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Ways of Perceiving Safety From Interpretative Registers to Mechanisms of Interpretation

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Abstract

In the study of fear of crime, perception of safety with respect to the risk of victimization is often viewed as the mere consequence of the absence of perceived risk. This paper takes the opposite view: that it is a complex phenomenon resting on a plurality of interpretative registers. Analysis of some thirty interviews of students at a French university shows three different ways of perceiving safety (fragility, self-confidence and tranquility), each rests on a specific relationship to oneself and towards supposed aggressors. Having shown this, we then look at how these interpretations emerge and evolve over time. Interpretations are by no means attached to individuals, rather, they fluctuate with the situations encountered and with past experiences, whence the importance of bringing out the two dimensions – synchronic and diachronic – of this phenomenon.

Keywords

Perceptions of safety, Perceived risk, Fear of crime, Situation, Disposition; Public Transport

Introduction

Fear of crime is now a major research theme in criminology. At the end of the last century, Hale (1996) already counted over two hundred books and articles on the theme. Ten years later, Vanderveen (2006) identified at least 3,500 studies and publications dealing with fear of crime and concern with safety. During the same period, Farrall et al. (2009) mention several hundred publications within a number of scholarly disciplines. Their number continued to rise during the following decade.

In fact, over the last fifty years, research has constantly shown the complexity of fear of crime. In addition to the variety of factors required to explain this social phenomenon, its conceptualization is the best illustration of this. Fear of crime actually includes three components: its emotional, cognitive and behavioral dimensions (Farrall et al. 2009; Ferraro 1995; Lachance et al. 2010; May et al. 2010; Rader 2004). The first includes emotions felt in response to a perceived threat, the second corresponds to the perception of risk of victimization, while the third refers to precautions taken to reduce the risk of suffering theft or aggression. The cognitive component has received extensive study due to its influence on the emotional and behavioral components (Farrall et al. 2009; Ferraro 1995; Hale 1996). Most of these were concerned with identifying the “risk factors”, which is to say the contexts, places, *stimuli* and socio-demographic variables correlated with perceived risk of victimization.¹ But by studying perceived risk from that angle, these studies systematically ignore one unanswered question: how can we explain the fact that one individual may judge an ambiguous stimulus to be threatening while another person in the same situation judges it benign and harmless (Jackson 2004)? So far, research focusing on the mechanisms involved in the perception of risk provide the most relevant responses (Farrall et al. 2009; Jackson 2009; Killias 1990). The discovery of several underlying cognitive assessments which structure the perceived risk of victimization has revolutionized our understanding of individual variations in “risk sensitivity” (Warr 1987) / “perceived vulnerability” (Killias 1990). There is a major conceptual limit to this approach, however: the perception of risk is perceived as a continuum. The search for a single structural relationship between the various underlying cognitive assessments presents perceived risk as a linear phenomenon, variations in which are a matter of degree rather than of nature.

The present text takes the opposite approach in its study of perceived risk. To begin with, it focuses on people who claim not to perceive a risk of victimization, or those for whom the perceived risk does not lead to worry about crime. In that sense, it takes less interest in the « conditions » under which the perception of risk emerges than in those which preserve oneself from that perception. This is why we will speak of « perceptions of safety » rather than of « absence of perceived risk ». The latter theme refers to the idea, which we combat here, of a single, structural relationship shared by all individuals, who would be positioned along a continuum expressing « a perceptive scale ».²

¹ The recent review of the literature by Sundling and Ceccato (2022) is a perfect example of this type of work, aimed at inventorying the « characteristics » impacting the risk perceived by travelers in public transportation.

² The models established using the Structural Equation Modeling technique illustrate this clearly. For an example, see Jackson, 2009.

Our own hypothesis asserts the existence of a complex phenomenon, inciting us to develop the concept of perceptions of safety.

The term « perception of safety » is quite widely used in international research. A rapid review of the literature indicates use of the concept of « perceived security » (Lizarraga 2022; Paydar et al. 2017), or that of « perceived safety » (Ceccato et al. 2021; Connell 2018; Chowdhury and van Wee 2020; Grinshteyn and Sugar 2021; Jansson 2013; Mouratidis 2019; Rišová and Madajová 2020; Thibodeaux 2013). But clearly, there is a very low level of conceptualization of these theoretical abstractions. In the immense majority of cases, these terms are considered to be simple synonyms of the perception of risk, sometimes even of fear of crime.³ There are however a few attempts at original conceptualizations. This is true, in particular, of the work of Jarabeen et al (2017), who attempt to develop the concept of “urban ontological security”. Based on Giddens’ (1991) famous concept, the authors show that safety is tied to a feeling of control in everyday life, which in turn rests on trustful relationships, satisfaction with the neighborhood and satisfaction with respect to the physical environment. Similarly, Hutta (2009) proposes to return to the German concept of “Geborgenheit”, which refers to an immediate emotion of wellbeing with respect to the specific space in which it arises. Although these concepts are embryonic, they indicate the existence of a more complex vision of the perception of safety. Now this complexity suggests that we look at that « perception » as something other than the mere consequence of the absence of any perceived risk. Thus, in one short paragraph in his text, Hutta notes that safety may be interpreted in a variety of ways: *the extent to which subjective-spatial relations are framed in terms of ‘safety’ and ‘order’ differs across persons and collectivities* (Hutta 2009, 268). If this is so, the differences are not only a question of degree, but also a question of the nature of the perception. For this reason the study of perceived risk from the angle of perceptions of safety involves a major heuristic stake.

However, these studies may be criticized for not taking into account the distinction between safety concern and fear of crime (Furstenberg 1971), and for basing the construction of their concept on this confusion. For this reason, and in spite of their contributions, we will not use these concepts in the present study. In order to avoid the risk of confusion of the very different dimensions of safety, we feel it is important to restrict the object of our work to perceptions of safety limited to the risk of victimization. Last, we prefer the term “safety” to “security” inasmuch as that expression is more firmly anchored in the field of fear of crime and victimization, whereas the latter is mostly employed with respect to international relations (Balzacq 2011).

Our hypothesis is that the perception of safety is not a homogeneous phenomenon, all the variations of which could be measured on a linear cognitive scale (differences in degree), but rather, a multi-sided phenomenon articulated around different interpretations (differences in nature). It must be clear, however, that if this hypothesis differs from a monistic vision (the interpretation of a perception of safety is the same for everyone, and the differences are measurable only in terms of degree), it differs, as well, from a relativist approach (each individual is unique and perceives safety in his/her own way), and advocates the existence of a few typical forms of interpretation. In accordance with this hypothesis, we will then propose a model aimed at explaining how these interpretations come into being and evolve with situations. But before going any further, we must return to earlier research suggesting the existence of this plurality of interpretations.

Review of the literature

The hypothesis that the perception of safety may be based on a plurality of interpretations has another origin than in the embryonic work of Hutta (2009) and Jarabeen et al. (2017). It originates in research on the perception of the risk of victimization, conducted at the crossroads of two major theoretical constructions: the perception of disorders model and the perceived vulnerability model. By stressing the many individual variations in the perception of physical and social disorders, the first model helped reveal the variety of forms of interpretation of the risk of victimization, and in fact the existence of a variety of ways of perceiving safety. At the same time, by identifying several cognitive concepts underlying the perceived risk of victimization, the second model brought to light the « basic cognitive bricks » on which the different interpretations studied in the present article rest.

The perception of disorders model

Given the failure of the victimization model to account for fear of crime on the basis of suffered, observed or reported crime (Noble and Jardin 2020), researchers rapidly took interest in low-intensity deviance, which may *signal an erosion of conventionally accepted norms and values* (Lagrange et al. 1992, 312). The early work, directly influenced by Wilson and Kelling’s famous paper (1982) partook of an essentialist perspective linking fear of crime with a concentration of disorders (Box et al. 1988; Lewis and Salem 1986; Roche 2002; Slogan and Maxfield 1981; Taylor

³ “Perceived social safety is similar to perceived personal danger, perceived safety or risk, and fear of crime, and may reflect cognitive and affective responses to risks” (Boomsma and Steg, 2014, 195).

and Hale 1986). However, this hypothesis was seriously questioned in later work. Taylor and Shumaker (1990), for example, fail to find a link between the presence of disorders and fear of crime in several deteriorated neighborhoods. But above all, many writers stress the individual variations with respect to perceived risk in a same area. Covington and Taylor (1991) show that the objective situation in a neighborhood (presence and concentration of disorders) affect fear of crime much less than the perception of disorders. To explain this finding, Ferraro (1995) suggests that the *objective situation* be dissociated from the *definition of the situation*. The former corresponds to the contextual features such as the material and social environment in the neighborhood, whereas the latter is the interpretation given by individuals to these objective patterns. According to Ferraro, fear of crime is not determined by the actual environment, but by a series of judgments pertaining to it. This led to a real change in paradigm: a transition from an essentialist perspective (in which disorders are unambiguous and their meaning is universal), to a cognitive perspective (in which disorders are ambiguous and their interpretation depends on the observer's viewpoint) (Harcourt 2001). Attention is then gradually displaced from the disorders to the observer, in order to explain individual variations in perceived risk with respect to a same *stimulus* (Brunton-Smith 2011; Farrall et al. 2009; Franzini et al. 2008; Hipp 2010; Innes 2004; Jackson 2004; Jackson et al. 2018; Latkin et al. 2009; Noble 2016, 2019; Sampson and Raudenbush 2004; Tulloch 2000; Wallace et al. 2015).

However, the research performed in the cognitive perspective is mainly concerned with variations in the level of perceived risk (how do you explain why a stimulus causes anxiety in one person whereas someone else views it as minor and harmless?). Whereas this line of research showed the influence of social and political values and attitudes (Jackson 2004; Jackson et al. 2018), of racial and cultural stereotypes (Franzini et al. 2008; Merry 1981; Sampson and Raudenbush 2004), of identification with a group (Merry, 1981; Tulloch, 2000), of experienced victimization as well as of routine activities (Wallace et al. 2015) on the perception of disorders, it takes little interest in the nature of the perceived risk (can two individuals faced with the same *stimulus* have different perceptions of the risk of victimization ?) (Noble 2016, 2019; Wallace et al. 2015). Although rarely discussed, a few studies do deal with this issue (Jackson and Gouseti 2014).

In a paper published in 2004, Innes attempts to explain the act of interpretation by which an individual assesses a disorder as threatening. According to this researcher, threatening signals always have three components; that is, an expression, a content and an effect. The expression corresponds to the nature of the signal; it is what signifies the incident. The content corresponds to a threat ascribed to the expression, and the effect is an emotional, cognitive and behavioral change induced by the conjunction of the expression and its content (Innes 2004). On the basis of a qualitative study, the author shows that groups of youths (expression) represent a threat for several of his respondents. But Innes observes different perceptions of the risk represented by these gangs (the content) depending on the respondent's age. While young respondents identify these individuals as potential assailants, adults fear youth groups because they are liable to deteriorate their property (Innes 2014). The multiplicity of interpretational repertoires when faced with disorders is also evidenced in a paper published by Carvalho and Lewis (2003). In a study of residents of several underprivileged neighborhoods in Chicago, these researchers identified three types of reactions linked to different interpretation of disorders. The *afraid respondents* mostly spoke of how dangerous some residents are, the *angry respondents* how disrespectful they are, and the *safe respondents* the ordinary and spatially limited nature of perceived disorders.

These studies make contributions of two sorts. First, the model developed by Innes shows that perception of disorders cannot be measured simply by a graduated scale of perceptions, but also on the basis of different interpretations. Secondly, Carvalho and Lewis show that there are also several ways of interpreting disorders which are not perceived as threatening. According to these researchers, *angry and safe respondents share the sense of security. However, in speaking about local crime and incivilities, angry respondents did not display the neutrality of their safe counterparts* (Carvalho and Lewis 2003, 788). In other words, the evaluation of a disorder as non-threatening is based on varied interpretations which suggest different ways of perceiving safety in a given environment. Furthermore, this hypothesis is supported by many concepts developed in the perceived vulnerability model.

The perceived vulnerability model

The early findings on fear of crime point to a paradox: those categories of individuals who are most fearful are not those who are most victimized. Women and the elderly, in particular, report a high level of fear in comparison with that of men and youths, who are in fact more often victims of personal crime (Reid and Konrad 2004). To explain this paradox, researchers rapidly made a distinction between the objective and subjective risks of suffering an aggression. Defined as the *personal evaluation of the crime rate and the probability of victimization* (DuBow et al. 1979, p.3), perceived risk soon comes to be viewed as the main factor in emotional reactions (Ferraro 1995; Ferraro and LaGrange 1992; LaGrange and Ferraro 1989; Miethe and Lee 1984; Warr and Stafford 1983). In the 1980s, several authors enriched this initial definition (Ferraro and LaGrange 1987; Warr 1987), but we owe the first

theoretical model of perceived vulnerability to Killias. In a paper published in 1990, he established three factors for vulnerability: social (poverty), physical (being a woman or an elderly person) and situational (living in a neighborhood with a high crime rate), which aspects he then links to three dimensions of threats, which are perceived exposure to risk, anticipation of consequences and the feeling of loss of control. According to Killias, the most vulnerable people (socially, physically and contextually) are more likely to feel exposed to a risk of victimization, to perceive the consequences of an aggression as more serious, and to feel incapable of defending themselves against an attack (Killias 1990). Some twenty years later, Jackson (2009) went on to test the validity of this model. He showed that perception of risk plays the role of an intermediate variable, between criteria of vulnerability (in this case age and sex) and worry about specific crime. Thus, women report a higher level of worry than men because they feel less able to cope with a theft or an aggression, more exposed to that risk and more seriously affected by its potential aftereffects. Van der Wurff et al. (1989) report similar findings based on a competing model structured around four factors, largely inspired by Routine Activity Theory. *Attractivity* is feeling oneself a potential target; *evil intent* translates the degree of mistrust of one's neighbors and other residents of the neighborhood; *power* refers to perceived control; and *criminalizable space* to situations viewed as risky. According to the authors of this social psychology model, it has a higher explanatory ability to account for fear of crime than the traditional sociodemographic model. In spite of the qualifications introduced by Farrall et al. (2000) the explanatory power of this model remains high nonetheless. The latter show that *power* and *criminalizable space* are part of the explanation of fear of crime, along with age and sex. *Attractivity*, on the other hand, is an explanatory factor for fear of crime in women only, whereas *evil intent* is only a factor in men.

During the same period, on the other side of the Atlantic, researchers were led to develop concepts closely tied to those of perceived vulnerability to explain their survey findings. The specificity of the North American conception resided in the use of different concepts to account for fear in men and women. The hypothesis of *the shadow of sexual assault* (Ferraro 1995) according to which the perceived risk of rape affects apprehensiveness of other forms of victimization is predominant in explaining women's fear of crime (Dobbs et al. 2009; Ferraro 1996; Fisher and Sloan III 2003; Franklin and Franklin 2009). However, these are the concepts developed to explain men's fear of crime that will hold our attention here. As opposed to those previously described, these concepts are based on dynamic cognitive evaluations performed in situation rather than on general tendencies to perceive a specific type of crime. The hypothesis of *the shadow of powerlessness* was formulated by May (2001a, 2001b) and May and Fisher (2009) to account for the fears of young male adolescents. This concept refers to the feeling of physical vulnerability experienced by some young men when faced with others thought to be less vulnerable. In the same line of thought, Day et al. (2003) and Brownlow (2005) show that men's fear often occurs when they *feel a loss of control*, especially in confrontations with other men or boys.

Research on perceived vulnerability provides two types of contributions to the study of perception of safety.

The first has to do with the variety of concepts developed to comprehend the perception of the risk of victimization. While the early definitions limit the perception of risk to perceived probability (DuBow et al. 1979), the most recent ones view it as a complex theoretical construction composed of several cognitive assessments (Farrall et al. 2009). Nonetheless, these studies may be reproached their attempt to construct a single structural relation between these cognitive concepts. It is our postulate, based on the perception of disorders model, and particularly on the work of Innes (2004, 2014) and of Carvalho and Lewis (2003), that the perception of control, likelihood, consequences, attractivity, evil intent and criminalizable space, combine in different ways to form different structures. In short, the perceived vulnerability model has uncovered a great many cognitive concepts while mostly ignoring the study of their combinations. But it is these specific combinations which give rise to different ways of perceiving safety, which we proceed to identify in the present paper.

As mentioned above, the second contribution of work on perceived vulnerability is tied to the use of concepts showing the existence of two distinct cognitive approaches. On the one hand, most European studies – as well as North American research on the hypothesis of the shadow of sexual assault – are based on a dispositional approach. In this case, the various cognitive concepts measure a general tendency. They assess the global level of perceived likelihood, perceived control, and perceived consequence with respect to a specific crime (Jackson 2009; 2011; Killias 1990). On the other hand, a few North American studies develop cognitive concepts involving a definitely situational approach. Here, the cognitive evaluation takes place in a given situation: the feeling of loss of control (Brownlow 2005; May et al. 2003) or the shadow of powerlessness (Fisher and May 2009; May 2001a, 2001b) do not reveal a general tendency but rather, precise contexts in which given individuals feel particularly vulnerable. In the last analysis, these two approaches provide answers to two distinct research issues: the dispositional approach accounts for the level of risk perceived by a given individual or social group with respect to a specific crime, whereas the situational approach is concerned with the effects of the situation on the perception of risk (Gabriel and Greve 2003; Noble 2016, 2019). However, these two approaches must inevitably be confronted in any discussion of the multiple ways of perceiving safety. What is at stake, then, is the underlying nature of these interpretations: are they

tied to the individual or to the situation encountered? We will show that this issue cannot be easily resolved, inasmuch as the two dimensions are at work, in complex interaction.

The aim of the present text is therefore: 1) to study the many ways of perceiving safety and 2) to account for the conditions under which these interpretations come into being and change. But first, we must present the material studied and the method used to extract the findings.

Methodology

The study discussed in the paper is based on the postulate that the perception of safety is structured around a plurality of interpretative registers. The most appropriate means of showing this plurality involves the development of typological concepts.

Since the presentation of a typology is always the outcome of a long chain of methodological and epistemological choices – which it is important to reproduce as faithfully as possible, barring which there cannot be any rational justification of the results found – this section is entirely devoted to a presentation of our positions and procedures at each step of the research project.

Background

Different methods may contribute to the establishment of typologies. Classificatory statistical analyses, often resting on multiple correspondence analyses (MCA), show the possible links between the modalities of variables, thus identifying social groups with distinct properties, practices and representations. However, use of these methods is infrequent in the English-speaking world, where research on fear of crime is most advanced. In France, these statistical methods are highly valued, but little work is done on fear of crime. Furthermore, French victimization surveys use few indicators aimed at apprehending this social phenomenon. The outcome is that classificatory analyses cannot yield anything more than information on the average level of frequency of fear in a social group in a given environment.⁴ Another family of methods consists of focusing on what respondents say. Qualitative surveys are relevant for understanding how individuals view their practices and personal experiences. The interview is the most adequate method for studying perceptions of safety. An individual, face-to-face interview allows for an exchange with the respondent during which the latter is incited to present his or her viewpoint, beliefs, and personal experiences with fear of crime. It is precisely this type of material that we aim at collecting in order to understand the different ways of perceiving safety. This is why we decided to perform interviews as our data-finding tool for the present study.

However, the choice of tool does not account for the articulation between data-collection and theoretical construction. On this central point, our position consists in giving preference to the respondents' own words. This position, greatly influenced by *Grounded Theory* as developed by Glaser and Strauss in 1967, gives absolute priority to an inductive approach. Placing respondents' words in the forefront implies an epistemological stance according to which scientific theories are based on the data collected. As opposed to the hypothetico-deductive logic, data is not collected in order to corroborate a pre-existing theory. It is the point of departure of theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Because few studies have been conducted on the subject treated in the present paper, we felt that the inductive approach was most appropriate for explaining any interpretations we might make. In short, the point of departure of this research is the very general postulate according to which the perception of safety is articulated around different interpretations which we hoped to identify. However, the forms that these interpretations may take are not formulated in any prior hypothesis. If there are a plurality of interpretations, these must be extracted from the data, using analyses based on approaches which will be discussed at the end of this section. Before that, we must present the setting and the population studied.

Sample

This study involves some thirty interviews of students at a university located in a working-class suburb of Paris. The subject of the interviews was fear of crime in public transportation.

To conduct the study, our focus was what is thought to be an anxiety-producing setting and a population generally sensitive to fear of crime. The Île-de-France area⁵ is one of the regions of France in which fear of crime is most pronounced (SSM-SI 2019) and in this extremely urbanized area, public transport is one of the places that elicit

⁴ An otherwise most interesting paper by Zauberman et al. 2013a, is a perfect illustration of this.

⁵ The Île-de-France is a region of France including Paris and several other neighboring *départements* (les Hauts-de-Seine, la Seine-Saint-Denis, le Seine-et-Marne, L'Essonne, Les Yvelines, le Val de Marne et le Val d'Oise). With 12 million *Franciliens* (as its inhabitants are called) it is the most densely populated region of France: it represents 19% of the French population.

the most anxiety. The last *Victimization and fear of crime in Île-de-France* survey conducted in 2021 by the *Institut Paris Region* shows that 38 % of *Franciliens* fear a theft or an aggression in public transportation as opposed to 19 % in their neighborhood in the evening (Heurtel 2019). The closed-in environment, the proximity of strangers, the unpredictable nature of the situations encountered make public transportation an appropriate setting in which to apprise the possible multiplicity of perceptions of safety (Sundling and Ceccato, 2022). As opposed to less anxiety-producing settings, in which the dominant interpretation of safety has a great probability of prevailing, public transport involves heterogeneous situations in which multiple interpretations may be seen (Ceccato et al. 2021).

The reason for concentrating on students is not so much tied to the socio-professional characteristics of this group (not particularly distinctive) as to their youthfulness. Eighteen to twenty-five year olds travel extensively on the public transport system (Noble 2019), are less apt to be concerned about the issue of delinquency (safety concern) (Robert and Pottier 1997), more exposed to the risks of victimization (Zauberman et al. 2013b) and above all more sensitive to fear of crime in these settings (Heurtel et al. 2018), making them particularly interesting for the study of this phenomenon. The student population is convenient for reaching people in that age group. Also, the university turned out to be an excellent place to recruit respondents. First, a large majority of students are aged 18-25. Next, campuses possess many rooms in which interviews may be performed under good conditions. As for the choice of the particular university, it was based on its location. This relatively outlying university is located in the Seine-Saint-Denis *département*⁶ reputed to suffer from a very high crime rate.

Procedure

The respondents were recruited on the campus. With the consent of some teachers and colleagues, we spoke during several courses, to introduce ourselves to the students. We told them that we were working on travel in public transport and on the general atmosphere there, then went on to explain that we were looking for students who agreed to answer the survey questions. When students were interested, we circulated a sheet on which each future respondent was asked to enter his or her first and last name and email address. The students would be contacted by email to organize the interview.

The difficulty, then, did not reside in recruiting people for the survey, but rather in determining how to make sure we had a variety of profiles. Respondents were selected exclusively on the basis of sex and age: the sex appeared on the recruitment sheet via the respondent's first name, and age was determined indirectly by what academic year they were in. However, our sample does include a relatively large variety of profiles: 55.2% are women, and 45.8% men; 55.1% were aged 18 to 20 and 44.9% between 21 and 25. Sons and daughters of employees represented 32.8% of the sample, 20.7% had parents in the managerial and intellectual professionals, 17.2% were children of crafts or business people, 6.9% of workers. 44.8% of respondents resided in the Seine-Saint-Denis, 13.8% in Paris, 13.8% in the Val d'Oise, 10.3% in the Seine-et-Marne and the remaining 13.6% were equally divided between the Hauts-de-Seine, the Val de Marne, l'Essonne and l'Oise.

The constituents of this group correspond approximately to the general sociological pattern of the university.⁷ At the university, as in our survey, 18-22 year-olds represent the majority of the population, there are slightly more women than men, a majority are not scholarship holders, and residents of the *départements* which touch the Seine-Saint-Denis are in the majority. There are some differences, however. Proportionally, residents of the Seine-Saint-Denis are overrepresented in the survey (44.8% as against 35.1%). The same is true of children of employees (32.8% versus 12.7%), the intermediate professions (17.2% versus 9.5% and students living outside the parents' home (41.4% versus 28.7%). Conversely, foreign students were underrepresented in the survey in comparison to the number in the university (6.9% versus 26.6%). The same is true for children of workers (3.4% versus 13.6%) and students aged 23 and 24 (0.0% in the survey and respectively 7.8% and 6.4% in the university population).

These individual interviews, performed between March 2012 and June 2015, were non-directive. As opposed to semi-directive interviews, this method has the advantage of not imposing any theme other than the very general initial question (Duchesne, 2000). Placing emphasis on the respondents' words supposes that the person questioned may speak of fear of crime in accordance with his or her feelings about it, and not the way the survey themes suppose they do. We therefore asked respondents to answer one initial question, broad enough to approach lack of safety from several angles: *According to your personal experience, how do you feel about the safety and the general atmosphere in public transportation?* The quality of the answers varied considerably from one respondent to another. Some took the opportunity to report on all of their experiences, while others were much more discrete and furnished little information. In every case we attempted to delve as deeply as possible into the respondent's answers. To do so we reacted verbally to the words and expressions they used, the aim being to limit our influence and that of our research

⁶ To the north of Paris, the Seine-Saint-Denis *département* characteristically concentrates a larger working-class population (in comparison to other *départements*). In addition, this is the poorest *département* in metropolitan France.

⁷ Table I, appended, shows the structure of the sample and that of the university in which it was recruited.

questions on their responses. However, this method was difficult to put into practice with those respondents who were not inspired by the initial instructions. Complementary questions were provided for those people. When there was no way of getting the exchange going, we put other questions to the respondents. What we wanted to know is whether the latter had, or had not, experienced incidents felt to be threatening in public transport. In the affirmative, we asked the student to describe the situation and the reactions connected with it: when this was not the case, we explored the type of travels, the general atmosphere in transportation settings and how he or she related to those places. After each new response we attempted to use the respondents' own comments to encourage them to continue, so as to avoid using the questions we had prepared whenever possible. The length of the interviews depended largely on the number of the students' experiences: the shortest were hardly more than one-half hour long, whereas the longest lasted over two hours.

Twenty-nine interviews were done in order to obtain as many different responses as possible. The number was not set in advance, but was the result of the principle of saturation: the more people we interviewed, the less new information we obtained, until we reached the point when the level was low enough for us to end the operation. In addition, comparison of our findings with those of previous studies strengthened our observation: our interviews found the same anxiety-producing factors and the same emotional, cognitive and behavioral reactions as those uncovered by earlier studies. Last, the very strictly targeted population (students at one university) and the limited context (the transport system in Île-de-France) were further reasons for the rapid saturation in our interviews.

Analysis

While Glaser and Strauss (1967) present, in *Grounded Theory*, a survey approach aimed at gradually producing knowledge based on data from field work, they entirely dodge the practical procedures to be implemented for the empirico-inductive production of theory. Some twenty-odd years ago, Demazière and Dubar (2009), realizing this, suggested a method of analysis appropriate for the establishment of typologies based on the precepts advanced by the two American authors. We found this method worthwhile with respect to our own research goals. For this reason – although we are not working on narratives on integration or on biographic interviews – we sought to apply these authors' recommendations to our subject and our research material.

The methods used in this paper may be described in four steps. The first, coding, identifies the situations/contexts, actors, experiences and reactions mentioned by respondents in their interviews. The aim is to break down the interview so as to class the terms by type and level (for example, cognitive reactions reported in the framework of the first experience are separated from those reported during a second one). Another objective is the accurate identification of terms connected to the perception of safety or of the absence of a perceived risk. The second step involves the identification of the social logics which structure the narrative. The idea is to understand the way individuals arrange, organize, establish a hierarchy among the different terms, and above all the respondent's position with respect to them. To do so, we use analysis of relationship by opposition (ARO). This data analysis method is based on the postulate that the structure of discourse and its meaning are organized around oppositions (but also around associations) of terms. *The aim of ARO is to discover, in a research interview, the relations between practical objects, elements of the environment and the properties, judgments, and symbolic significations which the speaker ascribes to them* (Demazière and Dubar 2009, 40).⁸ Through the relationships of opposition reported by the respondent, we seek to determine the social logics around which the narrative is structured. Once we have identified the way the different enunciations are arranged, organized, hierarchically structured, but also appreciated or deprecated (identification of social logics), through ARO, we may go on to compare interviews, or more precisely, parts of interviews (inasmuch as each respondent's narrative is a composite shot through with various social logics, which makes it impossible to compare whole interviews), whose universes of meanings coincide. The third step consists of distributing all of the parts of interviews dealing with the perception of safety around nuclear units (excerpts of interviews with a typical social logic). Using what is called the piling up method⁹, the idea is to group together the excerpts with similar types of arguments, in order to establish ideal types (Grémy and Le Moan 1977). The fourth and last phase is intended to discover the primary feature underlying variations in the different ideal types so as to identify the nature of the typology developed (Schnapper 2012). It is this methodology which has been used to produce the findings presented in the next section.

Findings

⁸ However, as opposed to those writers, we are concerned solely with oppositions and associations established consciously by respondents. Because we are not sufficiently competent in the field of psychology we refuse to seek relationships of opposition which possibly reveal an unconscious use of some terms.

⁹ In French, « la méthode dite des tas »

The findings are presented in two phases. We first describe the classes produced by typological analysis. This involves a presentation of the structures and specific features of the different ways of perceiving safety (the forms of interpretation). In the second phase we focus on the conditions of emergence and evolution of these interpretations. This section should provide a better understanding of the articulation between the dispositional and the situational properties in the interpretative mechanism (the mechanisms of interpretation).

The forms of interpretation

The outcome of analysis of relationships by opposition (ARO) is the establishment of a typology articulated around three ideal types. It is possible to assess the coherence of this typology, thanks, among other things, to the identification of a shared feature behind variations in the different types (Schnapper 2012). Thus, each of the three interpretative configurations brought to light by ARO shows a specific relationship to oneself and to supposed aggressors.

The forthcoming section is entirely devoted to the presentation of this typology. In order to highlight the respective specificities of the different interpretations, the excerpts constituting the nuclear units (those whose social logic typifies an interpretation) will deliberately be cited. The advantage of this methodological choice is to magnify the characteristic features of these three ideal types, and clearly define the compositions and structures. Conversely, it has the negative effect of giving the impression that the author of the paper is reifying interpretative processes which, in reality, are essentially dynamic. Consequently, it is best to not draw here any conclusion as to the situational or dispositional nature of the interpretations, nor as to how they come into being and their evolution. These essential themes will be discussed in the last part of this paper.

Thus, the present section is exclusively concerned with the description of *fragility*, *self-confidence* and *tranquility*. These qualifications, chosen by the author to introduce the specific relation to oneself and to the supposed aggressors in each interpretation, aim at identifying these three interpretative registers and handling them more easily. In other words, these designations are the result of our analysis of interviews and were not used by the respondents themselves.

Fragility

Interpretation in terms of *fragility* rests on a basic opposition between the presence and the absence of disorders perceived as threatening. Respondents close to this type claim not to have observed any incident susceptible of provoking the fear of a possible crime in transport settings. This is the case for Fabrice (age 18, Seine-Saint-Denis) for whom the only two experiences reported produced a very low level of alert. The first involved a dispute between a man and a woman between the ages of 20 and 25 in the RER D.¹⁰ When the man threatened the woman with physical violence, other travellers in their vicinity intervened and put an end to the conflict. The second situation occurred toward 4 AM, in the Noctilien¹¹ on the way to V.¹² Half asleep during the trip, the respondent occasionally glanced at the other passengers to make sure no-one *decided to take everyone's bags and throw them out the window*. According to this young man, these anecdotal experiences justify the *ultra-low* risk of being victim to an aggression in public transportation.

But *fragility* also rests on a second dichotomy – objective and factual this time – between those who have or have not ever had a threatening experience, and more rarely, an actual attack. For individuals close to this type, who claim never to have been victim to the slightest malicious act, the perception of safety is entirely dependent on chance. In the case of *fragility*, a single threatening experience may be enough to instill a perception of the risk of victimization. This scenario is reported by Charline (age 18, Seine-Saint-Denis), who is now very cautious after having been subjected to violent advances by four young men. Laurent (age 20, Paris) relates this second opposition most tellingly. Although he had *no problem* when traveling and claims to *feel safe* in public transportation, he explains that *if anything happens, an attack or whatever [he is] dead*. This remark points to the singularity of *fragility*. In this case, the perception of safety is based on a low perceived likelihood of victimization, and not on a strong perceived control of the situation or a faint apprehension of any consequences (Farrall et al. 1997; Innes 2004; Jackson 2011). This is why the slightest threatening situation may reverse this interpretation, based on the absence of any perceived disorders.

Self-confidence

¹⁰ A regional express line.

¹¹ The name of the night buses in Île-de-France.

¹² A district in a northern suburb close to Paris.

Interpretation in terms of self-confidence may be formalized in a diagram opposing the ability to counter an aggression and the inability to do so. Individuals who are closest to this type feel capable of protecting themselves thanks to their physical proficiency. This interpretation very strongly corroborates the cognitive concepts tied to perceived control (Brownlow 2005; Day et al. 2003; Farrall et al. 2000; Fisher and May 2009, 2009; Killias 1990; May 2001a; Van der Wurff et al. 1989; Weitlauf et al. 2000). Mathieu (19, Val-de-Marne) for example, explains that he can count on his *proficiency [in] the martial arts* in case of an aggression. Similarly, Abdel (20, Seine-et-Marne) who has practiced judo since the age of four says that he is *used to physical contact* and is capable of *defending himself* if faced with a potential assailant. Irrespective of the activity on which it is based, a strong sense of control is always grounded in the conviction of being familiar with experiences of physical confrontation (Weitlauf et al. 2000). Pierre, who plays rugby, mentions the intensity of interactions during matches and shows how competence in sports contribute to a feeling of physical confidence in everyday life.

In rugby, they called me the machine, or the bear...mentally, that makes you suppose you are really stronger and more developed than the average person, so you don't fear the people you meet as much, even if there is a risk of being aggressed, you fear it less [...] even if there is a conflict, you feel that it will be easier to settle than if you were someone smaller and more fragile (Pierre, 18, Val d'Oise)

While some people close to this ideal type claim that they have never experienced the slightest dispute in public transportation, others report attempted aggressions whose minor consequences or the failure of the attackers further reinforced their sense of control. On his way home, Abdel was approached by a *gang* of youths interested in his cell phone. He and one of them *pushed each other around a bit*, after which the young man succeeded in reasoning with the gang and brought the incident to a satisfactory conclusion. Far from contributing to fear of crime, the low level of violence in interactions and the fact that aggressors are not very threatening reinforce these travelers' sense of control (Agnew 1985; Tyler and Rasinski 1984).

The interpretation in terms of *self-confidence* rests, then, on a second representation opposing dangerous aggressors and those judged not dangerous. Pierre shows this clearly, stating that potential attackers *don't worry [him] so much*, since they are often *young* and rarely *massive beasts*. It is therefore unsurprising that the few interventions that were recounted – often to help people in trouble – were by students who feel *self-confidence* (Schwartz and Ben David 1976; Shotland and Goodstein 1984; Shotland and Stebbins 1980). With the help of another person, Mathieu stopped a fight between two travelers in the RER B. These interventions bear witness to the confidence these students feel when faced with some violent situations. As opposed to *fragility*, the interpretation in terms of *self-confidence* rests on a strong feeling of perceived control and often on low perceived consequences. Conversely, it is not necessarily tied to a low perceived likelihood of being a victim of an attack, or rather of an attempted attack.

Tranquility

The interpretation in terms of *tranquility* is based on one major split, opposing individuals targeted by presumed assailants and those who are not. The individuals closest to this type consider themselves to belong to a social and/or cultural category running a low risk of victimization. In addition to the concept of *attractivity* developed by Van der Wurff et al. (1989), this interpretation also refers to Matza's notion of *denial of the victim*. According to this researcher, choice of victims is not random, and some individuals are *de facto* spared by their geographic or social proximity to delinquents (Matza 1964).

Some of our respondents seem to have deeply interiorized this social logic. Karim, for instance (22, Oise) feels that the dress, social and cultural codes he shares with potential aggressors considerably reduces his probability of being a victim of these individuals.

I think that people who commit attacks are maybe people who have a friend, brother, cousin, or uncle like me, in the same situation I'm in, Arab, with a beard [...] dressed like me, maybe a student. So I think that psychologically [aggressors] will maybe tend to think: no, I won't touch those people, because it is as if I was touching a member of my community, so I'll avoid that, and I'll look for someone else. I think that is what is going on in those aggressors' minds.

Dounia (20, Val d'Oise), in turn, speaks of a possible solidarity between all those who are *stigmatized*.

I don't know whether the fact that we're all Arabs will create solidarity, maybe so, maybe not. But I hope so all the time, because I say to myself: between people who are stigmatized, well, even a black, even a white person

from the suburbs,¹³ you know, with all the gear of suburban youths, I think that creates... not a class consciousness, I wouldn't go that far, but you know that you're part of a stigmatized group, and that creates solidarity.

These statements clarify the structure of the interpretation in terms of *tranquility*, the basis of which is the opposition between those who belong to the same social and cultural group as the aggressors (to which the respondents claim to belong) and those who do not (potential victims). Because he thinks that attackers *are all of foreign descent* and he himself comes from Algeria, Karim feels [he has] *less of a risk of being attacked, robbed or beaten than a person of French descent*. Dounia has similar feelings. For this young woman, attacks are aimed at people outside of the broad social and cultural group composed of *stigmatized suburban people*:

An Arab doesn't feel threatened in S¹⁴ [...] we show the stigma, we aren't going to be afraid, you see what I mean? We're the bad guys, we aren't going to be afraid of bad guys. (Dounia, 20, Val d'Oise)

However, this interpretation is by no means shared by all respondents from immigrant families. Seydou (21, Seine-Saint-Denis), although brought up in a Muslim home and originating from Mali, avoids contact with young *Black and Arab* youths in his neighborhood whenever possible, for he disapproves and fears their behavior. This young man, who had arrived in France two years ago when the interview took place, said he had difficulty understanding the reason for such behavior, judged disrespectful, which is in strong contrast with the attitudes he was accustomed to among young people in Mali. Thus, the interpretation in terms of *tranquility* rests less on objective properties (cultural, social or religious features shared with supposed aggressors) than on the conviction of having some cultural and social codes in common with those individuals (Lupton, 1999). Command of these codes, described by Dounia as the *gear of suburban youths*, is what brings one close to supposed aggressors and simultaneously averts their predatory acts.

Fragility, Self-confidence, Tranquility: different ways of perceiving safety

In summary, *fragility, self-confidence* and *tranquility* are based on a specific relation to oneself and to supposed aggressors. In the first case we find the absence of perceived disorders and threatening experiences, and by extension, the conviction that few potential aggressors are present. The second is based on the impression that one can confront aggressors, believed not to be very threatening, while the third rests on the conviction that one will not be the target of supposed aggressors because one shares their cultural and social codes.

In the last analysis, these interpretations are clearly contained in the two models of perception of disorders and perceived vulnerability. *Fragility, self-confidence* and *tranquility* are born of specific arrangements of the cognitive concepts relative to these models. *Fragility* is based on the absence of perceived disorders and a low perceived likelihood of victimization. Conversely, interpretations in terms of *self-confidence* and *tranquility* rest on the perception of disorders. However, these disorders are not assessed as threatening (Carvalho and Lewis 2003). A strong feeling of control and a slight apprehension of consequences are characteristic of the interpretation in terms of *self-confidence*, whereas the impression of low attractiveness and slight evil intent (Van der Wurff et al. 1989) structure the interpretation in terms of *tranquility*.

Thus, the results of analysis of relationship by opposition (ARO) show the plurality of ways of perceiving safety. The findings are of two sorts. First, they confirm the relevancy of existing cognitive concepts, including those least often used such as those developed by Van der Wurff et al. (1989), for the comprehension of the different types of perception of safety. Secondly they provide a better understanding of how these cognitive concepts combine in different structures, leading to the emergence of different interpretations.

Interpretative Mechanisms

On the other hand, this analysis says nothing about the situational or dispositional nature of these interpretations. The question is whether *fragility, self-confidence* and *tranquility* are stable attributes, in other words whether they are properties attached to individuals, or whether they are temporary attributes more directly connected to particular situations. The results of our interviews did not enable us to come to any categorical conclusion. On the one hand, the narratives show that situations are constantly reevaluated by the respondents. But on the other hand, all of the respondents do not have the same probability of interpreting a same situation in any given way. We are obliged to

¹³ In France, the suburbs are the urban areas surrounding a large city. Since the mid-1970s, some of these areas have become impoverished. The expression « suburban youth » is a euphemism designating youths, often of immigrant origins, from the poorest neighborhoods.

¹⁴ A district in a suburb close to northern Paris, whose population is 36.5% immigrant.

acknowledge to coexistence of situational and dispositional properties within the interpretative mechanism (Gabriel and Greve 2003; Noble 2016, 2019).

This section is entirely devoted to the study of these two properties and the relation between them. The first part looks at situations and the effects of their features on the perception of safety. It emphasizes the synchronic dimension of the phenomenon; in other words, the role played by the *present, immediate* situation in its interpretation. The second part focuses on the role of past experiences in the way a given situation is interpreted. It stresses the diachronic dimension involved in interpreting, and therefore the *origin* of incorporated dispositions, or in other words, the historical nature of tendencies to perceive a given situation in a certain way. In view of the findings, the third part attempts to reconcile these two dimensions, synchronic and diachronic, with emphasis on the influence of situations on dispositions and on the plasticity of the latter.

Interpretations in actual situations...

Until the early 1990s, with very few exceptions (Merry 1981), the study of fear of crime was based exclusively on quantitative findings. Documented through a single question, fear of crime was viewed as a stable, static disposition, interiorized by certain individuals and not by others (Lupton 1999; Pain 2000). However, the rise of qualitative research greatly helped to deconstruct this definition. These studies, revealing the existence of temporal, spatial and social contexts conducive to the emergence of worries (Bannister 1993; Lupton 1999; Nasar et al. 1993; Pain 1993; Sanco 1990; Valentine 1990) showed the *temporary, situational* nature (Fattah and Sacco 1989, p. 211) of this social phenomenon. Thus, fear of crime is not static, it is dynamic. It arises when a situation is judged to be threatening (Chataway et al. 2017; Solymosi et al. 2015). Conversely, situations in which the presence of aggressors is judged quite improbable, those in which the person feels capable of defending his/herself, or those in which one does not consider oneself a potential target are interpreted, respectively, in terms of *fragility, self-confidence* or *tranquility*. So these interpretations are not attached to individuals, they fluctuate with the situations they encounter. A modification of the situation – in other words a particular arrangement of the elements present at a specific time – leads to a reassessment and possibly a completely different interpretation of that new situation. The results of our interviews clearly corroborate this. Caroline (21, Paris) for instance, explains that she *never felt much fear of crime in [her] daily use* of public transportation. However, she does feel apprehension *during unusual travels, especially at night and especially in S.*¹⁵ Dimitri (21, Seine-Saint-Denis) expresses a similar feeling. According to him, daytime travels *are really not a problem*, as opposed to travel in the evening, when you must be *more on guard*. Here, the assessment of a situation as being safe is strictly dependent on the real or supposed absence of individuals thought to be threatening (*fragility*), as Ilona (20, Seine-Saint-Denis) says in this excerpt:

Really, its astonishing, you change subway lines, and everyone is well dressed, nice, and then you take the train towards the N. train station¹⁶ and poof!¹⁷, it's groups like that.

Similarly, Réda (22, Paris) associates the dangerousness of some stations and stops on the francilien transportation network with the presence of potential aggressors. Thus, the C. station¹⁸ is depicted as *the hangout of suburban youths* and the N. Station as a place for illegal transactions, frequented by *drug addicts* and their dealers. Conversely, the small Parisian stations such as G.¹⁹ – scarcely affected by this type of takeover – are characterized as charming and calm:

G., where there are poems posted on the wall, is something else. There was even a book exhibit on one side, you don't want to leave the station. Actually, when I happened to go there, I missed my train, and I was in no hurry to take the next one, so I took a look, I was somewhat curious, that's it.

Interpretations in terms of *self-confidence* and *tranquility* are not attached to the individual either. Like *fragility*, these interpretations depend mostly on the situations encountered. Alexis (20, Seine-et-Marne) tells an anecdote showing how true that is:

¹⁵ A district in a suburb close to northern Paris.

¹⁶ A large Paris station.

¹⁷ A Norwegian girl living in France in order to study when the interview was done, the respondent repeatedly used the expression *chav* to qualify groups of individuals she sees as threatening.

¹⁸ A Paris subway station located in the 1st *arrondissement*.

¹⁹ A Paris subway station located in the 6th *arrondissement*.

I was reading a book, and then I felt a jolt on the book. It was a woman, I think, but I'm not quite sure, at any rate the person was wearing a skirt, high heels, make-up, the accent and the size suggested maybe it wasn't a woman, but let's say it was, and who started to say: yeah, stop reading, that's for fags. I didn't know what to do, it was improbable, [...] so I told her: you're out of your mind, [then she] said to me: no, stop saying that or I'll clout you. I thought to myself: oh boy, you'd better leave, you'd better go, because it's not worth the trouble.

Following this story, the young man continued, with specifics:

I wasn't afraid then, because I'm OK, in case of a physical confrontation, I know some judo, there wasn't any problem... I can take care of myself.

Caroline (21, Paris) reports a similar experience. During a trip on the subway, she had to deal with *an old lady somewhat flabbergasted*, who was pushing everyone so she could get on the train. The respondent told her *kindly* to let people get off first, so as to avoid jostling. Following that remark, *she began to raise her voice a bit*, and the old lady began to speak increasingly *incoherently*. All in all, the girl found that anecdote *more amusing than anything else*.

These two anecdotes, depicting an elderly woman and a cross-dresser in the role of the attacker, show how one's relation to oneself and more specifically one's physical capability are defined in situation. The feeling of control, then, is not an immanent attribute, reserved for individuals who have practiced the martial arts since their earliest childhood, but an interpretation which emerges in situation at the intersection of two cognitive evaluations: the physical strength ascribed to the potential aggressor and one's own estimated ability to deal with it. The feeling of loss of control (Brownlow 2005; Day et al. 2003) and the shadow of powerlessness (Fisher and May 2009; May 2001a, 2001b) correspond exactly to this definition: everyone is susceptible of experiencing fear of crime whenever a situation is felt to be out of control.

Last, the interpretation in terms of *tranquility* is no exception here. It is always the result of a dynamic adjustment resting on the present, immediate situation. While she was waiting for her train in mid-afternoon on her way to the university, Sofia (21, Essonne) was approached by *some scum [three girls]*, who soon *became aggressive*. In *petit-bourgeois dress* at the time of the incident, the respondent attempted to break with the image of a possible target by showing them that she was prepared to fight back. To do so, she *began to use the same expressions* as her antagonists, to show that *despite [her] appearance, [she] came from the same milieu* and that the situation *did not impress [her]*. Sofia's efforts during the interaction were aimed at modifying the image she imparted, to show that she was not a *petite-bourgeoise, a little rich girl who is just riding around*, but a girl *like them* (the aggressors), who *is proficient in their language* and more generally their codes, and *[making] them understand that if they wanted a fight, it was not a problem*. The respondent finally managed to get out of the interaction unharmed and with the cell phone that the three girls had attempted to steal. But what is most interesting is Sofia's explanation of the causes of the quarrel. According to her, those three girls would never have approached her in that way if she had been wearing more ordinary clothes:

Dressed like I am today, with a large sweat and jeans, bah, first, I would have been stopped by the police, that's no joke, it's true, I've seen it, and second, I think that maybe they (the aggressors) would have come over, but in another spirit, they would have seen the situation more as between equals: why is she looking at me? I'm going to tangle with her, where does she come from? She's not from my neighborhood... that's it. [Then] the way I was dressed, I looked sort of like an outsider in fact, so that's it, I think that if they did come, they would have come differently, but the chances are very good that they wouldn't have come.

Sofia feels that she changed the way she was perceived by her young aggressors by wearing clothing ascribed to a different, in fact higher, social class. Whereas if she had worn a large sweatshirt and jeans the three girls would have identified her as belonging to their own social group, and therefore as someone you don't attack (*the chances are very good that they wouldn't have come*) the fact of looking *classy, with nice clothes, a rather expensive handbag, with her hair well done and good make-up* seems to have identified her as a potential target. This is why even the interpretation in terms of *tranquility* (which rests precisely on the conviction that one is not the target of supposed aggressors) depends entirely on the circumstances.

All in all, *fragility, self-confidence* and *tranquility* are not attached to individuals, they fluctuate with situations. In the sense that any modification in a situation leads to a reassessment which is always liable to a more or less radical modification of the specific relationship to oneself and to supposed aggressors that prevailed in the previous situation.

... influenced by past experiences

But if ways of perceiving safety are situationally produced, according to circumstances, the probability of interpreting a given situation in terms of *fragility*, *self-confidence* or *tranquility* is not the same for everyone. In other words, the way an individual interprets a situation cannot be explained by any single situational pattern. Such a synchronic dimension would suffice if all individuals shared the same assessment of a context or a given situation. Now, a same *stimulus* can be given different interpretations (Carvalho and Lewis 2003; Farrall et al. 2009; Ferraro 1995; Innes 2004; Jackson 2004; Koskela and Pain 2000; Merry 1981; Noble 2016, 2019; Sampson and Raudenbush 2004; Tulloch 2000, 2003).

It is therefore important, in explaining ways of interpreting a given situation, to consider the individuals' past experiences, sedimented in them in the form of dispositions (Gabriel and Greve 2003; Noble 2016, 2019). Our interviews find that individuals are never "socially immaculate" when entering a social interaction: each person carries along the product of his or her past experiences, which orient the interpretation of present situations. Thus, when past threatening experiences are linked to specific contexts, later trips in the same contexts are never again interpreted in terms of *fragility* (at least as long as that link remains active). Deborah (22, Seine-Saint-Denis), for example, explains that she avoids using public transportation at night, whenever possible, and justifies the fact by an anxiety-producing experience: *sometimes I happened to go home at 11 P.M., and I already was annoyed, and all, and I don't like that*. Hugo (22, Seine-Saint-Denis) told of similar experiences to justify the perceived risk of victimization in situations where he is alone:

When there's no-one around it's a little less reassuring, when there are fewer people, that happened to me a few times to come upon people who've been drinking and who start banging on the subway.

Conversely, contexts interpreted in terms of *fragility* have never led to the slightest experience felt to be threatening in the past, be it one experienced, observed or reported by a third person. The expression *nothing to fear*, used twice by Alexis (20, Seine-et-Marne) in the excerpt below shows this to be true:

We were at [the] E.²⁰ station toward ten in the morning... there were a lot of people on the tracks, so nothing to fear, and around me there were only people... women, old people, people reading... nothing to fear.

Similarly, the probability of interpreting a situation in terms of *self-confidence* is closely tied to individuals' past experiences. Training in a martial art conveys a better mastery of one's emotions and teaches physical skills which increase that probability.

It (knowing judo) mostly has an impact on my self-control, in fact, I know how to respond if I'm provoked without directly using my fists. But it's reassuring, it's also reassuring to know that you can defend yourself (Abdel, 20, Seine-et-Marne).

The belief that *one can defend oneself* is further reinforced in individuals who have experienced an attempt at victimization and who chased their assailants by resisting. Or, similarly, for respondents who witnessed an aggression or a theft perpetrated by aggressors they judged not very threatening.

Once, I remember, I was in my high school, I looked out the window and I saw a man get robbed... an old man, I think it was his cell phone and it was two little kids about 10-11 years old and they ran off, and so, physically, that doesn't worry me much. (Pierre, 18, Val d'Oise).

Last, past experiences play as great a role for interpretation in terms of *tranquility*. When they are judged well-meaning, experiences with supposed aggressors tend to reinforce the assurance that one is not a potential target for them. In the following excerpt, Dounia (20, Val d'Oise) shows how interactions of this sort participate in the construction of a feeling of belonging to a particular social or cultural group and at the same time decreases the perception of risking victimization by people from that group:

I'll tell you frankly, as an Arab wearing a veil, I think that if something happens to me, I know there are young Arabs around who will protect me. At the N. station I was demonstrating for Palestine and there was a black, completely drunk... who said: yeah, all those Arabs again with their Palestine, and I went: what's your problem? Why do you say that? And then other Arabs went: yeah, what's going on there? You know, just Arabs who hang

²⁰ An RER station located in a suburb at the southern tip of the region.

around at the N. station, you don't know what they're doing there. And when he saw the scene... the other guy ("the black, completely drunk") split, he didn't try to understand. Really, there's a sort of solidarity that was established, very fast.

Whereas those groups of youths from underprivileged ethnic minorities *who hang around at the N. station* elicit apprehension in several of our respondents,²¹ their presence is interpreted by Dounia in terms of *tranquility*. Far from feeling threatened, the young woman in fact explains that she can count on being protected by them. This conviction is based on singular past experiences which lead her to feel she does not run any risk when such groups of youths are present.

To understand how a situation is interpreted, it is important, then, to look at the context upstream of the situation, and more specifically at the dispositions incorporated by each individual; in other words, the internalized outcome of past experiences which a person carries along into the present situation and which allows him or her to interpret that situation in a given way (Lahire 2012). For this reason, investigation cannot exclude the diachronic dimension which focuses on the origins of these dispositions, barring which there can be no explanation of the manner in which present situations are interpreted.

Dispositions shaped by situations

Fragility, self-confidence and tranquility, then, are at the crossroads of situations and dispositions. Each of these two elements – the present context and the incorporated past – affects the way individuals perceive safety at a given time. It remains for us to discover how situations and dispositions are articulated.

In the two previous sections we have shown that interpretations are transient, fluctuating with the situation, but at the same time that individual dispositions absolutely must be taken into account if we are to understand how a situation is interpreted. Now, in point of fact, use of the concept of disposition raises the question of its articulation with situations. Indeed, if dispositions are the internalized product of past experiences, then situations may be viewed from two different angles: as the framework activating dispositions or as the framework in which individuals are socialized (Lahire 2012). Most work on dispositions respond to this dilemma by minimizing the socializing role of present situations. It is as if past experiences had had a greater socializing effect than present experiences, which in turn would be more apt to activate previously internalized dispositions.²² Consequently, this position considers propensities to be rigid: Bourdieu (1980) defines *habitus* as a system of *lasting, transposable* dispositions.

The outcome of our interviews shows the opposite: that dispositions are malleable. Tendencies to interpret a given situation in a certain way are neither immanent properties (they are not attached to the individual) immutable (they are not permanent) or transposable (they do not apply to each and every situation encountered). Such would be the case if individuals lived in extremely stable social environments. If that were true, external contexts – which would be very much all the same – would involve permanent, transposable dispositions. But in actual fact, individuals are faced with fleeting, heterogeneous situations, especially so in public transportation. Dispositions, shaped by past experiences, are constantly modified by the new situations encountered. A distinction is required, then, between *variations* and *changes* in interpretation.

Variations in interpretations correspond to the non-transposability of dispositions. They are observed when interpretations differ from one situation to another because of notably different situational or contextual features. Before coming to live in Île-de-France, Dounia (20, Val d'Oise) lived in the Hauts-de-France, a region north of the Île-de-France region. For this veiled woman, the move led to a change in travel contexts and especially in the behavior of other travelers toward her.

In the provinces, it's different, people looked at me but it was racist looks [...]. I never was looked at as intensely as in my provincial town... especially where I was living, it was heavy, very, very heavy.

In public transportation in the Hauts-de-France Dounia had to deal with a *middle class* who had *its little house in the provinces* and who *was not accustomed* to the presence of a Muslim population. In this situation, faced with the insistent stares that constantly reminded her of her social and cultural distance from local people, interpretation in terms of *tranquility* is absolutely impossible. Whereas in Île-de-France, in contact with a much larger Muslim population and through experiences felt to be well-meaning with people who might be thought to be potential aggressors, interpretation in terms of *tranquility* is much more feasible. Thus, these two situations lead to different

²¹ See the remarks of Ilona and Réda, quoted above.

²² This is particularly true of Bourdieu's *habitus*. If primary socializing is decisive in the construction of the *habitus*, this is much less true of secondary socialization. In adulthood, the influence of socializing structures is limited by the principle of the conservation of the *habitus* which induces individuals to resist and to experience a crisis, but not to change.

social experiences which in turn fashion different dispositions. And this is why the chances for each of these two dispositions to be transposable of the other situation are slight.

Furthermore, the *changes* in interpretation have to do with the fact that dispositions are not fixed once and for all (non-immutability). They are seen when a same situation is interpreted differently because the propensity has changed. Maeva (20, Seine-et-Marne), who arrived in the Paris area recently to attend the university, reports that her mother made several recommendations to her as to how to avoid any aggressions in public transportation there. But all that advice was first received very selectively by the young woman, who claimed the right to make her own decisions as to what precautions to take. While this respondent explains that she pays close attention to her belongings, she refuses to be distrustful of travelers who wish to communicate with her, as her mother would like. This refusal to obey indicates a low perceived risk of victimization during this type of interaction.

No, I don't respect that, because it's generally tourists, or people who're asking me for directions, or what train to take [...], so I answer.

But this respondent's attention to that recommendation changed after she experienced an anxiety-producing situation. In a subway station, the young woman was approached by an older man who had been drinking. Thinking that the man was asking for information, she neared him and began a conversation. Very soon, the stranger's speech and behavior made her very uncomfortable, and she vainly attempted to get out of the interaction. After a short while, another traveler intervened and put an end to the aggressor's doings. After that experience the young woman reconsidered her mother's advice, and admitted she had *made a mistake* when she encouraged interaction with that man.

That same evening I called my mother, I told it all to her and I said: maybe I'll listen to you now when you give me advice.

While interactions with strangers were felt to be harmless until then, they are now the object of greater caution, especially in the case of drunken men. The tendency to interpret such situations in terms of *fragility* has been greatly modified. Maeva now tends to perceive situations in which men seek contact as dangerous: *if it's old men who want to talk, in general [...] that's a little frightening.*

In short, dispositions are not fixed, permanent properties, but perceptive tendencies sensitive to the situational contexts and to the action of other travelers. Dispositions are shaped by past experiences, and tend to be consolidated and corroborated when the arrangement of contextual elements and the behavior of individuals in specific situations occur in a way that corresponds to pre-existing "social expectations". Conversely, they tend to be deactivated (variation), to be weakened or to be transformed (change) when the pattern of the situation is modified. Therefore, the lasting nature of a disposition should not be sought in individuals, but rather in their relations with past, present and future situations. In other words, if a disposition is retained, it is because new situated experiences corroborate – or at least do not prove wrong – the tendency to interpret that situation in a given way.

CONCLUSION

The present paper studies the perception of the risk of victimization from the angle of perceptions of safety. Based on the many concepts developed in models of the perception of disorders and of perceived vulnerability, it supports the hypothesis that the perception of safety is not a homogenous phenomenon which can be understood simply through a graded scale of perception, but a complex one which rests on different interpretative registers. Verification of this hypothesis requires a twofold demonstration: the first involves the identification of the plurality of interpretations, and the description of their outlines and structures; the second – supposing that the first is demonstrated – requires that we comprehend the nature of these interpretations, in other words that we analyze and understand how they arise and change.

This research is based on some thirty interviews of students from a university in a suburb close to Paris. Public transport, studied here, is one of the most anxiety-producing settings in Île-de-France and therefore represents an appropriate environment in which to examine the different ways of perceiving safety. Data analysis, using an analysis of relationship by opposition (ARO), leads to the establishment of a typology articulated around three types of interpretation. Each of these interpretative registers rests on a specific relationship to oneself and to supposed aggressors: *fragility* is based on the absence of any perceived disorder or anxiety-producing situation; *self-confidence* is the feeling that one can face up to assailants, who are not judged too threatening; and *tranquility* is the belief that one is not the target of supposed attackers. On the one hand, these findings are consolidated by the fact that they mobilize many cognitive concepts established in the models of perception of disorders and perceived vulnerability. On the other hand, they provide a better understanding of the combination of these different concepts and therefore

of the structure of relations specific to each interpretation. In other words, the contribution of this construction is not located in its material – all identified previously – but in the way they are organized, structured in specific patterns, leading to different ways of perceiving safety.

However necessary, this analysis is nonetheless insufficient. Although it enables us to identify various registers of interpretation and to describe their structures, it says nothing about how these interpretations arise and/or change. The interpretative mechanism must therefore be sought elsewhere; that is, in the study of the situational and dispositional properties of *fragility*, *self-confidence* and *tranquility*. Close analysis of the interviews first shows the role of these two properties in the interpretation process. On the one hand, reference to situations is essential inasmuch as interpretation is always dependent on the particular conjunction of elements defining the situation. Consequently, the slightest modification of that conjunction leads to a reevaluation which may always modify the current interpretation. On the other hand, it is equally essential to refer to dispositions for the comprehension of why a person interprets a given situation in a particular way. Explaining the interpretation of a situation in terms of *fragility*, *self-confidence* and *tranquility* is only possible in reference to individuals' past experiences, sedimented in them in the form of dispositions. This consideration of the synchronic and diachronic dimensions of the interpretative phenomenon then clarifies the articulation between situations and dispositions. Contrary to the theses advanced by several dispositionalists, our findings point to the plasticity of propensities. These are not permanent, transposable properties. Rather, they are perceptive tendencies, constantly *in the making*, permeable to contextual patterns and to the behavior of individuals in situation.

In conclusion, the findings presented in this paper encourage the extension of research in two directions.

First, they incite us to pursue work on the perception of safety and the plurality of its interpretations. Analysis of relationship by opposition (ARO) is used to bring together interview extracts with similar social logics. By definition, the resulting typologies are characterized by little “intra-class” variations and strong “inter-class” differences. This little “intra-class” variations are the *sine qua non* condition for the establishment of any typology. First of all, they enable the identification of the interpretative mechanism at work in each class. Next, they make it possible to emphasize the differences between the classes. Nonetheless, future studies are required to study the effects of age, sex, ethnic/racial origins, social class or SPC on the experience of *fragility*, *self-confidence* or *tranquility*. There are three possible hypotheses. The first is that of consistent influence, in which case the sociodemographic variables play an essential role. Social workers who are in everyday contact with the most disadvantaged groups may, for example, feel that they are in a position to communicate with them. They then utilize a peculiar skill which would lead these workers to experience an original form of *self-confidence*. While perceived control, in the case of our students, rests exclusively on physical ableness, one may suppose that this cognitive assessment has other foundations in other social groups. The second hypothesis is that of a more complex influence, where the effect of socio-demographic variables is combined with the context. It is possible to envisage that *fragility* is experienced in the same way for all age groups during the day, but that the mere absence of perception of disorders is no longer enough for the elderly to experience this interpretation in the evening or at night. The third hypothesis is that sociodemographic variables have no influence. In a recent paper, Jacobsen (2022) shows, for instance, that the perceived probability of victimization varies considerably in different urban contexts, but there is very little inter-individual variation within the same context. Quite unexpectedly, she finds that men and women share extremely similar representations of the risk run within a same urban area. It would be important for future research to consider these different hypotheses so as to determine the precise role of sociodemographic variables in experienced *fragility*, *self-confidence* or *tranquility*. It must be said that the results of the present study, performed on a specific population group and in a specific environment, are not intended to be generalized. The extension of research to other groups and other settings may lead to the discovery of other interpretative registers. To explain fear of crime in urban residential neighborhoods, researchers include the model of decline/community concern (Conklin 1975; Jackson 2004; Lane 2002; Villareal and Silva 2006) or the model of collective efficacy (Sampson 2012) – in addition to the perception of disorder and of perceived vulnerability models. Now, the cognitive concepts developed within these theoretical models may contribute to the discovery of other ways of perceiving safety.

Further, the findings presented in this paper encourage the pursuit of research on the interpretative mechanisms, and more precisely on the way in which situations and dispositions interact. As shown by our review of the literature, research often takes one path or the other: some attempt to explain the general tendencies to perceive a risk of victimization (the dispositional dimension) while others study situations and the effects of their characteristics on the perception of risk (the situational dimension), but few look at the articulation between these two properties (Engström and Kronkvist 2018; Gabriel and Greve 2003). This is no doubt tied to the survey tools used, insufficiently adapted to consideration of the diachronic dimension. The vast majority of studies of fear of crime use transversal methods (a sample composed of respondents questioned only once) which do not show the dynamics of interactions between situations and dispositions. For this reason, some young researchers have recently encouraged the development of applications for smartphones, which make it possible to question respondents on the spot and repeatedly (Chataway et al. 2017; Solymosi et al. 2015). We in turn emphasize the importance of repeating

interviews at regular intervals, so that respondents may give precise indications as to their most recent experiences. The aim is similar in the two cases: use of longitudinal methods (a same group of respondents questioned on several occasions) to achieve a better understanding of how dispositions are shaped, reinforced and transformed (change), are activated or deactivated (variation) as a result of new experiences in situation.

APPENDIX

Table 1 : Comparison of figures for the study group and the university of recruitment in 2015 (%)

	Survey figures	University figures
Age		
18	17,20	7,99
19	17,20	12,32
20	20,70	13,23
21	20,70	11,86
22	20,70	10,27
23	0,00	7,76
24	0,00	6,39
25	3,50	4,79
26 or over	0,00	25,39
Sex		
Male	44,80	42,10
Female	55,20	57,90
Parents' SPC		
Manager or higher intellectual prof.	20,70	18,60
Intermediate professional	17,20	9,50
Employee	32,80	12,70
Worker	3,40	13,60
Crafts or business person	6,90	6,30
Retired	3,40	20,70
Unemployed and other non-working	12,10	
Not given	0,00	18,30
Scholarship holder		
Yes	48,30	42,30
No	51,70	57,70
Place of birth		
France	93,10	73,40
Île de France	59,30	non communiqué
province	37,00	non communiqué
French overseas <i>département</i>	3,70	non communiqué
Abroad	6,90	26,60
Maghreb	50,00	37,80
Europe	0,00	13,90
Africa (other than Maghreb)	50,00	28,00
America	0,00	3,60

	Survey figures	University figures
Asia	0,00	16,60
other	0,00	0,10
Area of residency, by département		
Seine Saint Denis 93	44,80	35,10
Val d'Oise 95	13,80	16,70
Paris 75	13,80	12,30
Hauts de Seine 92	3,40	5,60
Seine et Marne 77	10,30	5,30
Val de Marne 94	6,90	5,90
Yvelines 78	0,00	2,10
Essonne 91	3,40	2,30
France (other than IDF)	3,40	10,50
Type of housing		
Parent's home	58,60	71,30
Own home	41,40	28,70
Total	29 people	21 914 people

Source : CAPAG

Field : University

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