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Life satisfaction and perceived stress among young offenders in a residential therapeutic community: Latent change score analysis

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ABSTRACT

Recent rehabilitation frameworks underscore the importance of strength-based interventions for young offenders who may lack internal and external resources to manage their stress and plan for their life. This multi-wave longitudinal study investigated the dynamic relationship between perceived stress and life satisfaction among a group of young ex-offenders in a residential therapeutic community. Four waves of data were collected from 117 Hong Kong youths (24.0% female, mean age = 17.7) over one year. Latent change score analysis was employed to examine the univariate and bivariate changes of their perceived stress and life satisfaction. Results suggest a positive growth trajectory in life satisfaction over time. The results of perceived stress were less conclusive. Bivariate models indicated that the previous level of life satisfaction was negatively linked to the subsequent perceived stress level but not vice versa. The findings suggest that improvement in life satisfaction may reduce perceived stress in young offenders.

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Adopting a capacity-building approach, recent rehabilitation theories underscore the importance of enhancing young offenders' subjective wellbeing, which plays a crucial role in desistance, reintegration, and prosocial behavior (Casey, Day, Vess, & Ward, 2013). Reviews of the literature suggest that, compared to deterrence-oriented interventions and risk management approaches, rehabilitation programs that orient around a "therapeutic" philosophy tend to be more effective in transforming young offenders and reducing recidivism (e.g., Lipsey & Cullen, 2007; Lipsey, 2009). The underlying change processes, however, are relatively under-explored. The investigation of these processes would enhance our understanding on what constitutes effective youth interventions, and how. In this longitudinal study, we examined the change in life satisfaction, a major indicator of subjective wellbeing, as well as perceived stress among juvenile offenders in a therapeutic community that adopts a strength-based approach in rehabilitation. We also attempted to unravel the temporal relationship between the two.

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1. Life satisfaction and youth development

Among young adults and adolescents, life satisfaction has been found to buffer against the impact of stress and psychological problems (for reviews, see Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999; Proctor, Linley, & Maltby, 2009). Conceptually, subjective wellbeing comprises a cognitive component and an affective component; the former can be broadly measured by life satisfaction, which is a person's subjective evaluation of his or her life as a whole, whereas the latter refers to positive and negative emotionality (Diener et al., 1999). A person is said to have a high level of subjective wellbeing when he or she has a positive global judgment of their lives, more positive emotion, and relatively less negative emotion. Compared with affective measures, measures of life satisfaction are more stable over time, yet are sensitive enough to detect changes, making it one of the popular measures of subjective wellbeing (Park, 2004; Pavot & Diener, 1993). Along with a growing interest in promoting adolescent wellbeing, research on the development and importance of life satisfaction among children and youth have been proliferating in the past two decades. Nonetheless, relatively little is known about life satisfaction of at-risk youth and its antecedents and consequences (Gilman & Huebner, 2003).

Researchers generally agree that both personal and contextual factors contribute to the development and change of life satisfaction in youth (Gilman & Huebner, 2003; Park, 2004; Proctor et al., 2009). Personality traits, parenting styles, self-efficacy beliefs, and goal aspirations seem to influence a youth's level of satisfaction (Gilman & Huebner, 2003; Proctor et al., 2009). In addition, day-to-day positive experiences—quality interactions with parents, teachers, mentors, activity leaders, and peers as well as participation in structural and fulfilling activities—are paramount to the development of life satisfaction in adolescents (Gilman & Huebner, 2003; Park, 2004; Proctor et al., 2009; Valois, Zullig, Huebner, & Drane, 2009). Frequent positive social experiences, even minor ones, are found to be more conducive to life satisfaction than acute positive events (Gilman & Huebner, 2003). Unfortunately, at-risk juveniles tend to lack these internal and external resources, let alone continuous positive experiences, thereby rendering them vulnerable to a host of social, emotional, and behavioral problems (Carroll, Durkin, Hattie, & Houghton, 1997; Chitsabesan et al., 2006; Oyserman & Saltz, 1993).

Life satisfaction is the key hallmark of positive youth development (for reviews, see Gilman & Huebner, 2003; Park, 2004; Proctor et al., 2009). Research reveals that a low level of life satisfaction is associated with a higher risk for emotional problems and deviant behaviors in adolescents and young adults; it is linked to suicide (Valois, Zullig, Huebner, & Drane, 2004), depression (Gilman & Huebner, 2006), perceived stress (Abolghasemi & Varaniyab, 2010), substance use (Zullig, Valois, Huebner, Oeltmann, & Drane, 2001), binge drinking (Kuntsche & Gmel, 2004), internalizing and externalizing behaviors (Suldo & Huebner, 2004), and violence (MacDonald, Piquero, Valois, & Zullig, 2005). By contrast, high satisfaction with life is associated with healthy living style (Frisch, 2000), academic engagement (Lewis, Huebner, Malone, & Valois, 2011), a sense of hope (Gilman & Huebner, 2006), prosocial behaviors (Froh, Bono, & Emmons, 2010), and the like. That said, to ascertain the role of life satisfaction in positive changes—whether it is primary or secondary or both—it is necessary to uncover the temporal relationship between life satisfaction and its correlates.

Some attempts have been made to elucidate the impact of life satisfaction. Contrary to the general belief that life satisfaction is the by-product of positive life events, research has consistently demonstrated that life satisfaction also precedes diverse positive outcomes and moderates the effect of negative life events (Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005; Park, 2004; Proctor et al., 2009). A review study showed that subjective wellbeing, including life satisfaction, precedes various behaviors paralleling success and successful outcomes in life domains, such as work, relationships, and health (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005). Likewise, longitudinal studies revealed that adolescents who have a higher level of life satisfaction are less likely to display externalizing behaviors in response to stressful life events (Suldo & Huebner, 2004) and exhibit less problem behaviors in general (Sun & Shek, 2013). Apparently, positive life events, albeit being apt to induce positive mood in short-term, are not a necessary precursor of life satisfaction or happiness; rather, those who are relatively more satisfied or happy seem to have a higher likelihood to experience positive events and flourish in the long run. One plausible explanation is that life satisfaction may buffer against psychological stress and thus enables an individual to thrive (Park, 2004; Proctor et al., 2009).

2. Life satisfaction and perceived stress

Existing theories may help explain how life satisfaction potentially mitigates perceived stress. In coping theory, stress arises when an individual perceives that he or she does not have adequate resource to cope with the current or anticipatory demands (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). It is believed that people who have a more positive outlook or evaluation on life are more inclined to appraise the situation positively; negative life events may therefore be seen as an opportunity or a challenge rather than a threat. Seeing a demand through a positive lens, the person is expected to experience less stress and to cope more effectively (Folkman, Lazarus, Dunkel-Schetter, DeLongis, & Gruen, 1986). Similarly, in her broaden-and-build theory, Fredrickson (2001, 2004) posits that positive emotions can broaden one's thought-action repertoire; an individual becomes more flexible in thinking, may come up with a wider range of solutions, and could employ more effective coping strategies. Cognitive flexibility and broadened coping repertoire may in turn promote subjective wellbeing, together creating an upward spiral that buffers against stress. As such, a youth with a higher level of life satisfaction would likely initiate more adaptive behaviors and experience a lower degree of perceived stress. A few cross-sectional studies have demonstrated the association between perceived stress and life satisfaction (e.g., Abolghasemi & Varaniyab, 2010; Hamarat et al., 2001); however, the causal relationship between the two is yet to be disentangled.

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