Fear of Crime, Fear of Control: How Structuring Freedoms Can Increase Happiness

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Abstract

The balance between control and free will is a deciding factor in the happiness of an individual, and by extension, of a state. It has been the subject of philosophical discourse for thousands of years, from Plato's *The Republic* and the reduction of freedom to choose for achieving 'justice', to the long-held western democracies that proclaim that freedom of choice is the pillar of society. To understand individual happiness, the social and public contexts must be included in the subjective experience (Selymes, 2011). It has been argued that increasing control (not choice) can have a positive effect on the safety and happiness of individuals. However totalitarian regimes are not known for producing happy citizens because the lack of choice undermines the individuals' sense of control of their own destinies. This article aims to use Low's ethnography on gated communities and research of Jankowiak's ethnography of Hohotian's reactions to the Cultural Revolution of China as the base to investigate the right balance between 'freedom to' and 'freedom from'.

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Introduction

The balance between control and freewill is a deciding factor in the happiness of an individual, and by extension, of a state. It has been the subject of philosophical discourse for thousands of years, from Plato's *The Republic* and the reduction of freedom to choose for achieving 'justice', to the long-held western democracies that proclaim that freedom of choice is the pillar of society. "Happiness is a social phenomenon" and therefore to understand individual happiness, the social and public contexts must be included in the subjective experience (Selymes, 2011). Le Breton (2004) and Gruber & Mullainathan (2006) point to the possibility that exerting greater control at both an individual and state level can increase both safety and happiness. On the other hand, Jankowiak argues that "living in a totalitarian social organisation will undermine [the citizen's] sense of 'being in control' over their immediate environment" which in turn hinders happiness (2009: 148). Similarly, Inglehart and Klingemann argue that "virtually all societies that experienced communist rule show relatively low levels of subjective well-being, even when compared with societies at a much lower economic level" (2000: 171), thus supporting the idea that more choice means more happiness. However, this could possibly be more powerfully affected by the upheaval associated with dramatic regime change as opposed to the ideologies attached. Verme differs slightly in his argument, suggesting that the relationship between happiness and freedom to choose has a spurious element accounted for at least in part by "the locus of control" (2009: 149) and so educational policy can affect how happy citizens are made by greater freedom.

This idea can be built on by looking at Simpson's (1996) explanation of cautious/confident frameworks and the application of this moving from individual decision-making to the attitudes and reactions of whole societies. Further to this, Garland (2001), suggests that in the UK and the US, increasing market freedoms, and therefore individual choice in the current globalised environment, "has come to depend on the close control of excluded groups", which can clearly be seen in the residents of gated communities in Low's *Behind the Gates* (2004). In looking at small scale attempts of groups of people to exert or give up control, it is possible to see the underlying fears and social phobias that affect the individual decision-making process. The study of individual reactions and reasons for said fears can then go a long way to explain the success or failure of the related policies implemented by the particular government, from the *woonerf* concept in urban-planning, to tobacco taxation, and controlling the flow of information. Taking the Dutch *woonerf* (plural *woonerven*) as an example, this essay aims to argue for greater freedom in a state-controlled structure to alleviate public anxieties and strengthen a sense of community.

The Woonerf

A radical idea at its heart, the woonerven are urban planning systems that remove traditional road markings and signs in an attempt to make drivers more alert to other road-users. This includes the use of 'street furniture' in the form of trees and flower boxes to de-linearise the road and the

removal of pavements. Essentially, "cars are welcome if they travel at walking speed" (Hart, 2008: 70), and this has been proven to greatly reduce the risk of traffic incidents and increase children's play as well as enhancing the social capital of the area (Hart, 2008). The logic behind this works in two ways. Firstly, in removing cues that could reduce drivers' attentiveness, the public roadways become a communal area where all are responsible for their own and each other's safety. Secondly, it gives right of way more definitely to pedestrians and so encourages residents to treat the public roadways as a part of the general usable space instead of being a division that is designated only to motorised vehicles. This idea has been diluted and translated to 'Home Zones' in the UK and US, but governments are reluctant due to "fear of local government liability as a result of departing from commonly accepted street standards" (Hart, 2008: 71). Across Europe, however, residents would much prefer the *woonerf* structure with reduced traffic capacity for the benefits that it confers to the community (Hart, 2008).

Gated Communities in the US

In the US, there is a sense of intensified social injustice and inequality that is embodied by the growth of gated communities that physically fracture urban communities (Atkinson & Smith, 2012). The racial segregation engendered by such gating is indeed significant and relates strongly to "fuelled public debates about the supposed links between race and crime" (Garland, 2001: 136). Ironically, Low's ethnography of gated communities in the US (2004) shows attempts made by people to gain control of their lives in a world where "globalization and economic restructuring weaken existing social relations and contributed to the breakdown of traditional ways of maintaining social order" (2004: 17). Although she says that "gated communities serve different purposes and express distinct cultural meanings" (ibid.: 16), the numerous motives she describes for moving 'behind the gates' seem only to vary insofar as which social group is segregated as a result. For example, expats in Saudi Arabia are separate from the local population, and exclusive class division in Bulgaria and China makes wealth and status highly visible (Low, 2004: 16). Perhaps there is a place for the opening of spaces to encourage integration in residential areas and by extension opening society to more cohesion and producing happier communication between social groups.

So what is it that the residents of the US neighbourhoods expect to take from building high walls, employing security staff and installing surveillance? Low reflects on the desire for 'the old days' of the small American "two-movie theatre town", and points out that "developers, public officials and residents all raise the ideal of community when talking about gating". She also comments that "larger numbers of people feel increasingly insecure" (Low, 2004: 231), and discusses globalisation, the breakdown of "traditional institutions of social control", but also the threat of terrorism as being both symptomatic and causal in the modern US. Garland (2001) builds on this by looking at 'otherness' in more detail: in both the UK and the US "the public's fears and insecurities, its heightened awareness of the problem, its scepticism about liberal policies, its lack of concern for the offenders themselves" are all issues that have led to a "social and cultural divide between 'us' and 'them'" (Garland, 2001: 181). That is to say, the "dangerous undeserving poor" are perceived as social ills that are preventing the well-being of the "innocent, long-suffering middle-class victims" (Garland, 2001: 182). The division of spaces that comes from this conflict only serves to perpetuate these negative perceptions.

An interesting example is Carol, a young mother in the US who tells Low that she moved from a community where she had strong social ties and felt safe to a different neighbourhood in order

to remove her children from a school where "ethnic changes" in the area meant they would be exposed to students from various socio-economic backgrounds (2004: 137-8). She believes that the happiness and well-being of her children, both present and future, depends on them interacting exclusively with other children of the same social status. Similarly, Karen worries about traffic and her children being able to play in the streets, but soon her thoughts turn to new constructions that would attract "illegal aliens" for work (ibid.: 101). Whilst the gated communities make parents feel more comfortable with allowing their children to play outside, "freedom to play should be a right regardless of [what] your family can afford" (ibid.: 110). What is most concerning about this fear is that it is being transferred to the children of the communities from a very early age. In Chapter 5, Low talks to the children in her niece's neighbourhood and is shocked to discover that "the fears of children under ten in San Antonio resemble those of older children documented in earlier eras" (ibid.: 97). For example, one boy says "I'm afraid people can get in, a gate isn't enough to stop them" (ibid.: 96). Does this imply that these children's fears are exaggerated by the extra security? Indeed, in increasing the awareness of risks and dangers in an environment, additional security measures tend "to increase subjective insecurity" (Zedner, 2003: 163).

At this point, it is important to note that the crime rate in the United States is, and has been, decreasing rapidly, and in suburban areas the rates were already low in comparison with inner-city areas (Low, 2004: 130). The fear that is experienced by both adults and children in these communities is largely a social construction, and subjective security can be affected by many "factors apart from actual crime including individual temperament, environmental signals, political assurances and, not least, media representation" (Zedner, 2003: 164). The freedoms experienced within the gated communities come about by safeguarding against risk perceived as a result of these factors, but it "comes at a high social and psychological cost" (Low, 2004: 109). The atmosphere of "moral panic" within these communities could even go as far as to make the young inhabitants "more vulnerable to drug problems suicide or violence" (ibid.), as the social and racial segregation can further reduce the information with which these young adults can make decisions and assess risk.

Certainly the trend amongst contemporary suburban adolescents to adopt "stereotyped elements of urban black popular culture" (Low, 2004: 106) as a kind of rebellion against the control of their parents is very telling of how the segregation affects their choices as they become more independent. Often, this can escalate into actively seeking risks, especially when the youth finds it difficult to "see themselves in a positive perspective in their future history" (Le Breton, 2004: 1). It is when adolescents feel they have no control over their lives that they are most likely to endanger themselves in a "tension-releasing act" (Le Breton, 2004: 4), which can become increasingly likely in an environment with such literal, physical boundaries like a gated community. The combination of segregation from real inter-racial community and the interpretation of media and pop culture means that the information that children have to make assessments of risk are wildly misinformed and can lead to very real consequences, such as the eighteen deaths from heroin in one area described by Low (2004: 106). Since these sorts of social problems should not happen in the safe affluent suburbs, there is a displacement of blame onto black drug dealers and "predatory Mexican nationals" (Low, 2004: 106) in the media, which can only serve to further exacerbate the problem.

Social Phobias and the Fear of Other-ness

Simpson's notion of 'social phobia' as a cultural phenomenon (1996: 560) could go some way to illuminate the attitudes in this fearful culture. In her paper, Simpson (1996) explains the cautious,

confident and neutral frameworks used by all human beings to assess danger and safety. The cautious framework assumes that the environment is dangerous until proven safe; the confident framework assumes the opposite; finally, the neutral framework represents the most common assumption: it "marks people as dangerous or explicitly safe, but assumes nothing about the unmarked" (Simpson, 1996: 557). In relation to the gated communities of Low's observations, one can assume that the residents are working within a cautious framework more often than usual, especially when venturing beyond their walls into "other-ness". It may also be argued that the residents are "[deviating] from the appropriate framework" (ibid.) and therefore their behaviours can be described as symptomatic of phobia. Indeed, Simpson does suggest that "Americans could legitimately be considered crime phobic" (ibid.: 560). It seems that with an ever-increasing, diversifying population, many families want to escape the rapid changes that make them feel unsafe and return to an idealised time where everybody knows their neighbours (and their neighbours are 'like them').

Taking other individual characteristics to a cultural level, the idea of introversion as a part or type of personality can translate appropriately to the behaviours displayed across the various gated communities observed by Low (2004). Kearny describes a type of introversion that is characterised by "a pattern of fearfulness, timidity, avoidance and guardedness surrounding new stimuli such as strangers or novel objects" (2004: 6). This personality is prone to social phobia (though not all those who experience social phobias are of this type), and yet usually these characteristics are present in people who "still function adequately in their daily life" (ibid.: 10). However, when applied (loosely) to a whole community, this can have profound consequences for the well-being of the society as a whole, manifesting in the phobias described that motivate exclusionary actions.

Throughout her observations and interviews with her American subjects specifically, there is an underlying fear of 'otherness', and a need to control their environments in order to keep themselves and their families safe. This is not an isolated example either; Zedner sums up the feeling of these residents in the simple logic: "if security is a good thing, why not have more of it?" (2003: 156). Yet there is a deeper problem not addressed by this logic, in that "the very fact that the private security sector now outstrips the public poses a significant challenge to existing regulatory systems" (ibid.: 156-7). This creates a huge inequality of security services provided to those within and outwith the gates, but also even from one community to another, since these private services are regulated internally and to varying standards (Low, 2004: 50). Gated communities do not solve the problems behind the fears of their residents (many refer to 'a false sense of security'), in fact it only "reinforces perceptions that those who are not in the community are 'outsiders'" (ibid.: 65). So this inequality cannot possibly contribute to happiness and well-being in a society; those inside the walls become excessively fearful, whereas those outside the walls are aware of their exclusion from the protection, and therefore their unworthiness in the eyes of those insiders, as well as being forced to "[inhabit] dangerous places" (Zedner, 2003: 166) that are defined by the absence of such private security.

So what is the solution to this social phobia of crime and otherness? The commonly encouraged solution for individual phobias is direct-exposure therapy, though this would, of course, be inappropriate when applied to a whole society, and "removing all locks and seeking out high-crime areas seem foolhardy actions, rather than therapeutic ones" (Simpson, 1996: 560). However, the socialisation theory that inspires direct-exposure therapy is most certainly relevant. Shi et al. state that it is the government's responsibility to use policy to "strengthen the resilience of

individual, family, community and society" (2006: 170) which contributes to the needs that are "crucial to happiness" (ibid.: 169). In other words, the ability to resist, and even thrive in, adverse or dangerous conditions is a highly desirable quality in individuals of a happy, successful society. Moreover, the *belief in one's resilience* is at least equally important. Surely removing the walls and allowing a flow of people throughout the community would aid their fears: if one fears what one doesn't know or understand, the easiest route to alleviating these fears is by learning more about the *real* risk and understanding the true roots of the anxiety that drew the residents behind their gates in the first place. Much like the *woonerven*, allowing for greater interaction between all forms of transportation through removing the signals and rigid signage, removing the gates and allowing for an interaction between different areas of the community can increase the feeling of safety for all.

Risk Perception in China

In studying the psychology of risk perception and the Chinese public's reaction to the government handling of the SARS epidemic in 2002/3, Shi et al. offer "the multi-level resilience system" (2006: 188) as a key factor in cultivating long-term happiness. The relevant conclusions of the study are as follows:

> […]to control the irrational psychological and behavioural reactions of the public, government should pay more attention to the appropriate ways of releasing crisis relevant information, especially the negative and self-related information […] which could alleviate the irrational risk perception and panic. (Shi et al., 2006: 187)

Information, or lack thereof, is the power that can create or dissipate a society's fears. During the SARS epidemic, the government's handling of information concerning infection/recovery rates, the active preventative measures being taken and other crisis relevant material decided the objectivity of the public's risk assessment capacity (Shi et al., 2006: 186). Essentially, the government manipulated the information given to the public in order to create the appropriate reaction and level of risk perception that would both keep the maximum number of people protected but also the minimum number of people unnecessarily panicked.

When taking this beyond times of crisis, a government's use of the education system and the media as means for developing the public's resilience and risk assessment capacity are interesting avenues of thought. An example of 'bad' governance in creating public trust and improving risk perception can be seen in nearby Taiwan, where there is an "authoritarian style regulatory culture […] where hiding and holding back information is a norm" (Chou & Liou, 2009: 45). This in turn means that when the public need to assess risk, they have inadequate information and cannot "find real answers through the official channels of the system" (ibid.). In terms of public perception relating to food safety specifically, Taiwanese respondents displayed both "a lower awareness of food safety and consumers' rights" and a much higher "dissatisfaction with the governments' risk governance" (ibid.: 54).

In essence, public trust in the government's ability to assess and then communicate risk to the public has a huge effect on an individual's ability to make decisions that best improve their welfare, but also their confidence in their own *and* the governments' ability to do so. Shifting this back to the US, it seems that the public have a distrust of the public security systems available and so

choose to protect themselves. Yet, in taking this decision (which would more commonly be made by a government who had more appropriate information and decision-making skills), the residents either chose the wrong security or have far less confidence in their choice. These residents do not have the information they need to confidently assess risk and must think instead within a cautious framework. This can then lead to both irrational behaviour and apparently higher anxieties for the individuals brought up and socialised by such environments.

The Locus of Control

Verme looks at the relationship between control and freedom of choice in the introduction to his paper (2009). That freedom of choice correlates strongly with happiness and is asserted by Verme within the constraints of the individual's ability to confidently choose. This is what is known as the "locus of control" (Verme, 2009: 146-7). So if an individual feels capable of making the choice that will bring the most benefit to themselves and their loved ones, they are happy for more choices to be available. However, if the individual does not feel confident in making the correct decision, increasing choice will begin to make them unhappy (Verme, 2009). This largely depends on the personality type of the individual in question; for example, an internal type who believes outcomes depend on internal factors will appreciate freedom more so than the external type who believes that external factors have greater influence on outcomes. Verme states that his empirical, quantitative data shows a stronger association with life satisfaction and freedom of choice/locus of control than any other variable. Again applying this to the concept of structured freedom, a government can increase the confidence of the public in their own ability to make the correct decision by simultaneously providing correct and sufficient evidence and also condensing information so as not to drown the public in statistics that would create further anxiety surrounding their decisions. However, he also mentions the influence of the educational system, "if countries are authoritarian and encourage obedience […] they tend to reward and prefer externals" and vice versa for democracies who "try to empower their people" (ibid.: 150). These ideas imply a potential weakness in Verme's findings, and similarly in Inglehart and Klingemann (2000), as most developed countries are established democracies and therefore encourage autonomy in their citizens. The public are socialised into taking responsibility for their decisions and are therefore expected to have rational risk-perception. This could explain the anomaly in China, as a communist country, having similar happiness reports as democracies of the same income per capita. That is to say, while other communist states failed to support their citizens in coping with their choice or lack thereof, the Chinese government has successfully exercised control over the public through education and media as well as through political force. In short, the evidence so far suggests the locus of control does not demand greater freedoms, rather it demands close integration and development of the appropriate level of autonomy with the level of freedom or control available in any given society/community.

Finding Balance in Hohhot

Jankowiak's ethnography of the citizens of Hohhot, Inner Mongolia, provides some useful insight. In relation specifically to control, Jankowiak notes that "self-sufficiency is an important aspect in Chinese spiritual and health practices" (2009: 150). Further to this, in the foundations of Chinese cultural history, there is great importance attached to "responsibility, choice, and self-growth via achieving mastery of one's body" (ibid.: 151). This attitude boils down to one's own responsibility for one's well-being, and a proactive approach to pursuing happiness (ibid.). When the communist

party first came to power in China, Jankowiack states that the public belief that "most leaders were dedicated to the public good" (ibid.: 153) and improving standards of living meant that the society functioned healthily. However, by the time Jankowiack began his observations in the 1980s, the cultural revolution – amongst other possible factors – had "fostered a fortress mentality that de-emphasized the importance of choice, innovation and change" (ibid.: 154). During this time, he noted that the lack of control over the direction of their lives had caused undue psychological harm. Much like increasing freedom for all had caused phobic reactions to otherness in the US gated communities, the monotonous institutionalised insularity of Chinese society was born from a culture of fear (ibid.: 155).

Unsurprisingly, after the opening of more choices with the emerging market economy by 1987, Jankowiak's observations describe "an immediate positive impact on Hohhotians' life satisfaction" (2009: 157). This increase of choice did not negatively affect the community's strong inter-social bonding, which is commonly accepted as an important influence on subjective happiness and well-being. Importantly, despite Jankowiach's assertion that democracy provides control for its citizens and therefore a better environment for citizens to realise their own happiness, it is not necessarily political freedom that provides that control, as his own observations can confirm. Looking back to the Chinese government's handling of the SARS epidemic, it becomes clear that (regardless of political ideology), all states must balance on a fine line between controlling and freeing their citizens.

While political choice may not be necessary to an individual's happiness, the need to feel in control of one's own destiny is most certainly of great importance. By structuring the freedoms that a society can experience, a government can create higher social capital and increase the chances of individuals creating their own happiness by controlling their own future with appropriate levels of information. Too much information released, for example the crime statistics that fuel the media in the US, can create undue levels of anxiety which segregate communities, cities and even whole countries. In the same moment, however, too little, or incorrect information can greatly harm the public's trust in their policy-makers which can equally affect an individual's ability to make choices that enhance their and their families well-being.

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