



Fear of crime in urban parks – What the residents of Kuala Lumpur have to say?



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ABSTRACT

This study was conducted to determine the attributes which evoke ‘fear of crime’ and to determine the defensive behaviour among the urban park users. Findings are based on qualitative studies undertaken in the city of Kuala Lumpur among the park and non-park users ($N = 19$) by means of semi-structured in-depth interviews. The interview consists of respondents from various age, gender and race. The results revealed universal similarities to other cultures on fear of crime in urban green spaces. This study has highlighted eight themes on the attributes which evoke fear among the residents of Kuala Lumpur in their urban parks; concealment (vegetation), being alone, signs of physical disorder, presence of social incivilities, familiarity, prior information about crime and previous crime experience. This study also found that among the residents of Kuala Lumpur there is some form of defensive behaviour towards crime in urban parks but this was only observed among the women. This paper has also highlighted the implications on park planning and management from the comments given by the respondents. Though the aspect of fear towards crime in urban green spaces is not a major focus in Malaysia, this study illustrates the need to initiatives related to urban parks management to ensure a better sense of security among users.

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1. Introduction

Since the 1960s the ‘fear of crime’ has been acknowledged as a field of research interest for criminologists, constituting one of the leading research topics in this field of criminology (Farrall et al., 2000). According to Ferraro (1995, p. 8), fear of crime comprises “an emotional response or dread or anxiety to crime or symbols that a person associates with crime”. People who are afraid of being victimised in fact often change their habits (e.g. tending to stay at home, avoiding some streets, not travelling on public transportation) (Skogan, 1986; Miethe, 1995). Some may even choose to adopt protecting techniques such as getting a gun, installing extra locks/grills for the doors and windows or more sources of lights outdoor (Gordon and Riger, 1979).

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Hale (1996) estimated that by the mid-1990s, over 200 articles, conference papers, monographs and books have been written on some aspects or other fear of crime. Just four years later this number has risen to 837 according to an on-line search by Ditton and Farrall (2000). However, only limited number of studies on the fear of crime has been carried out in the non-Western countries (Adu-Mireku, 2002; Hwang, 2006; Johnson, 2006; Dammert and Malone, 2006; Karakus et al., 2010). Simultaneously, a growing number of studies have specifically examined fear of crime in urban green spaces (and particularly in the US and UK; see Sreetheran and Van den Bosch, 2014). This is because green spaces such as parks are regarded as public rather than private spaces which can be easily taken over by undesirable activities (e.g. drug usage, loitering youths) (Knutsson, 1997). This has produced extensive studies on the urban green spaces and human responses such as fear and crime in the Western European and North Americans environments (e.g., Schroeder and Anderson, 1984; Burgess, 1988; Nasar and Fisher, 1993; Bixler and Floyd, 1997; Kuo and Sullivan, 2001; Jorgensen et al., 2002; Van den Berg and Ter Heijne, 2005; Jorgensen and Anthopoulou, 2007; Lindgren and Nilsen, 2012; Jorgensen et al., 2013).

Nevertheless, very limited studies have investigated fear of crime in the urban green spaces in Asia, except for some work

in Japan (Yokohari et al., 2006), Hong Kong (Hung and Crompton, 2006) and Singapore (Yeoh and Yeow, 1997). Cross-cultural understanding on fear of crime is important because research findings from developed countries are not necessarily directly transferable to the developing countries (Adu-Mireku, 2002). For many years, the Western nations have been those that have primarily contextualised and conceptualised much of the literature on fear of crime (Johnson, 2006). Although the concepts of 'fear of crime', 'perceived threat' and 'perceived personal safety' are defined and applied differently, in this article 'fear of crime' is used to refer to the emotional experiences such as perceived safety, perceived risk, perceived threat etc. rather than the actual crime, risk, safety and security.

The present study represents a qualitative study in the city of Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. This paper seeks to fill the present gap in the fear of crime literature from an Asian perspective in three different ways. First, it sets out to determine the attributes which evoke the 'fear of crime' among park and non-park users. Second, it aims to determine the defensive behaviour among the urban park users. Finally, recommendations are provided to park managers on some options to reduce the level of fear of crime in the parks.

1.1. Fear of crime in urban green spaces

In an urbanised society today, the development of urban green spaces have become an integral component of most urban city planning. Many people are willing to pay significantly more to live near green spaces (Martin et al., 2004) because of the major benefits gained by the people in terms of health and well-being (Hartig et al., 2003; Chiesura, 2004), social cohesion (Peters and Buijs, 2010; Kázmierczak, 2013) and social contacts (Kuo et al., 1998) and opportunities for a range of physical activities (Arnberger, 2006; Wilhelm-Stanis et al., 2010). However, urban green spaces can also arouse feelings of uneasiness or apprehension (Jorgensen and Anthopoulou, 2007; Andrews and Gatersleben, 2010). Several features or conditions of urban green spaces (e.g. dark areas, signs of vandalism, graffiti, pervasive trash, drug paraphernalia, overgrown bushes, abandoned vehicles), as well as the presence of some potentially 'illegitimate-users' (e.g. beggars, loitering youths) can evoke fear of crime among the park users. In their work on different dangers associated with natural environments, Andrews and Gatersleben (2010) have identified that the threat of being attacked by another person (social danger) has the greatest effect. This threat is perceived as more severe and likely to occur than other danger threats such as being attacked by an animal, tripping over obstacles or becoming lost (physical dangers).

Parks are also perceived as risky when the sites are more densely vegetated, particularly when the vegetation is not apparently maintained (Schroeder, 1989; Michael and Hull, 1994). Urban areas with shrubs and trees are often considered unsafe because vegetation can conceal the presence of criminals and limit the vision of potential victims and crime defenders (Wolfe and Mennis, 2012). For instance, Nasar and Fisher (1993) found that dense growth of shrubs and tree low to the ground reduces views into the areas where criminals might hide, and inhibits possible escape routes for the victims. A female teenager said "you go to the trail and it's like trees, trees, trees. And you don't know like who's back there. You could get kidnapped and ripped up and nobody would know" (Brownlow, 2006; p. 234). A woman in a Norwegian study stated: "...if it (woodland) had been more open, if people could see in, if you could see what was inside here, then perhaps I could have sent her (daughter) myself. . . Now, nobody can see inside here. . ." (Skår, 2010; p. 114). In a study conducted in the urban greenways of Japan, fear of crime was found to be higher when there were less people and dark, and where paths were restricted or where the vegetation was too abundant (Yokohari et al., 2006). Parks are also less liked when perceived

to be the settings for drinking, drug using, crime, teenage hangouts, homeless, rowdy behaviour and clashes with rangers (Schroeder, 1989; Knutsson, 1997). This was even supported by another study by Burgess et al. (1988) who found the presence of undesirable park users (e.g. drug addicts, loiterers), vandalism and male sexual violence against unaccompanied women as being feared in more wooded areas.

1.2. Theoretical framework

This study adopts a social-ecological framework to consider the multiple levels of influence that evoke fear of crime in the urban green spaces. The socio-ecological approach is used as the framework to understand the attributes influencing human behaviour (e.g. fear of crime). In this framework, various levels of influence on a person's behaviour are distinguished. These can be divided into personal factors (e.g. age, sex, ethnic minorities, personal experiences), social and environmental factors (e.g. physical environment, social environment, policy environment) (Foster and Giles-Corti, 2008). Inspired by Giles-Corti et al. (2005), Foster and Giles-Corti (2008), Foster et al. (2010) and Foster et al. (2013), the following specific socio-ecological framework adapted in this study was developed by Sreetheran and Van den Bosch (2014) as a general framework for understanding how personal attributes, as well as environmental and social attributes and their interactions evoke fear of crime in the urban green spaces (see Fig. 1). This framework has also been linked to several other theories from the criminology and environmental psychological perspectives.

It is well documented that certain socio-demographic groups tend to exhibit greater fear of crime (see Hale, 1996). One of the most noticeable individual characteristics impacting fear of crime is gender (Ferraro, 1995; Reid and Konrad, 2004). Gender is often considered having an impact twice as strong as other variables such as age or social-economic status (Ferraro, 1996). Women have consistently been found to have higher levels of fear towards criminal victimisation than their male counterparts (Skogan, 1990; Ferraro, 1995; Vanderveen, 2002; Schafer et al., 2006). Interestingly, this pattern remains stable in various crime types (Skogan, 1990; Ferraro, 1995; Schafer et al., 2006).

Age is another socio-demographic characteristics discussed in the literature. The elderly (or those ages 65 and older) tend to be more fearful of crime than the members of younger age groups, although their victimisation rate is substantially lower (Hope and Sparks, 2000; Rand, 2008). Elderly people have been found to be more concerned about their personal safety and willing to avoid potential encounters with violence (Boakye, 2012). An in-depth study by Fattah and Sacco (1989) found that fear expressed by older people is greater than amongst younger people.

Fear of crime is also largely provoked by linguistic, racial, ethnic and religious divergence among neighbours, which may hinder their mutual understanding and communication, and which would also imply the absence of social control and cohesion. When people cannot understand different behaviours, they become uncertain about and mistrust these 'others'. People believe that the 'others' have different social values, attitudes and community commitment (Covington and Taylor, 1991; Lane and Meeker, 2003). People seemingly can have a tendency to treat others who are from a different cultural background as a potential threat (Sampson et al., 1997).

Direct experience of victimisation was also observed to heighten the fear of crime in the urban green spaces, as supported by past work by Mesch (2000) and Crank et al. (2003). Direct victimisation recognises only those victims who have been directly affected by the actions of an offender or incurred some immediate losses following victimisation (Mesch, 2000). Past victims have an increased likelihood of defining situations as dangerous and perceiving the risks of victimisation as greater (Mesch, 2000). However, there are

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