REFLECTIONS ABOUT INTERVENTIONS AND STRATEGIES ON INCREASING FEELINGS OF SAFETY IN LATER LIFE

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Abstract

Practices on increasing feelings of safety among older people often occur without the necessary empirical foundation. In response to this lack of evidence-based policy, this article provides a critical overview of several distinct practices and approaches by confronting them with empirical evidence. This contribution criticizes narrow rationalist approaches and summarizes the most important symbolical guidelines to heighten feelings of safety. Attention is given to the discussion between the increasing importance placed on so-called responsibilisation on the one hand and feelings of unsafety as a police's task or as a broader societal concern and responsibility for local authorities on the other. Several methods are discussed in order to formulate key components of successful strategies.

Key Words: *Ageing, Feelings of safety, Fear of crime, Policy Recommendations*

JEL Classification: I00

1. INTRODUCTION

Overlooking the literature of the last decades, research on feelings of unsafety concentrates mainly on crime and perceives feelings of unsafety as its derivative. Recently, there is growing awareness to broaden this narrow interpretation. People don't actually fear becoming a victim of crime; they rather express their concerns about social problems. Feelings of unsafety can be considered as a manifestation of a wide range of daily insecurities, including those related to all kind of economic, political and social issues (Hale 1996; Pain 2000).

This paper is predominantly interested in feelings of unsafety among older people. It is currently well known that nearly all countries have undergone, or are still undergoing, a demographic transition. As this proportional rise in the ageing population will affect upon all dimensions of human life, questions about why older people feel safe or unsafe deserve further research (De Donder et al. 2009). Because it is a well-replicated finding that feelings of unsafety can have negative consequences on individuals, policymakers are often committed to tackling feelings of unsafety.

Nonetheless, policy on the reduction of feelings of unsafety (among older people) is often outlined without the necessary empirical foundation. In response to this lacuna, this paper offers a critical overview of several distinct practices and approaches and confronts these practices with empirical evidence. A first remark is formulated by Boers (2008), who criticizes the focus on *reducing feelings of unsafety*. Such framework often focuses on reducing criminality, victimization and disorder. Instead he proposes to focus on *increasing feelings of safety*. This could be achieved by increasing trust and livability. Consequently, this paper focuses on increasing feelings of safety. First, an overview of different concerned actors is offered and second several key components of successful strategies are outlined.

2. WHO? DIFFERENT ACTORS IN THE PROCESS

2.1. Police

When feelings of safety are addressed, the public often demands more police officers on the streets. However, these actions can be both reassuring as causing concern (Christmann et al.,2003). Maybe it is not just merely the presence of police, which people require, but one can wonder *which* presence is required. The possibility to easily approach the police, communicate with them in an open way and to receive information helps to feel safe (Christmann et al.,2003). This is more likely to happen when police services patrol more on foot or with the bicycle. Furthermore, Jackson and Sunshine (2007) emphasize that public confidence in police is not driven by risk and crime but by social cohesion and by the way police defend group values. Furthermore, police should exercise their authority with fairness and respect towards citizens (Jackson & Sunshine,2007).

2.2. Individuals

Governments increasingly stimulate individuals' responsabilisation: they encourage action from individuals, whether or not grouped in communities, to take up some preventive or protective measures (Jackson & Gray,2010). Most of these strategies for individuals to reduce feelings of unsafety tend to focus on crime prevention. First, individuals could adopt some protective measures: install alarms and special locks, hang exterior lighting, buy a watchdog or even a gun. Especially in the 1970's and 1980's the promotion of abovementioned self-help measures was the most common initiative promoted (Norris & Kaniasty,1992). A specific form of individuals' initiatives to reduce crime and feelings of unsafety are Neighborhood Watch Schemes. These schemes are the formalized cooperation between neighbors to protect each other's homes. They have existed in the UK since the early 1980s and in 2003, these schemes covered 25% of all British households (Help the Aged, 2003).

While this approach is by no doubt well-intentioned, it implicitly blames individuals by implying that victims are in some way responsible for the hardships they encounter (Norris & Kaniasty,1992). Nevertheless, Norris and Kaniasty (1992) conclude that nor vigilance, nor using

locks showed capacity to increase feelings of safety. What is even more, these tactics may generate negative effects. While Bennett (1990) concludes that Neighborhood Watch Schemes have benefits in stable, affluent areas for people who are least fearful and least at risk from crime, these schemes could also have the opposite effect and create more feelings of unsafety rather than less.

2.3. Government

In the 1990's an actuarial style of governance and criminal justice has outdone other models of governance, such as welfare (Feeley & Simon,1992). Tackling disorder has gained the upper hand on welfare: e.g. Degenerated neighborhoods with lots of disorder are cleaned up or redeveloped in order to increase safety, in stead of improving quality of life of the residents. Geldof (2006) employs the term of prepression to denominate this evolution which is the contraction of prevention and repression: Prevention occurs as an intrusive intervention, which is repressive and intervenes in the personal privacy. For many years, safety has been mainly criminology-oriented. Yet, to feel safe policies should also pay attention to other qualities: reinforcing social capital and providing opportunities for agency (De Donder et al.,2010c), improving physical surroundings in terms of accessibility (De Donder et al.,2010b), targeting societal vulnerability and recognizing the role of discriminatory actions (ageism) (De Donder et al.,2010a).

3. COMPONENTS OF SUCCESSFUL STRATEGIES

That society is ageing is a well-known fact. However, it is less understood that elders are a very heterogeneous group. Not only do they differ with regard to age, but also they often live in diverse contexts. In developing interventions this variation has to be recognized (De Donder et al.,2010a).

3.1. Local solutions to local problems

Generally, people turn to their local community, which holds a feeling of a warm, familiar and safe place (Bauman,2001). Subsequently, interventions often occur at the local level. The community policing movement of the post 1970's emphasizes on problem-solving methods in the community which may not reduce crime, but which should heighten feelings of safety. However, several fear-reduction programmes have failed because of a lack of local embedding; despite this was initially the intention. For example, neighborhood cleaning up programmes lacked community input (Silverman & Della-Giustina,2001). This is not only the case for police actions. Policy programmes, which are detached from the community and pay little attention to the feeling of community, may be destined to fail (Hinkle & Weisburd,2008). Creating a sense of safety in a neighborhood needs to reflect local circumstances and build on the knowledge and experiences of the neighborhood residents. Different neighborhoods will prioritize different issues and policymakers should try to understand the specific situation of the neighborhood before prioritizing action (Christmann et al.,2003).

3.2. Age-Friendly physical environment

A practical example of the importance of locality is embedded in the framework of Global Age Friendly Cities (WHO,2007). Already, in its submission to the Second World Assembly on Ageing in 2002, the World Health Organisation acknowledges that 'physical environments that are age-friendly can make the difference between independence and dependence for all individuals but in particular for those growing old. For example, older people who live in an unsafe environment or areas with multiple physical barriers are less likely to get out and therefore more prone to isolation, depression, reduced fitness and increased mobility problems' (WHO,2002:27). The findings of De

Donder et al. (2010b) demonstrate that the physical quality of the local environs can contribute to higher feelings of safety. A first recommendation concerns tackling *disorder*. Cleaning up visible signs of disorder (dirt and litter) and regenerating the streets is one step, but policymakers also ought to focus on the *problems in street traffic*. Urban planning aiming at people to walk (more) in their neighborhood and use local facilities can increase feelings of safety (Hunter & Baumer,1982). Third, policymakers should develop intervention programmes aimed at older people *feeling at home and safe in their neighborhood* by paying attention to 'walkable neighborhoods': safe sidewalks, cozy surroundings and practical services at an appropriate distance (De Donder et al.,2010b).

3.3. Investing in social capital

In the debate on social capital, three types of social networks exist: bonding, bridging and linking social capital. Bonding pertains to ties or connectedness between homogeneous groups (Woolcock,2001). Bridging social capital denotes more distant ties, across diverse social groups. This type is considered to be more wide-ranging and includes different groups of people (Woolcock,2001). Policymakers should concentrate on building bridges between different age groups, and between different cultural groups (De Donder et al.,2010c). The former concerns intergenerational activities which are more desirable than activities exclusively for older people (WHO,2007). As for the latter, an open and welcoming neighborhood motivates newcomers to integrate (WHO,2007). Local social organizations can be encouraged to open their doors for non-classical members or to co-operate with other organizations. Bridging social ties may not only occur in formal organizations, but also arises on the streets. Pursuing the course of new urbanism (Jacobs, 1961), more *eyes upon the street* are put forward as the basis for informal control. Opponents point to the fact that lots of people on the streets does not always mean that people engage in the community. Or as Blokland (2009:263) states: 'Eyes on the street' don't automatically generate 'eyes for each other'. What is more important is public familiarity. Who knows his neighborhood may be able to judge what one can expect from another, both in a positive as a negative sence of speaking. Public familiarity does not generate more social control, but rather diminishes mistrust and consequently heightens feelings of safety (Blokland,2009).

Third, linking social capital entails vertical connections to formal institutions. Policy hardly ever recognizes this form of formal social control and its impact on sense of safety (Crawford,1999). When research indicates that insufficient possibilities for political participation heighten feelings of unsafety (De Donder et al.,2010c), investing in linking social capital between older people and governments seems required. The idea of community safety entails the consultation with residents about their concerns in their surroundings (Pain,2000). Giving older people a voice and a role in the policy process, providing them opportunities to bring solutions to specific problems, to communicate successes and failures are important recommendations (Forrest and Kearns,2001).

Finally, a critical note should be added. Policymakers often idolize 'social capital'. Nonetheless, investing in social capital might entail some possible pitfalls. First, group solidarity can be developed because of a communal aversion of societal developments. In the case of feelings of unsafety, a fine example is the rise of Neighborhood Watch Schemes, which are established from a shared fear, a shared willingness to control crime and possible odd behavior in the neighborhood. Researchers have demonstrated that participation in these schemes have positive effects, but also could create more feelings of unsafety rather than less, elevating residents' alertness to problems (Hale,1996). Subsequent, in the case of bonding social capital, an exclusive emphasis on

reinforcing homogeneous networks could lead to exclusion of other people. Policymakers often come up with plans for *senior* organizations, *senior* activities, *senior* meetings … Yet an exclusive emphasis on peer activities could create higher feelings of unsafety (De Donder et al.,2010c). Finally, strategies aiming at including certain social groups might have the effect of excluding other groups. Pain (2000) gives the striking example of homeless people. In order to reassure women in town centers beggars are often *removed,* away from the city centre, creating for the last category a potentially greater and real danger. Young (1998:80) refers to this as the 'cordon sanitaire, which separates the world of the losers from that of the winners'. It is an attempt 'to make life more tolerable for the winners whilst scapegoating the losers'. However, this approach is unacceptable and doomed to failure (Young,1998).

3.4. Involvement of (older) people

Neighborhood activities, organized by professionals, are less successful than activities which 'flowed naturally from neighbor to neighbor' (Norris & Kaniasty,1992:643). When it comes to the crunch, it is better to create opportunities for communities to develop and grow rather than to impose interventions on citizens. Enhancing people's involvement in civil society would restore the security. Participation can be encouraged at several levels. The most basic degree of participation is communication. A good communication is no luxury, but rather a key to the effectiveness of intervention programmes (Hinkle & Weisburd,2008). More extensive forms of participation are investigating people's needs, involving residents in formulating goals, engaging them to develop intervention programs and finally including them in the realization and evaluation of the project.

Older people represent an important and rising part of the population and should therefore not be underestimated as contributors to community life. Yet, the possible active role of older people is too often neglected: there is still a great potential for involving older people and senior organizations as participants in redesigning the livability of the neighborhood (Buffel et al.,2010). Yet, Van Den Herrewegen (2010:98) questions the willingness of people to be involved in projects: 'A much heard frustration and disappointment among official authorities is that citizens are not interested and difficult to motivate. Often only a minority is willing to contribute time and effort to get involved.' Clearly, not everyone is interested in participating. However, ann individual's decision to participate is not only shaped by personal motivations and resources, but is also based on mobilization attempts, opportunities provided by politics and society, and structural constraints across the life course (Buffel et al.,2010).

4. CONCLUSION

In response to the lack of evidence-based policy, the article provides a critical overview of several distinct practices and approaches, confronting these practices with empirical evidence. Throughout the literature, we can distinguish a dichotomy in recommendations on feelings of unsafety. On the one hand, the most part focuses on crime and disorder prevention, on enhancing social control and on applications for police actions, what we can call the *rationalist approach.* On the other hand, policy recommendations focus on reinforcing social capital, improving the 'geborgenheit[1]' of the neighborhood and on targeting societal vulnerability. These could be categorized in the *symbolic*

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[1] Geborgenheit evokes a positive sense of nestedness and refers to the idea of home (Hutta, J.Simon (2009), "Geographies of *Geborgenheit*: Beyond Feelings of Safety and Fear of Crime", *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space,* Vol. 27, pp.251-273)

approach. Throughout history, it can be noticed that most practices relied on 'rationalist' tactics. The literature, however, provides less support for the effectiveness of such approaches: studies that are more recent support rather symbolic methods.

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