

Crime, meaning in life and well-being in three residential areas in Penang, Malaysia

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Abstract

This paper examined how crime and meaning in life can be associated with individual's well-being. Crime as part of life's negative experiences and meaning in life as part of the personal positive attributes can be related to constructs of well-being including affect, life satisfaction and subjective happiness. Semi-structured interviews assessing experience of crime, meaning in life, negative affect associated with crime, life satisfaction and subjective happiness were conducted with 240 residents from 3 urban residential areas in Penang Island, Malaysia. The three urban residential areas represented low, medium and high-cost categories. We argue that people in these different residential areas might have different experiences associated with crime. The study found some significant relationships between the constructs and evidences for specific experiences among people living in different residential areas. These findings highlight the need to understand the complex relationships between experience of crime, meaning in life and well-being among people living in different residential areas.

Keywords: Crime, meaning in life, well-being.

1. Introduction

People's life experiences and individual differences determine their subjective well-being and happiness. This paper explores how crime as part of life experience and meaning in life as part of positive personal characteristics contribute to individuals' negative affect, life satisfaction and subjective happiness. Experience of crime can be greatly affected by the location in which people live. To further understand the relationship between crime, meaning in life and constructs of well-being, comparisons were made between people living in different residential areas in Penang, Malaysia.

Crime in Malaysia

The Malaysian Crime Index showed a general downward trend in the last 6 years, but more recent statistics recorded an increase of 4.5 per cent between January and April this year. What is equally important is how people view crime. Many Malaysian still do not believe they are safe. Fear of crime is an issue in its own right and can be independent of crime rate itself (Aldrin, Mohd Najib & Siti, 2012). Both direct experience of crime and fear of crime reflect how crime is represented in everyday lives and continue to have impacts on people's health and well-being.

Both direct and indirect experiences can potentially elicit negative emotions and various psychological problems. In this case, crime can be considered as a major negative event that can generally induce various negative affects. Direct or indirect experience of crime can be associated with psychological symptoms such as depression and anxiety (Berman et al, 1996).

To people who have been a direct victim of a crime, it can elicit a series of negative emotions including anxiety, anger, frustration and depression. To others not directly experienced with crime, observing crime as happening to others, can elicit fear, anxiety and depression. Fear associated with crime in turn can lead to other negative psychological states including mistrust, anxiety, alienation, dissatisfaction with life and mental illness, mental and other maladaptive social behaviour such as social isolation and purchasing of firearms and eventually, the breakdown of social solidarity (Liska, Sanchirico & Reed, 1988).

In this study, we are not only looking at negative affect as correlates of experience of crime and perceptions of safety. Taking the negative emotions further, we examined other well-being constructs including life satisfaction and happiness. According to Diener et. al (2010), subjective well-being refers to individuals' evaluations of the overall quality of their lives including life satisfaction and happiness. In this study, the associations between direct and indirect experience of crime, perceptions of safety, negative affect associated with crime, well-being and subjective happiness were examined.

Meaning in Life

Meaning in life often refers to the presence of and the effort to search for meaning and purpose in life. This definition implies the two major elements of the construct; the presence and the search for meaning (Steger et al., 2006). Presence of meaning is characterized by the perceptions of one's life as meaningful and searching for meaning is associated with an active discovery to seek a sense of meaning in one's life. Meaning in life has been associated with better health and psychological well-being.

People who found meaning from negative events or situation such as stress, trauma or life-threatening illness have been shown to have healthier diagnosis and improved psychological well-being in comparison to those who have not engaged in meaning-making (Taylor et al., 2000). Presence of meaning provides a sense of how one can fit into his or her environment together with purpose in life and this can contribute to how people assessed life in general. People with high level of meaning in life are more likely to view negative events such as crime as part of life's bigger meaning and cope better. In this study, meaning in life was examined in relations to experience of crime and perceptions of safety.

Living conditions

In addition, where people live will make a different to their life experience. People who live in high cost residential areas where security and amenities are higher may experience crime differently compared to people living in low cost residential areas where living condition is relatively more hostile. According to Aldrin, Mohd Najib & Siti (2012), people who lived in a gated residential area in Malaysia reported higher level of fear of crime. In their study, they compared residents who lived in a gated residential area to those who live in a non-gated residential area. They found that people who lived a gated residential area reported higher level of fear of crime across five different dimensions including crime problems in residential areas, crime-specific, physical environment, social environment and indirect victimization. They attributed the findings to the condition of the fencing and the relationships within the community (Aldrin, Mohd Najib & Siti, 2012). In this study, we compared the analysis between people who lived in a high-cost residential area, medium-cost residential area and low-cost residential area.

2. Methodology

Participants

Participants were 240 residents from three urban residential areas around Penang Island, Malaysia (80 from each area). Only one adult was interviewed from each household. One

hundred (41.7%) of the respondents were males and majority of respondents were of ethnic Chinese (55%) but a large proportion comprised of ethnic Malays (40%). Most of the respondents were between the ages of 21 to 40 (57.1%).

Procedure

Respondents were approached around their respective residential area and could choose to be interviewed or to answer the questionnaire by themselves (self-administered). Should they choose to answer the questionnaire on their own, a research assistant was available nearby to address any questions.

Information on Interview Schedule

Both English and Malay Language versions of the questionnaire were provided in the survey.

Background information

In this section, demographic background information that was assessed included age, sex, education and income.

Experience of Crime

This is a 5-item instrument designed to assess direct (self) or indirect experience of crime (close others). For direct experience, respondents were asked to report if they have been a victim of crime. For indirect experience, respondents were asked to report if anyone who are related to them (e.g. family, friends, neighbours) have been a victim of crime. Higher scores indicate more experience of crime.

Perceptions of Safety

This is a 12-item measure assessing respondent's perception of personal safety and rate of crime in their neighborhood and city. Example of the positive item - "Generally, I feel safe" and example of a negative item "A lot of crime is happening in my neighbourhood" Higher scores indicate higher perception of safety.

Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ) (Steger et al., 2006)

This is a 10-item instrument measuring the presence (i.e. how much the respondents feel their lives has meaning) and the search for meaning in life (i.e. how much the respondents search for meaning and understanding in their lives).. Questions are in a 7-point likert-type scale ranging from 1 (absolutely true) to 7 (absolutely untrue). Higher scores indicate higher meaning in life.

Negative Affect Associated with Crime

This was measured as part of the 12 item-positive and negative affect associated with experience of crime. This scale was adapted from *Scale of Positive and Negative Experience* (SPANE) Diener et al. (2010). SPANE is a brief 12-item scale that measures positive and negative experiences of individual. In this study, the items focused specifically on emotions associated with experience of crime. Examples of the items are "Thinking about crime generally made me feel sad" and "Thinking about crime generally made me feel afraid". Higher scores indicate more negative emotions associated with crime.

The Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener et al., 1985)

The SWLS is a 5-item scale that measures global life satisfaction of the individuals. Higher scores indicate higher life satisfaction. The participants were instructed to specify their agreement by indicating an appropriate number on each item that based on seven-point Likert

scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). An example of the item is “*In most ways my life is close to my ideal*”.

Subjective Happiness (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999)

This is a 4-item measure on subjective happiness. Higher scores indicate higher global subjective happiness. The items required respondents to rate themselves in relation to their peers and also in relation to happy and unhappy individuals. An example of the item is. “Some people are generally very happy. They enjoy life regardless of what is going on, getting the most out of everything. To what extent does this characterization describe you?”

3. Results

Table 1: Correlations between mean of variables; total sample

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Experience of crime	-					
2. Perceptions of safety	-.300**	-				
3. Meaning in life	.056	-.076	-			
4. Negative affect associated with crime	.048	-.121	.181**	-		
5. Life satisfaction	.121	.048	.343**	.141*	-	
6. Subjective happiness	.125	.036	.323**	.096	.783**	-

As presented in table 1, there was a significant negative correlation between experience of crime and perceptions of safety. People who reported more experience of crime were more likely to report lower perceptions of safety. Meaning in life has a significant positive correlation with negative affect associated with crime, life satisfaction and subjective happiness. Life satisfaction and subjective happiness had strong positive correlation. This is expected as the two are related variables. They both represent aspects of subjective well being but they represent two fairly different elements. Life satisfaction is related more to general assesment of life itself but subjective happiness is related to how a person feels, representing the more specific emotional experiences.

ANOVA

There was a statistically significant effect of residential type on experience of crime (F (2,229) = 6.502, P<.005). People who live in medium-cost residential area reported higher experience of crime compared to the other two areas. There was also a statistically significant effect of residential type on perceptions of safety (F (2,222) = 6.111, P<.005). People who lived in low-cost residential area reported lowest level of perceptions of safety compared to people who lived in high and medium-cost residential areas.

Looking at meaning in life, we found a statistically significant effect of residential type on meaning in life (F (2,233) = 3.280, P<.05). People who lived in medium-cost residential area reported higher level of meaning in life compared to people who lived in high and low-cost residential areas.

Focusing on the three well-being constructs i.e. affect, life satisfaction and subjective happiness, we found that there was a statistically significant effect of residential type on negative affect associated with crime (F (2,230) = 18.265, P<.005). People who live in high-cost residential area reported lower perceptions of safety compared to people who lived in low and medium-cost residential areas. There was also a statistically significant effect of residential type on well-being (F (2,232) = 3.609, P<.05). In this analysis, people who live in medium-cost residential area reported higher level of life satisfaction compared to people

who lived in low and high-cost residential areas.

Finally, we found that there was a statistically significant effect of residential type on subjective happiness ($F(2,235) = 5.818, P < .005$). People who live in medium-cost residential area reported higher level of subjective happiness compared to people who lived in high and low-cost residential areas.

Table 2: Correlations between variables; low cost residential area

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Experience of crime	-					
2. Perceptions of safety	-.224	-				
3. Meaning in life	.000	-.067	-			
4. Negative affect associated with crime	-.060	-.149	.502**	-		
5. Life satisfaction	-.014	.209	.542**	.376*	-	
6. Subjective happiness	.035	.107	.570**	.420	.855**	-

From Table 2, meaning in life had a significant positive correlation with negative affect associated with crime, life satisfaction and subjective happiness. Negative affect associated with crime also had a positive correlation with life satisfaction. Life satisfaction and subjective happiness have strong positive correlations.

Table 3: Correlations between variables; medium cost residential area

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Experience of crime	-					
2. Perceptions of safety	-.586**	-				
3. Meaning in life	.245*	-.328**	-			
4. Negative affect associated with crime	.204	.072	.014			
5. Life satisfaction	.287**	-.092	.268**	.085		
6. Subjective happiness	.082	.033	.152**	.123	.696**	-

From Table 3, experience of crime have significant negative correlation with perception of safety. Experience of crime also had a positive correlation with meaning in life and life satisfaction. Meaning in life had a significant negative correlation with negative affect associated with crime but a significant positive correlation with life satisfaction. Life satisfaction and subjective happiness have strong positive correlations.

Table 4: Correlations between variables; high cost residential area

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Experience of crime	-					
2. Perceptions of safety	-.067	-				
3. Meaning in life	-.063	.134	-			
4. Negative affect associated with crime	-.030	.110	-.009	-		
5. Life satisfaction	.047	.057	.186	.018	-	
6. Subjective happiness	.161	-.036	.210	-.068	.766**	-

From Table 4, no significant correlations were found between the variables except that life satisfaction and subjective happiness have strong positive correlations.

3. Discussion and Conclusion

This paper sets out to examine how crime and meaning in life can be associated with individual's well-being. However, findings from this study indicated that experience of crime has no relationships with negative affect, life satisfaction and subjective happiness. This is not consistent with previous findings by Berman et al., (1996) and Liska, Sanchirico and Reed (1988). It is likely that although crime generally has negative impacts on individuals, the experience of crime for this sample was particularly low that it did not have any impacts on the well-being. Negative affect associated with crime which measured the negative affect people reported as direct impact of experience of crime is associated with subjective well-being and happiness. This suggests that it is not the experience per se that can have impact on individuals but rather whether or not the experience elicits negative affect.

Meaning in life on the other hand had a stronger association with life satisfaction and happiness in which people who reported higher level of meaning in life also reported higher level of life satisfaction and subjective well-being. Meaning in life is not associated with experience of crime and perceptions of safety. It is however, positively associated with negative affect associated with crime in which people who reported more meaning in life also reported higher level of negative affect associated with crime. Our findings suggest that meaning in life can be considered as part of a more general attribute of an individual whereas crime and perception of safety are part of independent external events that can occur despite one's positive outlook. As such, crime as part of negative life experience and meaning in life as part of a person's positive attribute contributed to well-being of our respondents in different ways. Crime, although part of life's negative event, has minimal impact on well-being. This is possibly due to its low occurrence. Meaning in life on the other hand has strong positive association with well-being constructs. Future studies need to be conducted to further understand the effect of these two variables in well-being.

People who lived in different residential areas in our study appeared to have relatively distinctive experiences associated with crime. People who lived in medium-cost residential area reported not only higher experience of crime but also higher level of meaning in life, life satisfaction and subjective happiness compared to people who lived in high and low-cost residential areas. People who live in high-cost residential area reported highest negative affect associated with crime compared to the other people who live in low and medium-cost residential areas. People who live in low-cost residential area reported highest level of perceptions of safety compared to the other two areas.

To further understand these differential experiences, separate correlation analysis were conducted for different groups of people. The relationships between crime, meaning in life and well-being appeared to be strongest for those living in medium cost residential area. For this group, experience of crime is associated significantly with their well-being. This is somewhat consistent with findings by Aldrin, Mohd Najib and Siti (2012) which illustrated how living conditions can be associated with fear of crime. In their study, they found people who lived in a gated area reported higher fear of crime compared to those who lived in a non-gated area. Aldrin, Mohd Najib and Siti (2012) attributed the findings to the more specific living conditions (e.g. the construction of the fence) and the relationships between people in the community. Similarly, more research need to be conducted to understand the distinctive experiences with crime as observed in our sample.

This study highlights how experience of crime as part of negative life event and meaning in life as part of individual's positive attribute may work differently in contributing to a person's wellbeing. Secondly, this study indicated how experience of crime is different depending on locations and how these variations in turn have different impacts on individuals. Future studies need to focus on trying to understand these issues further.

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