

Jean Choguiboff
Yvonne Bernard
CNRS, Paris

THE SPATIAL REPRESENTATION OF INSECURITY

SUMMARY

The feeling of insecurity has most often given rise to examination along sociological lines. The authors of this report have opted instead to have the nature and actual experience of the feeling of insecurity form the basis of investigation. The results presented are of a study carried out among the residents of a neighborhood in Paris : les Halles. In no case did the feeling of insecurity seem to stem directly from the appearance of the surroundings. Nevertheless, whenever anxiety is present, there are characteristics of every area which are of such a nature as to increase or decrease it. We have grouped these under three headings : exit, recourse, refuge. It became evident in the course of the study, moreover, that the parameters of the concept of insecurity were not as clearly defined as had been assumed at the outset.

INTRODUCTION

The term "insecurity" can be used in two different ways. The first refers to a state of fact, the reality of which is established by observation. It is possible to qualify, make an inventory of, and ascribe accountability for the offences and establish a level of criminality. It would thereby be possible to relate certain places or certain types of space with those levels. The second use of "insecurity" refers to a mental state of the perception of a situation, evaluated as potentially dangerous, even if it is not objectively so. It is a matter of what is loosely designated by the term, "feeling of insecurity".

Speaking of the feeling of insecurity gives rise to a new difficulty in the formulation itself of the object of study. Speakers of english use

the term "fear of crime". The literal translation into French, "peur du crime", as it is generally understood by native speakers, is synonymous with "fear of murder". The term "feeling of insecurity", which is usually employed, eliminates the object of fear, retaining only the subjective experience. Its meaning is more flexible and diffused. A survey carried out in a small town in France showed that for 54.6 % of the population studied, the "feeling of insecurity" was above all a psychological fear : "fear of everything, to be someday a victim, to lose freedom, to not be able to deal with the environment..." (FONTES et al. 1985).

The expression is thus applicable to various meanings according to their context - fear of illness, fear of unemployment... "Fear of being attacked", which comes closer to the english expression, carries too precise a sense to be understood as an exact equivalent. These differences from one language to another may well be revelatory of the complexity of a phenomenon for which the terme "fear of crime" only covers one aspect.

In the extant literature, evaluation of the feeling of insecurity is, in most cases, entirely based on the assessment of behavior in a single situation, considered prototypical. As LEE (1982) puts it : "the most common indicator of fear of crime, by a considerable margin, is a single item asking respondents whether there is any area near their homes where they are afraid to walk alone at night." It is always a very simple question of this type which continues to furnish material to elaborate differential studies (eg. LARSON, 1982 ; LISKA et al., 1982 ; O'CONNOR, 1983 ; STAFFORD, GALLE, 1984 ; KENNEDY, SILVERMAN, 1985...)

The choice of this situation over another seems more dictated by common sense than by the examination and systematic selection of insecurity-provoking situations. It is difficult to affirm with certitude that the same results would derive from another question, such as, "Do you feel secure if you leave home with a lot of money on you ? "

These methods bring to bear some restrictions on their results. One is left to wonder whether the insecurity felt is entirely evinced by this sole kind of situation. Certain researchers, conscious of this snag, have proposed other methods of evaluation. Van der WURFF and

STRINGER (1986), in the course of a study of the residents of cities in Holland, have so enlarged the field by carrying out their investigations on several types of situations of an insecurity-arousing nature.

OBJECTIVES

The feeling of insecurity appears and develops in the framework of a situation perceived as potentially dangerous. This perception is generally determined by the existence of environmental factors which favor the emergence of a state of anxiety, but it is equally highly dependent on multiple factors characterizing the experience of the perceiver.

Most research has emphasized the effect of sociological variables. The main purpose of the research presented here is rather to study environmental variables and to detect, particularly, which areas favor the emergence of anxiety or quell it.

We have therefore opted for the psychological approach : put in relation the behavioral manifestations (fear, avoidance) and the situation which provoke them. Consequently, our work set us out on two paths :

- to analyze the components of the feeling of insecurity, its origins, its nature, its manifestations.
- to locate the characteristics of the environment that play a determining role in its appearance.

METHOD

At the time of a preliminary phase, nine non-directive interviews were conducted. The subjects, who lived in various sections of Paris, were asked to talk about insecurity. From these interviews, we realized that if we were to remain faithful to our fixed objectives, we would have to refocus the interviews on the personal experience of the subjects in their own neighborhood.

We have therefore chosen to concentrate our investigations on one single neighborhood, asking the subjects to speak about the feeling

of insecurity as it relates to the atmosphere and environment of the neighborhood. It was up to us to study the manner in which the same area could be described differently, according to the speaker.

The neighborhood used is a section of the les Halles district of Paris, which is bordered to the north by the Rue Réaumur, to the south by the Forum des Halles, to the east by the Boulevard Sébastopol, and to the west by the Place des Victoires. In general, the reputation of this area is that it is insecure, as with the entire les Halles district as a whole.

It also offers the advantage of containing, within a limited perimeter, a number of different areas, each having its own different character :

- wide thoroughfares, with heavy automobile traffic but relatively few pedestrians and wholesale outlets which are not conducive to strolling (Boulevard Sébastopol, Rue Réaumur)
- a highly animated market street, which quiets down at night, but still serves as a main axis of movement through the area (Rue Montorgueil)
- very narrow streets which are practically deserted at night except for a few cafés that are meeting places for a mixture of types - students, derelicts, punks, working people...
- the Rue Saint Denis, infamous for its prostitutes and sex shops
- an area which has become very popular ever since a number of well known fashion designers opened boutiques there, but is nevertheless rather quiet during the day and practically deserted at night (Place des Victoires)
- last but not least, the Forum des Halles, one of the liveliest places in Paris, with the exception of the underground part, which no longer draws strollers after the stores close for the day.

The first phase of research was based on a series of non-directive interviews with ten subjects living within this perimeter, with widely varied sociological characteristics. The interviews began with the following request : "Talk to me about this neighborhood from the point of view of your impression, of the atmosphere : how do you feel, especially from the point of view of security". A map was presented to the subject, to show him exactly what area we were concerned with and to help him locate the areas he wanted to discuss.

A second phase was based on individual, semi-directive interviews, conducted among thirty residents chosen at random. The first phase had permitted us, among other things, to establish the pertinence of a breakdown into twelve zones with differentiated characteristics. In the course of this second phase, these zones were indicated on a map of the neighborhood. The subject had to rate them from the most pleasant to the least pleasant and from where he felt the most secure to where he felt the least secure. He had to explain the reasons for his choice. Other questions followed bearing on his own experience of insecurity. We asked whether anything had ever happened to him in one of these areas, whether he had avoided anything there, or whether he felt uncomfortable there to begin with.

Taken together, the interviews of the first and of the second phase gave way to an analysis of thematic content. The amassed data were inventoried and arranged by themes, in such a way as to point up the divergences and especially the convergences of discourse. Those things offered over and over by several subjects were particularly examined, but we also gave attention to certain points, less often made but which seemed to us to clarify some rather generally observed behavior. In spite of a transversal regrouping by theme, we have kept in mind, in analyzing quotations, the general context of the interview in which they were pronounced and which could modify the meaning.

RESULTS

In the framework of this communication, we will present only two points which seem to us to characterize the specific influence of spatial environment on the feeling of insecurity.

1) The configuration of an area is never, properly speaking, frightening, as such, but it may be more or less reassuring.

The feeling of insecurity is dictated above all by the anxiety aroused by the real or assumed presence of certain populations deemed dangerous : immigrants, derelicts, loiterers.... It is rare for an area to inspire a feeling of insecurity just by dint of its appearance alone. What provokes anxiety is the kinds of people encounters, or fears to

encounter, the preconceived idea of what a neighborhood is like, often induced by its better or worse reputation.

Certain characteristics of a place can, however, contribute to the increase or decrease of this feeling. These are the traits which relate to the possibility of avoidance. We will sum up these qualities under three headlines : exit, recourse, refuge.

Exit : People are afraid of areas where the risk exists that escape is not possible. The underground galleries of the Forum des Halles and a passage connecting two streets were described in a similar way by a certain number of people questioned. In these areas, in case of aggression, one runs the risk of being cornered without the ability to get out, either because the exits are purposely blocked, or because they are hard to find on a hurry.

Recourse : People prefer areas where they will most easily get help. Streets where there are lots of people inspire more security than deserted ones. If something happens, the impression one has is that one of the people present will come to his aid : The sight of policemen is reassuring in the same way, more for the possibility of their being called upon if need be than for the possibility of their discouraging would-be aggressors by their presence.

Refuge : People remember places where they can withdraw from the threat. The streets are more or less marked with the beacons of places where a person can seek refuge if necessary : police stations, cafés, all-night restaurants, clinics... Some streets are deemed more frightening than others, owing to the absence of such places. This can be either due to the fact that they actually are devoid of them, or that the person is not so familiar with the section in question. In this respect, familiarity plays a security-augmenting role by multiplying the number of places of refuge identified as such.

2) The insecurity people talk about is not always the same as the insecurity they actually experience.

The feeling of insecurity in the neighborhood was brought up in two kinds of interviews which are not exactly identical : interviews focussing on insecurity (preliminary phase) and those focussing on the neighborhood (first and second phase).

Insecurity is a subject which is widely covered by the media. The term is semantically rich in disparate notions and connotations for most people living in Paris. From the moment an interview concerning insecurity gets under way, the subjects tend to start taking positions reflecting concepts which they have internalized from what is being discussed around them, so they talk about the actual "fear of crime" - the fear of being attacked.

When the subject is brought up initially as a discussion of the neighborhood itself and on usual activity, insecurity appears in a different light. It is actually seen that certain habitual conduct is not spontaneously linked to what is usually thought of as "insecurity" by the subjects.

Insecurity can be simultaneously denied in terms of its being a problem (I don't feel insecure in my own neighborhood) and shown to exist in terms of actual conduct (I don't like coming out of the métro alone at night). These contradictory statements were made by a young woman for whom the perfectly real insecurity felt at that moment does not enter into a discussion of insecurity. It seems less related to the characteristics of the neighborhood or to the state of society than to a kind of accepted fatality of the female condition. Having integrated it at the heart of her most usual activities, she doesn't think for a minute to incorporate it in a discussion of the "problem of insecurity".

Fear in big cities, moreover, is far from being limited to fear of a possible physical aggression. In certain badly planned areas, automobile traffic is a very real concern for pedestrians, especially when they are with young children. Certain parts of the Boulevard Sébastopol are avoided because the traffic is seen as too dangerous. Mora insecurity also was brought up by a mother of a family, with regard to the Rue Saint Denis.

Within the perimeters we studied, there are actually very few areas which are deliberately avoided by neighborhood residents specifically for reasons of security. This is the case for a number of women who avoid the Rue Saint Denis because of the prostitution following, and in the aisles of the Forum des Halles, especially the corridors of the métro, because of the poorly marked exits. The hour of day is often

more important than the area : a large number of elderly people avoid leaving home in the evening.

It should be noted that a place can inspire a feeling of repulsion for which it is sometimes hard to tell what is actually insecurity from that which is an aesthetic or emotional reaction. From this angle, there are several places which are fled without the subjects' feeling explicitly insecure. The terms which come up are "sinister", "aggressive surroundings", "noisy" or "depressing".... According to who is speaking, it is the main arteries, the Rue Saint Denis, the Rue Turbigo, or the Rue Rambuteau along the Forum which are therefore avoided by a detour, because of their unpleasant character.

The relationship of someone to his neighborhood can be tinged with anxiety without his ever dreaming of using the term "insecurity". However, this discomfort when confronted by an environment to which one attributes a hostile nature is very like a particular form of insecurity.

DISCUSSION

Although we have been careful to choose, as the terrain of observation, a neighborhood presenting a collection of varied places and having a reputation for insecurity, the results obtained obviously cannot be completely generalizable. They can, though, constitute the elements of thought for other projects.

It might have been thought that there was a direct relation between the feeling of insecurity and insecurity per se ; that is, to the objective probability of being the victim of a crime. Our observations suggest that the process leading to the emergence of the feeling of insecurity are more complex and often independent of the simple assessment of risk.

Certain environmental factors favor the emergence of a state of anxiety. These factors are often actually those objectively apt to favor a threatening or aggressive situation : darkness, deserted space without apparent places of refuge, or closed in, without possible exit. However -and this is an interesting result of the study- certain areas

induce anxiety less, because they are seen as offering a way of escaping or handling a hypothetical attack, should the case arise.

Without going so far as to speak in terms of the feeling of insecurity, the subjects express being ill at ease in certain areas. There can be a prevalence of people who look threatening or repugnant. The area can be a place of greater or lesser degrees of attractive or healthy activity. The architecture urbanism can be more or less well suited to human needs, in terms of space and privacy. These different factors, which the subjects are often incapable of analyzing in a rational manner, produce a feeling which comes very close to that of insecurity.

As we suggested initially, analysis of these results leads to the consideration that it would be wrong to reduce the feeling of insecurity to the single fear of being attacked. The spatial environment is apt to activate anxiety independently of a simple, logical calculation of the probability of aggression. The subjective experience of the environment, the impression felt in the surroundings, the feeling of being integrated or not in one's own neighborhood are equally factors to be taken into consideration in the emergence of the feeling of insecurity

BIBLIOGRAPHIE

Fontes M., Jalabert M., Espart M. (1985) **Etude sur le sentiment d'insécurité. Existe-t-il à Auch ?** Conseil Départemental de la Prévention de la Délinquance du Gers.

Kennedy L., Silverman R. (1985) **Perception of social diversity and fear of crime.** *Environment and Behavior*, 17, 3, 275-295.

Larson C. (1982) **City size, fear and victimization.** *Free Inquiry in Creative Sociology*, 10, 1, 13-16.

Lee G. (1982) **Residential location and fear of crime among the elderly.** *Rural Sociology*, 47, 4, 655-669.

Liska A., Lawrence J., Sanchirico A. (1982) **Fear of crime as a social fact.** *Social Forces*, 60, 3, 760-770.

Newman O. (1972) **Defensible space**. Architectural Press, London.

O'Connor M. (1983) **Concern and fear of crime in Kalgoorlie, Western Australia**. Aust. Journal of Social Issues, 18, 4, 259-267.

Stafford M., Galle O. (1984) **Victimization rates, exposure to risk, and fear of crime**. Criminology, 22, 2, 173-185.

Van der Wurff A., Stringer P. (1986) **Situated feelings of residential unsafety**. IAPS-9 Conference, Haifa, Israël.