# Experiencing and governing safety in the night-time economy: Nurturing the state of being carefree

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## ARTICLE INFO

## ABSTRACT

Against a background of widespread academic and policy interest in fear and security in urban consumption spaces across the Global North this paper explores subjective experiences of safety and the way these may be (un)affected by CCTV and on-street policing. Adopting a phenomenological perspective and drawing on the narratives of nightlife consumers in three Dutch cities (Utrecht, Rotterdam, Groningen), we propose to conceptualise safety as a range of 'meta-stable' experiential states. In the first and basic state we termed 'absorptive coping', nightlife consumers interact with the world as if on auto-pilot and are carefree; they are unconcerned about their safety and experience no trouble or worries. This state is suspended when consumers become 'on the alert'. 'Actual danger' occurs when consumers perceive one or more individuals with the intention to do harm. We find that surveillance and policing practices can induce and affect transitions between the identified states. CCTV has marginal effects in this regard; on-street policing is more effective in preventing the states of being on the alert or actual danger and in shifting consumers back to absorptive coping. Yet, police presence and practices can also be counter-productive, triggering unease in consumers and suspending absorptive coping. Implications for the surveillance and policing of urban consumption spaces are outlined.

## 1. Introduction

Across the Global North safety and fear have become pervasive aspects of both everyday life and urban policy (Ball et al., 2012; Pain and Smith, 2008). Influential among policy-makers in the current era are the ideas that residents and consumers are attracted more easily to city centres that are lively and safe, and that lack of safety is an impairment that harms city-centre economies (Coleman, 2004; Helms et al., 2007; Kern, 2010; Raco, 2003). As a result, local urban policy has become increasingly focused on repressing crime and incivilities through surveillance and policing (Bannister and Fyfe, 2001; Bannister et al., 2006; Ball et al., 2012): more extensive closed-circuit television (CCTV) surveillance, more police officers on the street and the criminalisation of what are perceived to be 'anti-social' behaviours are strategies than have been adopted in many city-centres. One of the unintended consequences of this orientation towards repression is that it suggests disorder and incivilities are somehow the norm in city-centre spaces, thereby unintentionally helping to reinforce moral panics and discourses on crime and uncivilised behaviour. Furthermore, it is unclear if, and to what extent experiences of fear and lack of safety are integral to persons' lived experiences of public and private-spaces in city-centres.

Criminologists, feminist geographers and others have long since studied fear of crime, providing critically important insight into its extent and triggers (e.g. Bromley and Stacey, 2012; Ferraro and LaGrange, 1987; Hale, 1996; Johansson et al., 2012; Koskela and Pain, 2000; Pain, 1997, 2000, 2001, 2009; Rebotier, 2011; Whitzman, 2007). We are nonetheless also drawn to recent work on safety which, as a concept, is somewhat broader and foregrounds more positive intensities and a sense of well-being in everyday situations (Bromley and Stacey, 2012; Fleuret and Atkinson, 2007; Lindgren and Nilsen, 2012; Pain and Smith, 2010; Pain and Townshend, 2002). It thus helps to move "the analytic framework out of its hegemonic order-centred and fear-centred fix" (Hutta, 2009: 258). In other words, such an approach to safety provides an opportunity to 'contextualize' fears and worries against a background of other (positive) experiences rather than immediately dissecting those fears and worries, and enables a rethinking of preventative and repression-oriented safety interventions in city-centre spaces.

In this paper we probe and explore experiences of safety by adopting a phenomenological perspective, and consider how those

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experiences are (un)affected by CCTV surveillance and on-street visibility of police officers. In doing so, we draw on in-depth interviews with urban nightlife consumers in the Dutch cities of Rotterdam, Utrecht and Groningen. We focus on safety at night-time for two reasons. Firstly, affective experiences in urban spaces are intensified at night compared to day-time because "perceptions of the 'hours of darkness' as a time of danger, fear, crime and sin seem to be persistent and deeply embedded components" in Euro-American culture (Hobbs et al., 2003: 44). Moreover, districts in which bars, clubs and other nightlife premises are concentrated are often emotionally charged spaces at night-time, offering many opportunities for transgression of social norms that are taken for granted during day-time (Hubbard, 2005; Williams, 2008). Secondly, discourses of city-centres as spaces of binge drinking, substance use, uncivilized behaviour and disorder have increased considerably over the past decade, leading to further concerns over safety and the intensification of, among others, CCTV surveillance and on-street policing (Crawford and Flint, 2009; Jayne et al., 2011; Roberts and Eldridge, 2009). Although CCTV surveillance and on-street policing are part of a larger repertoire of surveillance and regulatory interventions, we focus on their potential safety effects as they have gained considerable attention in the academic literature as techniques through which local governments seek to increase subjectively experienced safety (Hadfield et al., 2009; Sparks et al., 2001; Yarwood, 2007). Moreover, in the cities of Rotterdam, Utrecht and Groningen CCTV surveillance and on-street policing occupy a central position in municipal 'Safe Nightlife' policies.[1] We appreciate that experiences of safety in public and private spaces are closely interlinked and are constitutive of each other (Whitzman, 2007) but concentrate on safety in public spaces in this paper as local policy discourses and measures tend to concentrate on those areas.

In what follows we argue that safety is to be understood as an on-going and pre-reflective absorptive coping with the world, as if on autopilot which is felt with and through the body, and during which persons are free of care, concern and worry. Only when this absorptive coping is disturbed, does a conscious subject emerge and are bodily feelings triggered that may be articulated verbally as emotions (as in 'I feel unsafe'). We also favour a different logic and rhetoric regarding (lack of) safety and surveillance in nightlife. While actual occurrences of danger and crime that disturb absorptive coping should be punished and prevented, it is equally — if not more — important to govern safety in city-centre consumption spaces, such as nightlife districts, in such ways that the carefree absorptive coping that we believe to be fundamental to the lived experience of safety is fully appreciated and nurtured. The remainder of this paper starts with a brief review of the literature on experiences of safety.

## 2. The experience of safety

### 2.1. Conceptualising safety

Albeit widely and easily used, the term safety is difficult to define. A first distinction is often made between objective and subjective safety. The former is about the occurrence of actual crime and is often measured through crime rates, rates of victimisation and statistical risk measures derived from such rates (Johansson et al., 2012; Pain, 2000). Subjective safety — the topic of this paper and henceforth referred to as safety — embraces a range of emotional and embodied sensations (Bannister and Fyfe, 2001; Bromley and Stacey, 2012; Hubbard, 2005; Johansson et al., 2012; Pain, 2000) that are not easily captured by quantitative indicators.

Safety is often defined as a double negative — that is, as the absence of a situation in which people feel unsafe — but definitions of this sort fail to capture the positive embodied sensations of safety in themselves. Given that the latter are difficult to put into words on their own terms, Hutta (2009) argues that metaphors and metonyms offer a vocabulary to flesh out more positive dimensions of the subjective-spatial experience of safety. He mobilizes the German term *Geborgenheit* which "evokes an immediately positive sense of sheltered-ness, nested-ness, and well-being", and exemplifies this by referring to being "snuggled up to a warm pony with winter skin, standing on a willow in the sun" (Hutta, 2009: 252 and 258). Whilst the Dutch 'geborgenheid' has the same connotations as its German counterpart, there is no equivalent term in English. For Hutta 'security' provides some semantic overlap but lacks or sidelines the connotations of sheltered-ness, nested-ness and well-being. An alternative way of articulating the positive experiences of safety is to mobilize the terms of 'comfort' and 'home'. On the basis of focus-group discussions with lesbians and gay men, Moran and Skeggs (2004: 84 and 86) argue that 'comfort' is a key term used by participants and "that the language of comfort plays a central role in the characterisation of safety and security" and that "home is comfort as an experience of location". Hence, humanistic interpretations of 'place' and 'home' in geography (Blunt and Dowling, 2006; Tuan, 1976) might also be used to express the embodied sensations associated with safety.

Hutta's understanding of *Geborgenheit* aligns with work in emotional geographies which understands emotion as "connective tissue that links experiential geographies of the human psyche and physique with(in) broader social geographies of place" (Davidson and Milligan, 2004: 524). This means that safety is relationally produced, and is constantly (re)configured and (re)negotiated as a transient and situational process, between the person and the particularities of place (Koskela and Pain, 2000; Waitt et al., 2011). These ideas can be developed further by drawing on recent work on affect and atmospheres (Adey et al., 2013; Anderson, 2009; Thrift, 2004). In so doing, we take safety in nightlife districts to be an affective quality that emanates "from the assembling of the human bodies, discursive bodies, non-human bodies, and all the other bodies that make up everyday situations" (Anderson, 2009: 80) and is spatiotemporally discharged in atmospheres. These atmospheres are always unfinished and open to be taken up into individuals' experience — "they require completion by the subjects that 'apprehend' them" (Anderson, 2009: 80).

### 2.2. Perceiving safety

Understanding safety as relational and in terms of atmospheres that are apprehended and taken up into individuals' experience, raises the question how perception works. Certain strands of phenomenological thought can help us to address this question. According to Merleau-Ponty (1962) experience tends to be 'mute and anonymous' (Crossley, 1995: 49): people are always open to the world that surrounds them through sensory experience but they are often neither consciously concerned with all they encounter nor are they aware of the process of perception or their role as perceiver. Perception in this sense is pre-reflective. For the most part it does not involve conscious thought and relies on rather crude, automatic and effortless information processing, aided by bio-cultural perceptual structures that are partly wired into

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[1] In the Netherlands 'Safe Nightlife' policies are a local government response to a number of severe incidents in Dutch nightlife districts. They are a form of nodal governance (Hadfield, 2008) in which the city council, the nightlife industry and the police collaborate with the aim of reducing violence and disorder in nightlife districts and enhancing consumers' experience of safety. Policy measures differ across cities but often include CCTV surveillance and on-street policing (Van Liempt and Van Aalst, 2012).