Sense of safety and the urban environment: A study of preadolescents and adolescents

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Abstract

The environment is a central part of people's life, identity and ability to maintain a sense of well-being and personal safety. The aim of this study is to investigate the feelings of safety/unsafety that arise from living in an urban environment and to link them with well-being and self-esteem during early and middle adolescence. Questionnaires were completed by 1637 students (809 males and 820 females) of an average age of 12.8.

Previous studies have shown a significant relationship between sense of safety and gender. In contrast, we found no evidence to support the assumption that self-esteem decreases in middle adolescence and is lower in girls. Findings support the usefulness of a transactional approach to investigating adolescents' sense of safety.

Key-words: sense of safety, adolescence, urban context, well-being, risk perception.

Sentido de seguridad y contexto urbano: una investigación sobre el preadolescente y el adolescente

Resumen

El ambiente es una parte central de la vida del individuo, identidad y capacidad de mantener un sentido de bienestar y de seguridad personal. El objetivo de este estudio es investigar las sensaciones de seguridad/inseguridad que surgen de la vida en el ambiente urbano y asociarlas al bienestar y a la autoestima durante la primera y media adolescencia. Los cuestionarios han sido terminados por 1637 estudiantes (809 hombres y 820 mujeres), cuya edad de promedio era de 12,8 años. Según la anterior investigación, hemos encontrado una relación significativa entre el sentido de seguridad y el género. En cambio, no hemos encontrado ninguna evidencia en el apoyo de la suposición de que

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la autoestima disminuya en la adolescencia media y de que sea más baja en las chicas. Los resultados apoyan la utilidad de un acercamiento transaccional en las investigaciones del sentido de seguridad del adolescente.

Palabras Clave: sentido de seguridad, adolescencia, contexto urbano, bienestar, percepción de riesgo.

Introduction

Recently the transactional and contextual approach to studying interaction between the individual and the environment has focused on molar units of analysis, overcoming the tendency to look at very specific and fragmented aspects of the residential environment. This approach recognizes the important role played by the affective and temporal dimensions in environmental experience (Bonaiuto, Aiello, Perugini, Bonnes, & Ercolani, 1999).

In environmental psychology more attention has been paid recently to the relationship between inhabitants and place of residence. If at first this relationship was examined in relation to the quality of the physical characteristics of the residential environment (architecture, urban and social planning), the current transactional perspective is looks more at meaningful units, focusing on aspects such as the appraisal of residential satisfaction or attachment to place – variables that create stability and security and defend personal identity (Brown & Perkins, 1992). According to Canter (1977), place is the result of relations between actions, conceptions and physical attributes – three interdependent factors which determine the specificity of a place.

The literature shows that *place attachment* (Altman & Low, 1992; Giuliani & Feldman, 1993) is weaker in areas where buildings are too big and unvarying, where there is a lack of green spaces, threatening people are around and where the educational, sporting and cultural facilities are inadequate, whereas it is stronger in quiet and accessible zones, where buildings have a pleasant appearance, when social relations are possible and when there are adequate local facilities and meeting places.

Starting from the definition of places as units of experience within which activities and physical forms combine (Canter, 1977), Twigger-Ross and Uzzell (1996) view *place identity* as an organic process in which the

place is inextricably linked with the development and maintenance of continuity of self.

Plas and Lewis (1996) have drawn on literature on urban planning and community psychology in an investigation of how architectural and design features can create a psychological sense of community in a planned leisure community.

Wandersman and Nation (1998) have characterized three models that investigate the specific connection between ecological context and individual health and well-being: the first model links atmospheric characteristics like noise, pollution and overcrowding to well-being and individual development; the second attributes importance to sociological factors (socioeconomic level, unemployment rate) and to the social structure of an area; the third focuses on the role of "incivilities" in residents' lives.

Perkins, Meek & Taylor (1992) divide incivilities into two categories: physical (such as the presence of abandoned houses, trash, deafening noises, writings on walls) and social (such as the fact that the district is one where drunks, gangs of young people, prostitutes and vagrants go around). These phenomena seem to have a particular role in determining citizens' sense of insecurity. The strong presence of both types of incivility can produce the perception of an unsafe atmosphere and consequently increase the fear of crime.

Sense of safety

Sense of safety is introduced in the literature as a multidimensional and complex construct because it presents on the one hand a distinctly psychological and subjective dimension founded in the individual's personality, while on the other hand it has social and objective dimensions grounded in ethical, legal and political factors. These two dimensions combine to link the private and the public, the subjective and the objective, and vice versa (Amerio, 1999, p. 20, our transl.).

Sense of safety, therefore, is a single concept that unites the objective risk of being involved in an act of aggression, the individual's perception of that risk and the personal assessment of vulnerability.

Recent theoretical contributions (Moser, 1995; Zani, 2003) have suggested that the feeling of insecurity is a multidimensional construct that is made up of three dimensions: one is cognitive (subjective

evaluation of the seriousness of the problems in the area), the second emotional (fear of being personally involved) and the third behavioural (coping strategies). The first dimension relates to the information and impressions the individual has about the situation in which s/he is involved, the second to the individual's feeling of unease about the environment, and, finally, the third has to do with any flight or avoidance strategies put into practice in the face of danger. Negative personal experiences increase insecurity in all these dimensions.

One point that has excited researchers' curiosity ever since the very first studies on this subject is the lack of a direct relationship between *objective insecurity* (the risk of victimization) and *subjective insecurity*. This is demonstrated, on the one hand, by the spread of a sense of insecurity that exceeds the statistical evidence, and, on the other, by the fact that people who feel more uncertain (women, the old) are not those who run a greater risk of being victims of episodes of crime. This last point is known in the literature under the name of victimization-fear paradox (Skogan & Maxfield, 1981).

Some authors have attempted an explanation in terms of indirect victimization: a person feels unsafe when s/he has information about incidents of crime that have happened to others through newspapers or conversations with family, friends or neighbours who have actually been victims of crime.

Another important aspect highlighted by the literature concerns the relationship between insecurity and fear of crime: on the one hand, there is the tendency to collapse the two concepts; on the other, it is thought that the risk of criminal victimization is only one of the factors that give rise to insecurity, which manifests itself in a wider and more generalized way, and also appears connected to other phenomena associated with living in an urban environment, such as the perception of physical characteristics, involvement in transgressive behaviours, the risk of incidents on the street and isolation.

Research on urban lack of safety has been carried out mostly on the adult and elderly population; little has been written about adolescence, whereas there is plenty of literature on other typical expressions of "malaise" in this age group, such as involvement in high-risk behaviour.

The introduction of an ecological vision of development (Brofenbrenner, 1986) has progressively led psychosocial research to ask

questions about the role of environmental and cultural variables in determining people's quality of life. Developmental contextualism has sought to describe various social systems that are associated with developmental problems or with the adaptive characteristics and the well-being of adolescents.

Having adequate information about the environment makes it easier to adopt strategies for coping effectively with situations and also makes it possible to try out paths towards autonomy, in particular in adolescence, that is, a period of life during which a sense of insecurity can lead to loss of confidence in one's own potential and resources. An individual's life environment is of great importance in the socialization process and can influence his/her path towards well-being or malaise.

Adolescence and the sense of safety in the urban context

As Bonino (2001) point outs, adolescence has recently been defined as a challenge that is full of opportunities and risks. On the one hand, these risks can be overcome by the adolescent through his own activities and decisions, and on the other hand by the rapidly changing social contexts that form the texture of his development (p. 44, our transl.).

In this context, Cohen and Siegel (1991), in defining the perspective of adolescent development, have pointed out different aspects of the social context: as social system, as physical environment and as temporal system.

In this view, adolescents' behaviour can be better understood if we consider the setting that characterizes their daily life: school, relationships with friends and family, neighbourhood, voluntary groups, religious or cultural associations.

Levine and Perkins (1987) think that the use of this view implies observing and interpreting social and individual problems, and paying special attention to interaction between environment and individual. Lewin (1951) suggested some time ago that the setting is as important as the person, and both must be analyzed in order to understand behavior.

From a promotional perspective, working on people's life context helps create environmental conditions that can support individual changes across time.

The model of development as action in context has given a considerable boost to research on adolescents, because it has

demonstrated that there is no single adolescent produced by childhood experiences and pubertal maturation, but there are multiple adolescents that face the developmental tasks typical of this age group in their different relative contexts in differentiated and personal ways (Blyth & Leffert, 1995; Ostrom, Lerner & Freel, 1995).

Greater autonomy and wider-reaching exploration of the environment also increase exposure to potentially risky situations, and this is a source of higher levels of personal and social insecurity. In this developmental phase the need to explore both self and environment becomes ever clearer and this expresses itself in a greater involvement in transgressive or risk behaviours. The social and relational world broadens in order to favour the process of identity construction and individuation from parents (Cicognani & Zani, 1999).

Recently, however, some authors (Ryan & Linch, 1989; Cicognani & Zani, 1999) have highlighted how psychological independence can be achieved without detaching oneself from one's parents, but rather inside close relationships characterized by vicinity, affective warmth and, increasingly, symmetry and exchange.

Inside processes that seem to produce levels of malaise characterized by anxiety and stress, some authors (Perkins, Meek & Taylor, 1992; Perkins & Taylor, 1996) have shown how the perception of living in an area that is not very safe can lead to a limitation in people's movements, changes in social relations and increasing conflicts between groups. The sense of insecurity is not necessarily connected to the existence of "objective" dangers but often varies according to subjective experiences or socio-demographic facts such as age, sex and social position. In a study by Farver, Ghosh and Garcia (2000) preadolescents who considered their neighbourhood "unsafe" felt worried and powerless – independently of whether this danger was real or imagined. The subjective perception of a threat to one's own safety raises levels of anxiety, vulnerability, stress and vigilance, thus undermining feelings of self-esteem and self-efficiency. Moreover, "uncertain" adolescents seem to have greater difficulty establishing and maintaining relationships with peers (Wallach, 1994).

Environmental psychology has considered the role of contexts in determining feelings of insecurity, introducing concepts like *place attachment* or *sense of community* and identifying them as factors that

can moderate the negative effect that poor, squalid metropolitan districts have on young people in terms of deviant behaviour, abuse and learning problems (Martinez, Black & Starr, 2002).

The literature about this subject has shown how density of ties, the feeling of being integrated into a community and attachment to place can lower the sense of insecurity and protect people from the consequences of fear (Freudenburg, 1986; Ross & Jang, 2000; Chipuer, 2001).

Feelings of environmental insecurity and lack of trust in other people can have a strong impact on perceived quality of life and the condition of general well-being in urban contexts.

Place attachments are not static; they change in accordance with changes in the people, activities or processes, and places involved in attachments. They are nurtured through continuing series of events that reaffirm humans' relations with their environment (Brown & Perkins, 1992, p.282).

In adolescence, a life phase that is full of disruptions, safety turns out to be one of the fundamental needs at a point in the life cycle characterized by particular vulnerability (Zani, Cicognani & Albanesi, 2001). However, only recently has the question been asked whether the sense of insecurity in the city context is a problem worthy of attention and interest, both at a theoretical level and with respect to actions to prevent or promote well-being.

The relationship that adolescents establish with their "ecological" life context is central and can influence their chances of an optimal development, because on the one hand it can represent a resource for development and on the other a danger to avoid. Worry about crime, in the adolescent age band, is associated with lower levels of social and relational skills, for example, increased distrust and suspicion towards other people, lowering of self-esteem, worsening of school performance and reduced sporting activity (Williams, Singh & Singh, 1994). However, the fear of victimization among adolescents is not only a question of fear of assault, but also fear of loss of control over one's life.

The literature sees the perception of lack of control as a typical feature of the sense of insecurity. Several studies confirm this hypothesis, demonstrating that individuals show a strong and unjustified sense of subjective immunity in family activities, an underestimation of risks or a belief that they are able to cope with known situations.

Insecurity and fear of crime are associated with a lack of informal social control, whether urban insecurity is seen as a consequence of the disappearance or weakening of widespread solidarity, or imputed directly to social disorganization (Zani, 2003, p.78).

Moreover, the non-predictability of a situation produces feelings of powerlessness, with the consequent perception on the part of the individual of not being able to control or predict the course of events inside his/her life context across time or space. Railway stations, city parks, waste land (so-called *non-places,* Augé, 1993) provoke feelings of abandonment and danger in adolescents, and they see these as the main places of insecurity.

Within the framework we have been describing particular attention has been paid to the relationship between the perception of insecurity and gender differences. Numerous studies (McGarrell, Giacomazzi & Thurman, 1997; Zani, Cicognani & Albanesi, 2001) have shown a deep-seated link between these two dimensions, emphasizing the point that males consider the city safer than females do and express *reasonable* fears and the feeling of being in a position to assume control attitudes. The position of women is different: they show higher levels of anxiety and fear. There is a widespread view among adolescents of both genders that girls must adopt more precautions because they are considered weaker, more vulnerable and more exposed to physical and sexual violence (Schafer, Huebner & Bynum, 2006).

According to some authors (Fisher & Sloan, 2003), women's greater apprehension could be connected to the influence exercised by fear of sexual victimization even when participants are invited to consider non-violent and non-personal crimes. Stanko (1995) considers sexual violence a central part of female identity, and this leads women to feel more unease than males about the physical and social environment.

Method

The present study is part of a research perspective shared with community psychology, health psychology and environmental psychology, disciplines that seek to construct paths towards well-being and analyze people in their life context. The issue of an urban sense of safety has become a priority on the current environmental agenda in both the scientific and the political field (Platt, 2004). However, studies on this

topic, as pointed out earlier, have generally neglected adolescence. For this reason the present study (which has also been a subject of discussion among the different local bodies that deal with minors) focuses on this age group.

Hypotheses

The aim of this study is to explore the sense of safety/unsafety in the urban context, self-esteem and well-being in a sample group of pre-adolescents and adolescents in a medium-sized city in northern Italy (Genoa). Four key hypotheses, formulated on the basis of the literature, underlie the study:

- sense of safety decreases with age and differs according to gender (Zani, Cicognani & Albanesi, 2001; McGarrell, Giacomazzi & Thurman, 1997);
- the feeling of safety is expected to be stronger in the neighbourhood context than in the city as a whole;
- self-esteem and well-being decrease with age and differ according to gender (Robins, Trzesniewski, Tracy, Gosling & Potter, 2002) and parents' level of education;
- there is a correlation between sense of safety, well-being and self-esteem.

Procedure

The same procedure was adopted for each class. The researcher handed out questionnaires in the classroom with the class teacher present. This helped to ensure uniformity of administration and eliminated the need to train teachers. Each student was given one copy of the survey instrument on his or her desk. The researcher read though all the instructions and, if necessary, reformulated the question in simpler terms. Students were allowed to ask for clarification about the questions and the researcher (not the teacher) answered such queries.

The students were informed that their answers would be confidential; participation was subject to parental consent.

The survey was carried out during the 2005/2006 school year.

Measures

The questionnaire was composed of the following instruments:
- Socio-demographic information schedule

- *Scale of sense of safety* (Migliorini, Zunino & Piermari, 2004). This scale provides a measure of the sense of safety that adolescents feel in the area where they live. The scale is divided in two different sections: the first part inquires about sense of safety in the city (1 item on a ten-point scale) and in the neighbourhood (1 item on a ten-point scale), the second part is focussed on sense of safety in the residence neighbourhood (12 items) and on the fear of victimization (1 item on a ten-point scale and a tick list of aggressive actions). The scale reveal three factors that explain 50.98% of the variance: Emotional Aspects, Relationships, Police and Adult Presence.
- The scale was developed from a qualitative survey carried out on adolescents in Genoa (Migliorini, Zunino & Piermari, 2004).
- *Rosemberg global self-esteem scales* (GSES, 10-items version, Rosemberg, 1965). This scale provides a measure of self-esteem, defined as the emotional value perceived by an individual; it consists of ten items answered along a four-point scale from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree". The scale has a Guttman scale reproducibility coefficient of 0.92 and a test-retest correlation of 0.85 (Linton & Marriott, 1996).
- *Vécu et Santé Perçue de Adolescent* (VSP-A, Simeoni, Sapin, Antoniotti & Auquier, 2001). The scale investigates various dimensions of quality of life: vitality, physical and psychological well-being, relations with teachers, relations with parents, relations with friends, school performance, body image and leisure activities. Each item was answered on a 5-point Likert scale, anchored at the ends from 1 ("not at all/never") to 5 ("very much/always"). The time frame used was the previous 4 weeks. The test is consistent (Cronbach alpha 0.74–0.91). Content and construct validity are good. (Sapin, Simeoni, El Khammar, Antoniotti & Auquier, 2005)

Subjects

Twenty schools in the urban area of Genoa (Italy) were involved and 1637 students (820 females and 809 males), aged between 10 and 17 years, participated in this study.

Results

Table 1 summarizes means, medians and standard deviations of the variables measured by the questionnaire.

Table 1. Means, Medians and Standard Deviations of Sense of Safety, Self-esteem (GSES) and Well-being (VSP-A).

	Sense of Safety Scale	Safety attributed to the neighbourhood	Safety attributed to the city	Rosemberg GSES	VSP-A
Mean	35,16	6,87	8,31	31,78	120,95
Median	35	7	9	32	122
Std. Deviation	4,61	2,1	1,88	4,86	17,35
Minimum	15	1	1	10	34
Maximum	48	10	10	40	167

The item mean scores of Rosemberg GSES are above the midpoint of 2.5, indicating a good level of self-esteem in the sample. Item *"I feel that I am a person of worth, at least on an equal basis with others"* shows the highest score (Item Mean 3.4). Moreover, scores are substantially equal between males and females, thus disproving the classic idea according to which adolescent girls have lower self-esteem than adolescent boys. This homogeneity is also to be found when comparing answers on the basis of age: primary school pupils have a self-esteem medium total score of 31.77, which is very close to that of lower secondary school (M=31.70) and upper secondary school pupils (the M=31.97). This homogeneity in the data may indicate a certain stability of self-esteem during early and middle adolescence and across genders.

With regard to the VSP-A scale, the items that obtain a higher score are those relating to relations with parents and friends, who represent the two main sources of social support, classically considered an important dimension of well-being. A comparison between male and female answers on each item does not show any particular differences. The only meaningful result relates to physical appearance: the literature considers body image the most salient factor and critical for females. In our sample, with a difference of only half a point in the averages, boys feel more neurotic and inadequate about their physical appearance. This result is analogous to what has been found in a recent study by Eisenberg, Neumark-Sztainer, Haines & Wall (2006), which showed that a larger percentage of boys are made fun of because of their bodies and

confirmed men's growing interest in physical appearance. However, no significant differences were found between males and females with regard to general well-being. On the contrary, there is a significant decrease (F=17,99**) in overall well-being from primary school (M= 124.53) to upper secondary school (M= 118.12).

Further analysis of variance was carried out in relation to the parents' level of education. In this context, either considering fathers or mothers, significant differences regarding adolescents' self-esteem (F=7.64** regarding to fathers, F=5.42** regarding to mothers) and well-being (F=4.92** regarding to fathers, F=3.46** regarding to mothers) appear.

Sense of Safety

For what concern sense of safety, young people think their own neighbourhood is safer (M=8.31) than the city as a whole (M=6.87). This result can be interpreted within the context of overall literature about adolescents in cities, according to which parents allowed their children greater autonomy inside the neighbourhood, favouring the development of a gradual sense of personal responsibility and a more positive relationship with the district. Moreover, adolescent girls feel significantly less safe both in the neighbourhood (F=55.30**) and in Genoa as a whole (F=36.50**) than their male peers. This confirms classic hypotheses about gender difference that point to women's greater insecurity in urban contexts despite the fact that victimization indices are higher among men. Some authors (Stanko, 1990) have talked about the idea of danger socialization among women since infancy.

Sense of safety, as investigated in the first part of the Scale, differs across age (See Figure 1), in particular older participants feel greater insecurity in Genoa than younger ones (M=6.59 against M=7.20 of primary school pupils); this could depend on greater exposure to potential risk situations and, as we said before, to the uncertainty that comes from the process of individuation from parents. Moreover, as adolescents grow older they develop a better understanding of the dangers they may face.

Using ANOVA methods, we asked questions relating to mean differences in perception of safety based on age variables: they are significant for Genoa (F=10.65**) but not for the neighbourhood.
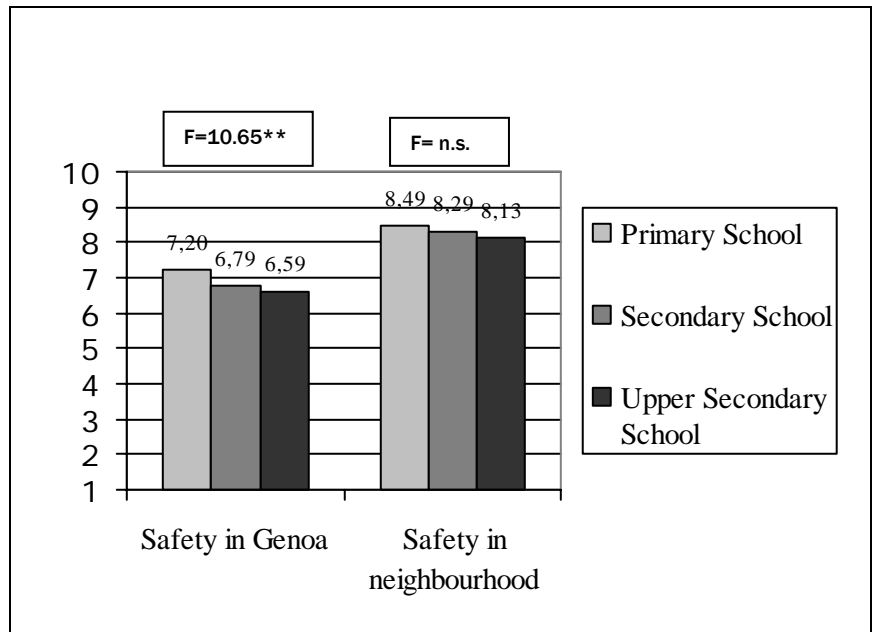
Figure 1. Sense of Safety: Means in the city and in Residence Neighbourhood according to age

Subjects were asked to indicate their degree of agreement on various aspects that make up the sense of safety (see Table 2).

The item "*Being in places where I can do pleasant things gives me a sense of safety*" has the highest average (Item Means=3.51), which supports the idea, according to place-theory (Canter, 1977), that activity is one of the main constitutive components of *place*. This experience emphasises the active and conscious use of space as a means of recreation and gaining a sense of calm and security. The item with the lowest average score is "*I feel insecure when I am in places I do not know very well*" (Item Means=2.26). This could explain better the greater sense of security participants show in their neighbourhood, the place they presumably know better than the city as a whole. These 12 items confirm the significant difference (F=117.14**) between male and female means.

Table 2. Mean Item Scores in Sense of Safety Scale

Sense of Safety Scale	Valid	Missing	Mean	Std Deviation
In my neighbourhood I feel sure when I encounter persons that I recognize	1625	12	3,46	0,73
When I am with my friends I feel sure	1626	11	3,42	0,72
When I go alone in turn I fear that something can happen to me	1624	13	2,47	1,00
I feel myself uneasiness when I pass in a road where there is nobody	1627	10	2,27	1,06
When roads are not very illuminated I'm frightened	1621	16	2,38	1,04
I feel restless when I see dirty roads, written on the walls, abandoned buildings	1622	15	2,61	1,03
I feel good in the places of my quarter where there are green areas (trees, flower-beds)	1622	15	3,34	0,83
I feel myself calmer in the zones where there are local and stores	1622	15	3,15	0,87
The presence of adults who watch a dangerous place renders me sure	1620	17	3,26	0,83
I feel surer when I see police enforcements in the zone in which I am in.	1619	18	3,12	0,98
I feel uncertain when I am in places that I do not know very well	1621	16	2,26	0,93
Stay in places in which I make pleasant activity give me safety	1619	18	3,51	0,69

Fear of crime

Many authors maintain that insecurity is to be equated with fear of crime, while others argue that fear of victimization is a central, but not exclusive, part of such a construct. In the present study we choose to distinguish between concern about being attacked and sense of safety; for this reason we decided to investigate fear of victimization separately in the form of a direct question. Here, too, there is a significant difference between male and female scores (F= 25.486**). Then we introduced participants to eleven situations that might heighten insecurity and that differed in terms of target (people or property) and asked them to indicate which they had thought of when answering the previous question. Subjects' prime concern is their physical safety: most of them report having imagined an attack or a brawl (50.6%), sexual harassment (49.3%) or mugging (46.8%). Property theft from cars or scooters was

mentioned by 19.3% of the sample. Only a limited number of participants (5.4%) used the space to refer to possible episodes not included on the list; among these, 47% made reference to kidnapping, followed from 17% that wrote "murder". Such answers could have been influenced by nationwide reports of such crimes during the period of the survey.

In confirmation of what has been said in relation to the sense of safety and personal fear of being victims of dangerous situations, as well regarding the type of episode, there are significant differences in relation to gender.
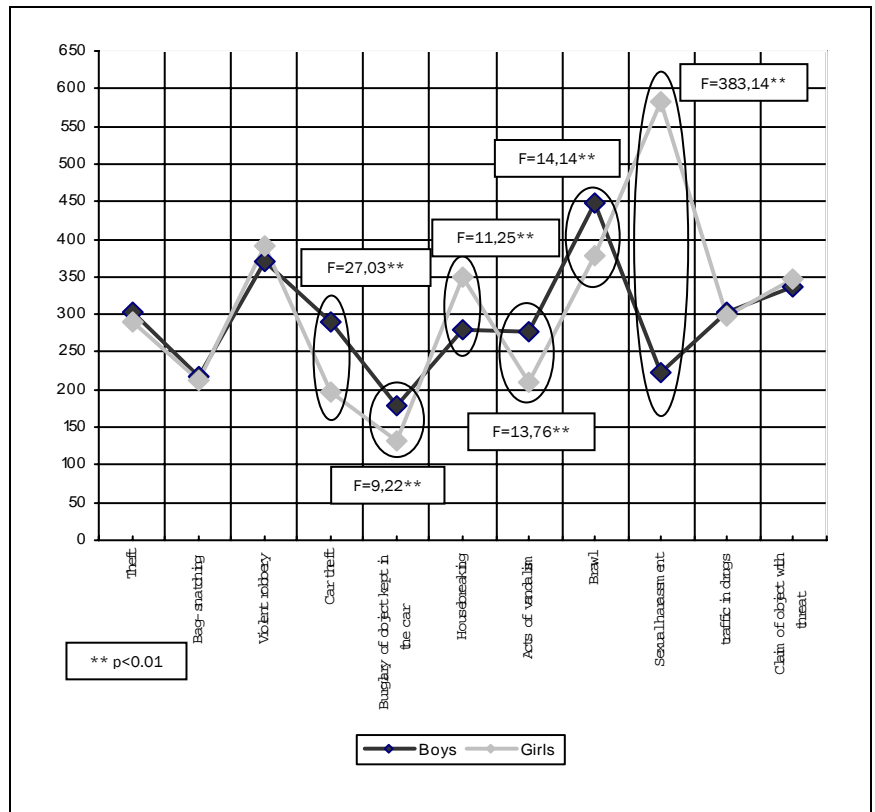

Figure 2. Analysis of variance between males and females fear (means) for crimes

As shown in Figure 2 the adolescent girls put greater emphasis on phenomena like sexual harassment or burglary, whereas boys appear

more concerned about the possibility of being involved in acts of aggression, or victims of vandalism or car theft.

The ANOVA results about male and female means evidence significant differences on all questions relating to safety (see Table 3).

Table 3. ANOVA results about male and feminine means in all measures relating to safety

	F
Safety in neighbourhood	55,304**
Safety in Genoa	36,501**
Sense of Safety Scale (12 items)	117,142**
Fear of Crime	25,486**

** p < 0.01

Correlations

Correlations between variables are presented in Table 4. Generally it can be said that there are correlations between all the instruments used; the strongest correlation is between GSES and VSP-A (.602**).

Table 4. Correlations between variables

		Sense of Safety Scale	VSP-A
VSP-A	Pearson Correlation	0,224**	
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	1629	
Rosemberg GSES	Pearson Correlation	0,183**	0,602**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000
	N	1628	1634

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

This result is not strange since some authors include self-esteem in their well-being meta-construct (Ryff, 1989, speaks about *acceptance of self* and *personal growth*). Less significant is the correlation between self-esteem and sense of safety (.183**), probably because security is not a personality trait, but tends rather to be influenced by context.

Conclusion

As explained before, the general aim of this study was to investigate self-esteem, well-being and sense of safety during early and middle adolescence, a period generally neglected by the literature. In particular,

there is an evident necessity to give psychological research a transactional and molar perspective (Bonnes, Bonaiuto & Lee, 2004), expanding the traditional perspective to study issues relating to the environment and the extent to which human beings are *situated* within it.

The results of the descriptive statistics, analyses of variance and correlations lead to several conclusions.

- First, in relation to feelings of insecurity, one specific factor is gender. This confirms what has been found in the literature (Zani, Cicognani & Albanesi, 2001; McGarrell, Giacomazzi & Thurman, 1997) about higher levels of insecurity among females.

- Analysis of data emphasises the main fears perceived by adolescent boys and girls; also in this case the two groups differ regarding the events that produce worry and fear of victimization. The greater salience that sexual violence assumes for females would seem to confirm Stanko's idea (1995) that it represents a central component of women's identity.

- There is also a tendency in the sample towards a lessening of sense of safety with age. Moreover, there is a difference in the sense of safety which relates to neighbourhood and the entire city.

- Self-esteem proves to be constant in relation to gender and age variables; this contrasts with the hypothesis that there is a remarkable decrease in general self-esteem in adolescence that is more pronounced among girls than among boys (Robins, Trzesniewski, Tracy, Gosling & Potter, 2002).

- Although we took into consideration only parents' socio-demographic data, the analysis of the variance has shown significant results both in relation to the father's and the mother's educational qualifications. Previous studies (Dekovic & Meeus, 1997), however, considered the father's attitude more important than the mother's in the development of self-esteem.

- Well-being, stable with regard to gender, decreases with age. In his studies on young adults, on the other hand, Ryff (1991) examined the perceptions of improvement or decline in well-being criteria and noticed a tendency for subjects to find a continuous improvement.

- Matrix Correlation among self-esteem, well-being and sense of safety shows that these three constructs provide a base for studying the complex relationship that mediate the development of security through individual and contextual elements, that need more and deeper researches. Additive analyses may lend to individuation of predictive factors to enhance a global sense of safety in adolescence. The implications of creating healthy contexts for the adolescents and giving them the opportunities to explore their surrounding and to increase their self-esteem are a relevant challenge for researchers.

All this suggests the need for an approach that addresses the questions in hand in their multi-facetted plurality and that recognizes the multiplicity of the underlying factors. The instruments could be administered in other residential areas in order to make comparisons also on the basis of environmental and socio-cultural factors.

With regard to future developments, the previously introduced theoretical model for the study of the relations between life context and well-being (Wandersman & Nation, 1998; Prezza & Santinello, 2002) could be taken as the starting point for considering the variables under investigation in the present work (well-being and self-esteem) as mediating elements in the process that leads to the development of a global sense of safety instead of a fear of crime (see Table 5).

Table 5. Models that regulate the relationship between ecological context and individual outcomes

Model	Examples of contextual factors	Examples of mediator processes	Examples of consequences
Environmental Stressors	Overcrowding, Noise	Coping, Adaptability	Personal and Scholastic Problems
Structural Characteristics	Socio-Economic Status, change of residence	Coping, ties and neighbourhood Support	Mistreatment, Delinquency
Environmental Disorders	Physical and Social Incivilities	Defensible Space	Anxiety, depression, Fear of Crime
Personal and Environmental Resources	Environmental Healthiness, Green Spaces, Lighting	Psychological and Social Well-Being, Self-esteem	Sense of Safety

In this new approach the focus is no longer on the possibility of reducing or mediating negative consequences, but rather on the positive

construction of a sense of safety – in other words, enhancing existing personal and environmental resources.

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