likely victimized than younger persons. Surprisingly, this holds not only für „contact crimes“ such as robber (≥ 60 J.: 1,1‰, < 60 J.: 3,8‰) or violence (≥ 60 J.: 1,5‰, < 60 J.: 13‰), but also for theft (≥ 60 J.: 12,4‰, < 60 J.: 21,3‰) and even for breaking and entering (≥ 60 J.: 9‰, < 60 J.: 10,4‰; these data refer to prevalence rates in 1991 for the old german countries; Wetzels et al., 1995, p. 61).

However, these findings, even if they can be considered to be sufficiently well-founded, may underestimate the elderly's experience with criminal victimization. In particular, considering the *actual* victimization risk in isolation does not account for the fact that older individuals, over the course of their lives, have had a greater opportunity to experience victimization. The risk of ever having become the victim of criminal activity increases proportionally with age: the longer a person lives, the greater *ceteris paribus* the probability that s/he will experience a certain event. Thus, for example, 80-year-olds report twice as many victimization incidents involving breaking and entering than 20-year-olds. A similar pattern of findings has been observed for other frightening crimes (serious physical assault, robbery, personal threat, purse snatching; cf. Greve, Hosser & Wetzels, 1996). The question whether a person belongs to the victim or to the non-victim-group depends obviously on the scope of time regarded (see also Sessar, 1990). Thus, findings that show the elderly are seldom the victims of actual crime yet nevertheless exhibit a more marked fear of crime must be viewed in the proper perspective. The more older a person is, the more likely s/he is an expert of criminality in terms of personal experience with criminal victimization.

Furthermore, the discussion within criminological literature has chiefly concentrated on anonymous crimes that generally occur in public places. It is rather important, however, to note that this perspective neglects the violence and victimization that occur in close social relationships. Although victimization experiences involving close personal acquaintances do not (as a rule)

⁴ The one exception is the subcategory of purse snatching, which at 55.6 percent affects more older women than younger ones. However, recent data suggest reducing trends even with respect to this category of crime (Pfeiffer, Brettfeld & Delzer, 1997).

Fear of Crime Among the Elderly: Beyond Simplifying Paradoxes¹

More than two decades ago, Clemente and Kleiman (1976, p. 207) claimed that "... it is reasonable to argue that for older people fear of crime is even more of a problem than crime itself." Though it seems to be the „state-of-the-art“-perspective until today (cf. Hale, 1996, p. 100ff.), this was not the starting point of the debate. To the contrary, the discussion on the impact of criminality on older persons started in the early seventies with the assumption that the elderly are "suitable targets" for criminal offenders (cf. Brillon, 1987; Cutler, 1987). At first hand it seems to be very plausible that a "reasoning criminal" (Cornish & Clarke, 1986) is more likely to search for a victim that is unable to defend himself, unable to escape, but at the same time is a relatively promising victim in terms of material goods and property (e.g., compared to children). However, it soon became clear that this belief does not appear to be based upon fact: official statistics on crime as well as large-scale victimization surveys have shown that with respect to almost every kind of criminality, older people are less often victimized than younger ones (e.g., Cook, 1976; Hirschel & Rubin, 1982; Mawby, 1982; Wetzels et al., 1995; among many others). Hence, from a statistical point of view, they carry the lowest risk of victimization.

Surprisingly, the elderly seem to be unaware of their safety: numerous studies have shown that older people are not only *concerned* with criminality as a threat to society in general (cf. Sacco, 1993), but personally *fear* criminal victimization (starting with Clemente & Kleiman, 1976, or Sundeen & Mathieu, 1976; for a recent overview Hale, 1996, p. 100ff.; the difference between concern and fear was already discussed by Furstenberg, 1971). For more than two decades, the criminological literature has been full of alarming reports that older people suffer from fear of crime more than any other age group (for a recent example, see e.g. Parker & Ray, 1990). Consequently, as indicated in Clemente and Kleimans phrase cited above, criminologists have tended shift focus from crime against older people toward the fear of crime among the elderly. Recently Rosenbaum and Heath (1990, p. 222) declared even the „war on fear of crime“ instead of the „war on crime“.

Today, the often cited slogan that the elderly are "prisoners of fear"² seems to be widely accepted in the literature (Fattah & Sacco, 1989, p. 212ff; McCoy et al., 1996, p. 193f.) and

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² As the headline of Time magazine from 1976 claims (see Fattah, 1993b, p. 61, FN 8; Finley, 1983, p. 24; Skogan, 1981b, p. 29; Yin, 1980, p. 498, 1982, p. 240, 1985, p. 69; similar slogans are cited by McCoy et al., 1996, p. 192). It seems worth noting that beyond the objections concerning its empirical and theoretical

this so-called "victimization-fear-paradox" attained the status of common knowledge among criminologists (cf. Hale, 1996).³ Although this pattern is not a „paradox“ in a strict sense, the combination of highest scores on fear and lowest (statistical) risk of criminal victimization for the elderly seems indeed to be a rather inconsistent pattern of results. However, attempts to explain this pattern have not always been very convincing. Despite various critical analyses (critical overviews are provided by Eve, 1985; Hale, 1996; LaGrange & Ferraro, 1987; a good example of a critical and differentiated empirical study was conducted by Warr, 1984), it is probably not unfair to say that the „paradox“ takes center stage in the discussion not only as an empirically confirmed finding, but also as still unsolved puzzle which, in many particulars, requires further explanation.

However, despite a large amount of literature (Aday, 1988) the issue of criminality and aging and in particular the emotional and cognitive reactions of the elderly towards criminal threats and victimization are seldom discussed from a geronto-psychological point of view. Usually, older persons as victims of crime as well as the perceptions of crime among the elderly are just mentioned marginally in pertinent gerontological textbooks (e.g., Cutler, 1987; Doyle, 1990). Quite possibly, this is why a second „paradox“ has been overlooked in the present discussion: if a person -- adequately or inadequately -- does in fact exhibit a great fear of criminality, then this should have a negative effect upon his or her general sense of well-being and life quality (Garofalo & Laub, 1978, p. 251; Lawton & Yaffe, 1980, p. 775; Ward, LaGlory & Sherman, 1986, p. 336f; Yin, 1982). However -- contrary to what one might expect -- recent gerontological findings show that general well-being is remarkably stable up to old age; this holds for measures of self-esteem as well as for indices of well-being and depression (cf. Brandtstädter, Wentura & Greve, 1993). There is much support for the notion that older persons generally experience a fair amount of success in coping with critical life events as well as with age-related threats, losses, and deficits (e.g. Baltes & Baltes, 1990; Brandtstädter & Greve, 1994; Staudinger, Marsiske & Baltes, 1995). Consequently, one should „paradoxically“ conclude that the high fear of crime among the elderly doesn't have a considerable impact on their life. Since this also is not very plausible, a more precise look on both sides of the „fear-victimization paradox“ appears promising.

background discussed in this paper, the phrase 'prisoners of fear' is inappropriate and even cynical because originally this is the title of an impressive book by Ella Lingens (1948) about her memories as prisoner of the Nazi concentration camp at Auschwitz.

³ Accordingly, the fear-victimization paradox continues to receive mention in almost every examination on the topic; in most cases it is simply reproduced without critical commentary (Akers et al., 1987; Antunes et al., 1977; Boers, 1991, p. 57ff., 1993, p. 71f.; Brillou, 1987, p. 9ff., p. 52ff.; Clarke, 1984, p. 329; Clarke & Lewis, 1982, p. 50; Clemente & Kleiman, 1976, 1977; DuBow, McCabe & Kaplan, 1979, p. 15; Fattah, 1986, p. 472f., 1993b; Finley, 1983, p. 36; Gubrium, 1974; Hindelang, Gottfredson & Garofalo, 1978, p. 183f.; Janson & Ryder, 1983, p. 207; Kennedy & Silverman, 1985, p. 242; 1990, p. 307; Lee, 1983; Lindsay, 1991, p. 55; Lindquist & Duke, 1982; Mawby, 1982, 1986; Normoyle & Lavrakas, 1984; Ollenburger, 1981; Skogan & Maxfield, 1981, p. 77f.; Smith & Hill, 1991, p. 218; Stafford & Galle, 1984, p. 173; Ward, LaGlory & Sherman, 1986; Yin, 1980, p. 499, 1985, p. 20).

The present investigation attempts to analyze criminological findings with respect to this „paradox“ from a gerontological and developmental psychological perspective. The empirical arguments presented in the following rest upon data from a German representative victimization survey conducted in 1992 by the Criminological Research Institute of Lower Saxony (KFN) at the request of the Federal Ministry for Family, Seniors, Women, and Youth. In order to obtain nationally representative data on the criminal victimization and fear of crime of older vs. younger persons in the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) a representative sample of 15,771 subjects from both the old and new German states were assessed in personal interviews (for description of the sample, the assessment procedure and central results see e.g. Bilsky & Wetzels, 1994; Wetzels et al., 1995; assessment details concerning the data reported here are discussed below). The interview was essentially a retrospective, comprehensive assessment of personal experiences and consequences of victimization. In addition, numerous other criminological aspects (e.g. registering a criminal charge, attitudes toward the severity of punishment), and a scarce collection of psychological aspects (e.g. subjective well-being, perceived social support) were asked.

However, three remarks on possible restrictions of the empirical arguments presented in the following seem to be appropriate in advance. First, the selection of the variables and their respective operationalization in the KFN-survey was not planned from a developmental or gerontological point of view. Accordingly, various aspects that seem to be interesting or even necessary from a geronto-psychological perspective are simply not available for empirical analyses (e.g. health status of the participants, activities of daily living), and the assessment of the variables available is in some cases not as comprehensive and careful as one should demand from a purely psychological point of view. However, the richness of the available information in this sample (in particular concerning criminal victimization and fear of crime) seems to be worth the effort of re-analyzing criminological data from a geronto-psychological perspective. One consequence of this *post-hoc*-perspective, however, is that the „story“ to be told here rules the structure of this paper. Therefore, since its (hi)story is not a typical deductive one, its structure deviates somewhat from the usual sequence (introduction - method - subjects - results - discussion). Second, the analyses presented in the following sections are based upon portions of the total sample. Due to economic restrictions, the study was conducted in a modular fashion, i.e., various representative portions of the sample were presented with various combinations of parts of the master-questionnaire. Thus, the sample size (and, consequently, degrees of freedom) is variable for different analyses and in most cases too small (or even zero) for multivariate analyses, due to the lacking of overlaps between some parts of the questionnaires for different subsamples. Third, the findings presented in the following sections are based exclusively on cross-sectional data. Consequently, since personal tendencies to exhibit -- or report -- fear of crime and violence may also depend on the person's biographical and historical background, the observed differences between older and younger individuals can only be interpreted with reservation as developmental in nature.

appear in official statistics, such crimes are both quantitatively and qualitatively important problems for the elderly (Glendenning, 1993; Pillemer, 1993; Pillemer & Finkelhor, 1988; Pillemer & Sutor, 1992; Pillemer & Wolf, 1986; Wolf, 1992; for FRG: Wetzels et al., 1995; Wetzels & Greve, 1996). In fact, the relative risk of victimization by a family member is higher for older individuals than for younger ones; the proportion of experiences of violence within the family related to the total of experiences of violence increases with age (Greve, Hosser & Wetzels, 1996). However, the psychological stress and emotional consequences of such experiences may differ in many important respects from the consequences of anonymous criminality; this is particularly plausible of fear reactions.

2 Do Older Individuals Exhibit More Fear of Crime? Different Answers to a Difficult Question

If the discussion regarding whether the elderly are truly less often the victims of criminality requires more differentiation, then this is all the more true for the other side of the fear-victimization paradox. At a first glance criminological research on victimization since the early seventies portrays this side of the paradox („elderly people show more fear than younger ones“) as a clearly replicable finding. A recent review of the literature (Hale, 1996), however, underscores that these studies are hopelessly mixed with respect to their assessment methods, their methods of analyzing the data and their theoretical background (if there is any at all). Accordingly, although most studies report increasing fear with age, some data contradict this claim. For example, Ortega and Myles (1987), despite the comprehensiveness of their sampling procedure, found no direct effect of age on fear of crime, and Smith and Hill (1991, p. 228) found a correlation of $r = .05$. Gomme (1988, p. 70) even reports a small negative correlation ($r = -.08$; see also Ferraro & LaGrange, 1992; Krahn & Kennedy, 1985, p. 704). Somewhat more pronounced relationships were found, e.g., by Baker et al. (1983, p. 328), Hindelang, Gottfredson and Garofalo (1978, p. 193), Lewis and Salem (1986, p. 54), Maxfield (1984, p. 242), Mullen and Donnermeyer (1985, p. 239) and Warr (1990; for additional supporting results see section 2.1). This heterogeneous pattern of results proves that a more differentiated discussion of the *concept* 'fear of crime' is required in terms of method, content, and theory (Ferraro & LaGrange, 1987). As will become more clear in the following sections, depending upon the theory and methodology (operationalization and assessment procedure) applied, the question of whether the elderly exhibit more fear of crime than their younger counterparts can be answered in many different ways and with surprisingly divergent results.

2.1 Fear Increases with Age: The Standard Answer

The first answer to this question might be called the "standard" answer. It has been cited again and again in over 30 years of criminological literature and has provided the foundation for the fear-victimization paradox. In these studies, fear of crime is assessed using the so-called standard question from the American National Crime Survey. The question reads: "How safe do you feel or would you feel if you were here in this area at night, outside, and alone?" (the answer alternatives: very secure -- fairly secure -- fairly insecure -- very insecure; the exact formulation of the question varies somewhat between different studies; for an overview see Ferraro & LaGrange, 1987; Hale, 1996).⁵ With respect to this measure of fear of crime, the KFN-survey replicates the previous findings quite clearly: fear of crime assessed this way rises with age. A comparison of means over eight age cohorts (Coh I: < 20 years, Coh II: 20-29, Coh III: 30-39, Coh IV: 40-49, Coh V: 50-59, Coh VI: 60-69, Coh VII: 70-79, Coh VIII: 80+) indicated a significant main effect of age ($F[7;8870] = 34.17, p < .001$; cf. figure. 3, below) and also the correlation with age, though not very high, is positive and statistically significant ($r = .15, p < .001$). This replication of previous findings is less interesting in terms of confirming an established fact as it is in demonstrating that the further findings and evaluations reported in this paper are based upon the same empirical foundations employed by those studies which describe the fear-victimization paradox.

In itself, the standard assessment of fear of crime conjures up a host of difficulties (Boers, 1991; Eve, 1985; LaGrange & Ferraro, 1987). One first obvious objection is, as Ferraro and LaGrange (1987, p. 77) ironically remark, that the standard formulation does not make exclusive reference to *criminality* as the object of fear -- for example, the item can be interpreted to include fear of nighttime accidents (Wetzels et al., 1995, p. 207). Second, from a methodological point of view the standard-question as a single-item measure is rather noisy (Taylor & Hale, 1986, p. 158) and tends to overemphasize the variation in responses.

More pertinent critique of the standard assessment is the doubtful validity of a procedure centered only upon specific kinds of criminality (and the fear of such). This measure ignores not only the issue of violence in close personal relationships mentioned above, but also, for example, the issue of public criminality which occurs within buildings including one's own apartment (breaking and entering is certainly one of the most important and threatening of crimes; Lindsay, 1991, p. 55). Several studies have shown that the original findings cannot be replicated when the operationalization of the standard question is slightly altered (e.g., Ferraro

⁵ In fact, the majority of the studies in this research area are based on or referring to this way of measuring 'fear of crime' (e.g. Arnold, 1991, p. 97f.; Baldassare, 1986; Baker et al., 1983; Balkin, 1979; Box, Hale & Andrews, 1988, p. 343; Clarke, 1984, p. 332; Hindelang, Gottfredson & Garofalo, 1978, p. 175ff.; Kennedy & Silverman, 1985, p. 246; Lebowitz, 1975; Lewis & Salem, 1986, p. 45; McCoy et al., 1996, p. 196f.; Sessar, 1990, p. 126; Sundeen, 1977, p. 14; Toseland, 1982; for an additional overview see Boers, 1991).

& LaGrange, 1992; Lee, 1982, p. 662). To this extent, doubts regarding the validity of the standard question as sound indicator of fear of crime seem to be highly justified.

2.2 The Fear of Elderly Persons Is Not Exceptional: The "Absolute Level of Fear" Answer

The finding that fear of crime increases with age -- even when one puts aside doubts regarding the accuracy of this observation -- need not be particularly portentous or frightening. In fact, on the four-point scale (see above), the mean value for the standard question is 2.38 ($SD = 0.86$) for the elderly over 60 years of age; this corresponds with the description "fairly secure" (for a similar pattern of results cf. McCoy et al., 1996, p. 199). The value for younger persons is somewhat lower ($M = 2.14$; $SD = 0.80$), as reported above, but corresponds to the same description.

Results from a different operationalization of fear of crime underscore this point. In the KFN-survey, the *frequency* with which persons experience fear with regards to four relevant domains was assessed (theft, violence, robber, and rape; item formulation: „how often do you fear to be beaten and injured [etc.]?“ alternatives: never - seldom - sometimes - frequent - very frequent). The results show that, in absolute terms, fear of crime was „seldom“ experienced (figure 1). Apparently, fear of crime among the elderly, despite the vast amount of literature on the subject, is not really a *grave* problem (for a similar viewpoint, see Ferraro & LaGrange, 1992, p. 233; Skogan, 1993, p. 138).

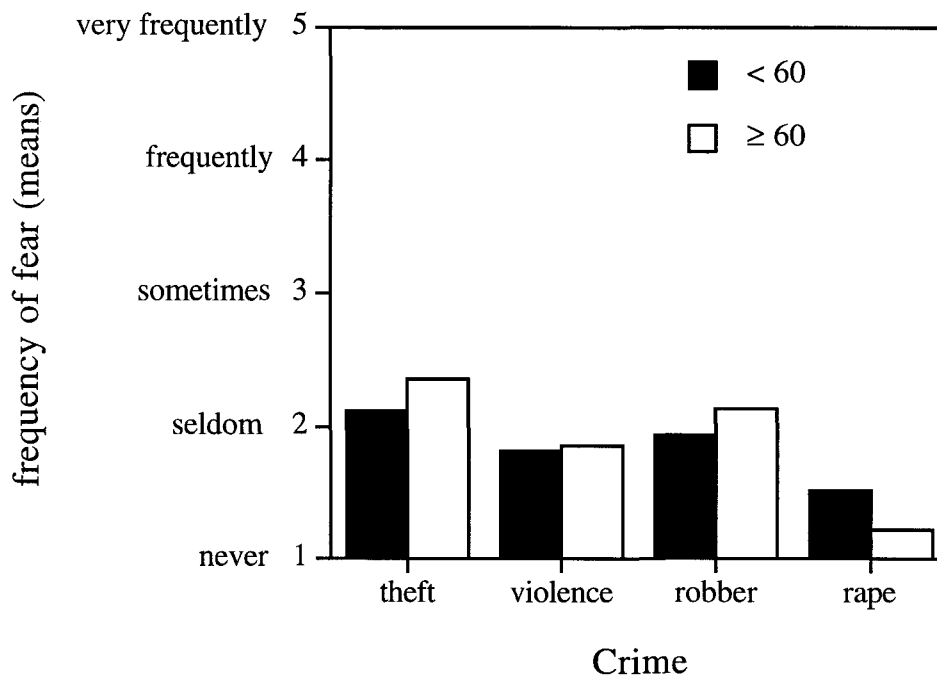


Figure 1: Frequency of fear among older and younger persons (means)

To be sure, even this somewhat more differentiated form of assessment indicates that the elderly have a higher level of fear in three out of four domains (rape was the one exception for obvious reasons). Accordingly, the sum of these four values, when compared between old and young subsamples (division of the sample at the 60-year mark), produced a statistically significant difference in fear of crime ($t = 2.68, p < .01$). At first glance, this finding contradicts the thesis, that the age-related increase of fear of crime is just an artifact of the (global) standard-item (Ferraro & LaGrange, 1987; Hale, 1996, p. 102). However, this finding again carries with it various restrictions. First, social stereotypes of aging might lead to a reduction of social desirability to avoid the *expression* of fear for the elderly (Lawton & Yaffe, 1980, p. 776), which would imply that the weak relationship between age and fear of crime found in the present study is even weaker in reality. Second, the finding of a statistically significant difference between older and younger participants mostly results from the deviant scores of very young survey participants (under 20 years of age). As can be viewed in figure 3, the very young participants have, or at least concede lower fear of crime than any other age cohort. Accordingly, an *a posteriori* comparison of mean values (Duncan's formula) showed significant group differences only between the oldest (over 70 years old, over 80 years old) and youngest cohorts (under 20 years old). In particular, there is no remarkable increase of fear between forty and fifty on the one hand and sixty or seventy on the other.

Moreover, by slightly altering the partitioning of the sample (into groups $<$ and \geq 65 years, which is the normative age of retirement in FRG), the observed difference is no longer statistically significant ($t [9104] = 1.78, p = .08$). Thus, to some extent, the weak statistical effects produced by an arbitrary age limit should not be accorded great significance (for a similar argument, see Fattah & Sacco, 1989). This seems to be worth noting since the division into age groups is heterogeneous (and sometimes unevenly spaced) in the literature (for a brief discussion of this problem see Fattah & Sacco, 1989, p. 2ff.).⁶

⁶ For examples of different categorizations see e.g. Antunes et al. (1977), Baldassare (1986), Baumer (1985), Braungart, Braungart and Hoyer (1980), Clemente and Kleiman (1976, 1977), Hindelang, Gottfredson and Garofalo (1978), Lebowitz (1975), Lindquist and Duke (1982), Liska, Sanchirico and Reed (1988), Ollenburger (1981), Rosenfeld (1981), Sacco (1993), Stafford and Galle (1984) or Toseland (1982). A noteworthy exception is the work of Warr (1984) which, starting with rather fine age-related distinctions, searches for the strongest contrast between age categories, (see e.g. p. 690).

The behavioral perspective. The literature on fear of crime characteristically fails to address the *indicative* significance of avoidance and protecting behaviors. Usually, these kinds of behaviors are treated as a *consequence* of fear of crime (e.g., Burt & Katz, 1985; Gates & Rohe, 1987; Gordon & Riger, 1979; Hindelang, Gottfredson, & Garofalo, 1978, p. 200, p. 203ff.; Krahn & Kennedy, 1985, p. 700; Rosenbaum & Heath, 1990, p. 230; Ward, LaGlory & Sherman, 1986). Even authors such as Yin (1985, p. 31), who interpret protecting behaviors as an *aspect* of fear, „treat“ them as consequence (see also Garofalo, 1981; Skogan & Maxfield, 1981, p. 17).

Again, a closer look reveals that fearful behavior is *indicative* for the presence of fear (Lazarus & Lazarus, 1994, p. 149). One normally sees when another is afraid, and when one doesn't see any traces of fear, claims to the contrary will be mistrusted accordingly. Thus, one could argue that fear *expresses* itself by fearful or threat-preventing behavior. However, as discussed in the previous section, a conceptual relationship between fear and behavior implies the impossibility of a causal connection. This is illustrated by a look on the reverse side. The very same (visible) behavior, when executed by someone who doesn't feel fear, cannot be aptly termed avoidance behavior (but as, e.g., deceptive); thus, fear is a *constitutive* condition of this behavior as *fearful*. Given this argument, it is especially interesting to note that the empirical assessment of fear of crime generally employs behavior-oriented questions (Ferraro & LaGrange, 1987); this applies in particular to the standard question (Hale, 1996). In other fields of research, for example the investigation of fear reactions in primates, such considerations naturally form even the basis for discussion, since primates can't be asked (see e.g. Hebb, 1946). The fewer external signs of fear one perceives in a subject, the less one will believe assertions regarding that person's fear. In sum, the constitutive character of behavioral aspects of must be acknowledged even if one is not willing to subscribe to a strictly behavioristic point of view (see for a similar argument Ortony, Clore & Collins, 1988, e.g. p. 10).

To this extent, behavior and fear are certainly not "quite distinct" as claimed by Skogan and Maxfield (1981, p. 58). Rather, protective or fearful behavior is just another *aspect* of fear of crime. From this point of view, findings that increased fear is accompanied by a restricted range of behavior (Liska, Sanchirico & Reed, 1988; for an overview Rosenbaum & Heath, 1990, p. 230ff; also Burt & Katz, 1985; Gordon & Riger, 1979; Norton & Courlander, 1982; Rosenfeld, 1981) or that the rate of crime in an neighborhood only predicts precautionary behaviors when fear of crime also comes into play (Krahn & Kennedy, 1985) are not to be seen as contentful empirical results that corroborate hypothetical assumptions, but just prove the assessment procedures employed to be sufficiently valid.

This argument does *not* imply, however, that behavioral aspects of fear might not „behave“ differently from cognitive or affective aspects since they may have partially different (configurations of) causes. Thus, it seems worthwhile to investigate them separately, *if* one

2.3 Fear Is Not A Central Concern for the Aging Individual: The "Relative Significance of Fear" Answer

Fear of crime among the elderly, even if it does not appear to be very high in absolute terms, is still too high if it has a significant negative impact on their daily lives. One must therefore consider the role that fear of crime plays relative to other worries and fears. The KFN-survey assessed personal feelings of security or threat with respect to two major aspects of criminality (first: theft, robbery, fraud; second: injury resulting from violence) within the context of 15 domains including family conflicts, requirement of intensive care, or loss of a close friend or relative (the question reads: "To what extent do you feel that your personal security is presently threatened by the following events or dangers?"). Results indicate that both younger and older persons show little concern regarding criminality (figure 2).⁷

It is very clear from these data that the older individual's fears center around being dependent, sick, requiring intensive care, or losing a close friend or relative. It becomes evident that older individuals fear criminal victimization just as little as they fear sudden misfortune or war. Concerns regarding criminality are by no means the only nor the most important issue for the elderly (for similar or comparable results see e.g. Brillon, 1987, p. 24; Croake, Myers & Singh, 1988; Yin, 1982, p. 242; cf. also Hale, 1996; for a different pattern of results see e.g. Lindquist & Duke, 1982, p. 116).

⁷ The abscissa in figure 2 indicates the mean value of the aggregated score of personal threat over all 15 domains calculated for the whole sample. Since this mean threat score for the older subgroup is slightly higher than the mean score for the younger subgroup, the relatively low ranking of fear of crime among the elderly is in this figure even somewhat underemphasized: concerns regarding criminality sink further below average the further it travels towards the right.

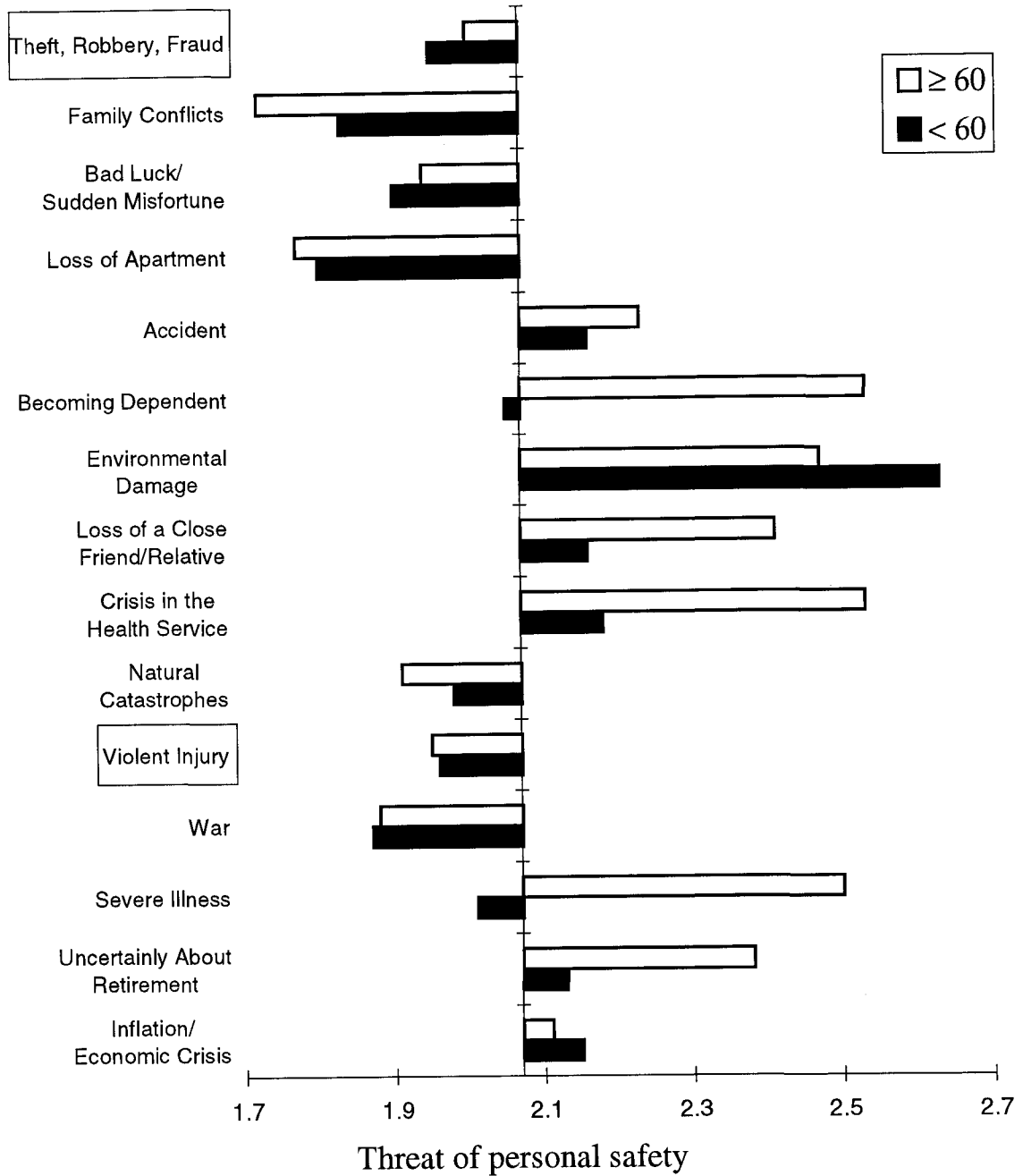


Figure 2: Relative threat of criminality in comparison to other typical concerns of older and younger individuals (means; abszissa at general mean)

2.4 Various Operationalizations Produce Various Results: The "Different Methods of Measurement" Answer

Each of the previous sections have implicitly touched upon the central problem of the entire debate on fear of crime. Any answer to the question regarding the extent of fear of crime depends greatly upon what one means when one speaks of "fear of crime" and how this concept is empirically assessed. Unfortunately, as mentioned above, research endeavors which show an age-related increase in fear do not apply consistent measures. In particular, the assessment of fear of crime is seldom guided by a specific theory. Yet upon closer examination, it becomes quickly clear that from a conceptual point of view, fear of crime is comprised of different facets. At the very least, differentiating between the affective, cognitive, and conative-behavioral components of fear seems necessary (Fattah & Sacco, 1989; Hale, 1996; Skogan, 1993). In the KFN-survey, data on all three of components were obtained.

The affective component. Presumably, the most obvious facet of fear is the affective component. One can hardly deny that *feelings* of fear comprise the core of the fear concept. Accordingly, Warr (1984, p. 686; 1987, p. 33; 1990, p. 896) explicitly surveys the intensity of fear of victimization with the phrase "How afraid are you..." (see also Ferraro & LaGrange, 1992; a similar, yet simpler procedure was used by Akers et al., 1987, p. 494; or Giles-Sims, 1984; "How worried are you..."; see also Krahn & Kennedy, 1985, p. 701; for an overview see Hale, 1996). As described above, within the KFN-survey, the frequency of feelings of fear with respect to four different criminal domains was assessed (theft, violence, robbery, and rape). The following evaluations are based upon the aforementioned summarized score of all four measures (Cronbach's alpha = .84).⁸

In contrast to the standard operationalization, this „affective“ side of fear of crime, when analyzed according to the results described in section 2.1, does not covary with age. This holds both for mean scores ($F[7;9105] = 1.59; p > .10$; see figure 3, below) as well as for individual scores ($r = .03, p > .05$). The observed differences between age groups, even if they are statistically significant in singular group comparisons (<20 against ≥ 70 years; see above), have no practical importance since the magnitude of their difference is less than two tenths of a standard deviation.

The cognitive component. The conceptual status of the cognitive component of fear of crime -- i.e. the subjectively perceived probability of criminal victimization -- is controversially discussed among criminologists. While Yin (1985, p. 31) views perceptions of threat and risk as "dimensions" of crime-related fear, Garofalo (1981, p. 843) conceives them as "conditions." In

⁸ In a recent pilot study, this measure of frequency of fear was found to correlate with the intensity of fear (using the phrase "How great is your fear of being ...") at $r = .81$ (Greve, 1996). This finding supports the validity of this assessment of the affective component.

a similar vein, Skogan and Maxfield (1981) understand fear of crime as a psychological state that is "provoked" by personal appraisal of risk (similar views from Skogan, 1981a, p. 25; Gubrium, 1974, p. 249; Yin, 1985, p. 32). Warr and Stafford (1983, p. 1034; see also Baker et al., 1983, p. 321) assume that cognitive factors "produce" fear; Ferraro and LaGrange (1987, p. 73) speak of "influence" and "effect" (similar views from Miethe & Lee, 1984, p. 400). Boers (1991, p. 208) speaks more carefully of "components" and "elements." Balvig (1990) differentiates between five cognitively oriented "nominal" definitions and speaks in this context of "connotation" (p. 123). Similarly, in a brief overview by Skogan (1993), three of the four definitions of fear of crime described are cognitively oriented (appraisal of the importance of the problem, appraisal of risk, and degree of threat).

A closer look reveals, however, that the *constitutive* significance of cognition, particularly the perception and interpretation of situations, for emotion must be acknowledged (Rorty, 1980). For example, in frightening films -- at least in the well-made examples of the genre -- fear is directed not to what one sees, but rather to what is implied, i.e., what the perceiving person interprets and associates with the visual image. According to this conception of cognition as a precondition for emotion, the cognitive appraisal of a situation as „threatening“ and in particular the perception of *personal* risk (Killias, 1990; Perloff, 1983; Sacco & Glackman, 1987; Yin, 1985; Warr, 1987, differentiates here more precisely between "perceived risk" and "sensitivity of risk"), are *essential constituents* of fear (Clarke & Lewis, 1982). This relationship, however, no way implies that fear is a "rational answer" (Baumer, 1985, p. 242) to threatening cognitions. Rather, appraisal of risk is a (constitutive) part of fear and thus a necessary (constitutive) condition for fear -- but in a logical, not in a causal sense. A person who is sure that s/he will *never* be the victim of a certain crime, *does* not fear that crime. To experience fear of crime in a certain situation *implies* (logically) to perceive this situation as „dangerous“ (otherwise the experience would not be 'fear'). In particular, fear of *crime* logically implies a -- cognitive -- reference to crime: the threat has to be identified as 'criminal' (which is not a visible but an interpreted and -- hence cognitive -- aspect of a perceived situation). In their comprehensive and careful discussion of this perspective, Ortony, Clore and Collins (1988) discuss cognitions as „antecedents“ of emotions (p. 172); but this is compatible with the conceptualization outlined here since it is possible that a certain cognition of a „dangerous“ situation doesn't develop itself into fear of crime whereas it is impossible that fear of crime can occur without any cognition.⁹

From this follows that the appraisal of risk is not a "cause" (not even a "proximal" one) or "determinant" of fear (like most authors claim; cf. Box, Hale & Andrews, 1988, p. 342; Fattah

⁹ At this juncture, it seems worth mentioning that to „claim that emotions always involve some degree of cognitions is not the same as asserting that the contribution of cognition is necessarily conscious“ (Ortony, Clore & Collins, 1988, p. 4). However, as these authors also concede, „the experience is the sine qua non of emotions“ (p. 176). By the way, this is one reason why the experience of emotions is immune against error (cf. Greve & Buchner, 1995).

& Sacco, 1989, p. 223; Miethe & Lee, 1984, p. 399; Warr, 1984, p. 682ff.; Warr & Stafford, 1983; Yin, 1980, p. 493, 502), but a constitutive *part* or aspect of it, and that the subjectively perceived risk of victimization cannot be conceived as a stressor whose *consequence* is fear of crime (Sacco, 1993). Hence, it would be misleading to present "beliefs" and "fear" as distinct phenomena ("while individuals *hold* beliefs about crime, they *feel* danger"; Skogan, 1981a, p. 25; emphasis in the original; see also Fattah & Sacco, 1989; Hale, 1996), since this sort of distinction sweeps the aforementioned conceptual relationships under the carpet.

If the foregoing considerations are correct, it becomes less surprising that strong bivariate relationships are found between "fear" and "subjective risk of victimization" (Sacco, 1993), or that „fear“ occurs only under conditions of high (perceived) threat *and* high (perceived) probability of the event in question (Warr & Stafford, 1983). Findings of this nature (cf. also Miethe & Lee, 1984, p. 404ff.), however, do not imply causality; instead, one might more aptly describe them as "pseudoempirical" results (in the sense of Smedslund, 1984). Accordingly, the mere fact that the reported correlations are not *always* high (Ferraro & LaGrange, 1987, p. 79) does not mean that a hypothesis is falsified (or even proves that the connection between cognition and emotion is *not* logical in nature), but only underscores the apparently invalid assessment of at least one component. Since the assessment of „fear“ usually rests on the standard question, this suspicion becomes quite plausible.

In the present study, the subjective probability of becoming the victim of a given crime was assessed parallel to the frequency of feelings of fear: Subjective probability was again assessed with respect to the four criminal domains mentioned above (the question reads: „How probable is it in your opinion that you will be personally victimized within the next 12 months by ...?“; answering alternatives: improbable - less probable - probable - highly probable). Accordingly, the cognitive facet of fear of crime was assessed in an analogous manner through a sum index over all four domains (Cronbach's alpha = .83).

The age curve for the subjective probability of victimization (figure 3, below) is remarkable in two respects. First, it is quite interesting to find no age-related increase on this dimension of fear ($r = -.02$, $p > .10$). Second, although a comparison of means does result in a significant age effect ($F[7; 7782] = 2.51$, $p = .014$), the oldest and youngest groups do not differ significantly from each other. Furthermore, the subjective probability of victimization actually seems to drop somewhat in the age groups over sixty years. Therefore, it seems inappropriate to speak of an "irrational" or "delusional" fear of crime among the elderly (cf. Balkin, 1979; Boers, 1991, p. 109, p. 178; DuBow, McCabe & Kaplan, 1979, p. 16f.; Eve, 1985; Jaycox, 1978; Lindquist & Duke, 1982, p. 121f.; Skogan, 1981a, 1987; Stafford & Galle, 1984, p. 182; for an overview Hale, 1996, p. 100ff.). From all appearances, older individuals do *not* overestimate their risk of victimization; indeed, they seem aware of its decrease.

refrains from drawing conceptually incoherent conclusions. In the present study, a total of eight different precautionary behaviors were assessed. Analogous to the facets described above the conative aspect of fear of crime was assessed by summing up the individual scores to an behavioral index (example items: "I avoid certain streets, public squares, or parks," "I carry some means of defense;" "I avoid public transport services after dark;" Cronbach's alpha = .85). Interestingly, the age curve for the conative indicator does indeed show a clear increase. An analysis of individual ($r = .28, p < .001$) as well as mean values ($F[7;9065] = 111.32, p < .001$; figure 3, below) shows that older persons behave more defensively and more carefully than younger ones. Moreover, the difference between the youngest and the oldest age groups is about one standard deviation, which indicates a change of considerable magnitude and practical importance.

This finding proves illuminating with regards to the discernible increase in fear of crime observed using the standard question. Apparently, this way of assessing fear of crime addresses a situation which is closely related to avoidance behaviors ("evening," "outside," "alone"), and those aspects clearly gain in significance with age (cf. also Hale, 1996). If the arguments presented above are sound, i.e., if precautionary behaviors are not merely the consequences of fear, but rather comprise an actual indicator of essential fear, then this finding at first hand seems somewhat discrepant with the findings on the cognitive and affective aspects of fear reported in the previous sections. At the very least, it prompts one to search for the perspective which appears to be the most appropriate for the paradox under question.

3. Is There Any Paradox At All? Arguments For An Integrative Conceptualization Of Fear Of Crime

It seems somewhat difficult to take stock of the results presented thus far. On the one hand, it obviously would be misleading to make the sweeping claim that fear of crime rises with increasing age. In absolute terms, older individuals are not very afraid of crime; nor are they relatively more often afraid of crime than their younger counterparts. Moreover, older individuals correctly estimate their chances of being involved in such crimes as lower than for middle-aged adults and not higher than for young persons. Furthermore, fear of crime is quite obviously not a pressing concern for older individuals, particularly when compared to problems associated with the personal future (disease, personal care, loss of family and relatives). On the other hand, the results of behavior-oriented indicators (including the standard question) show that claims of greater fear of crime among the elderly are not completely unfounded.

Thus, a more clear-cut theoretical conceptualization of what is meant by "fear of crime," i.e., what aspects might be appropriately attributed to this concept is obviously necessary. Actually, the call for a more pronounced theoretical understanding of what "fear of crime" should entail is