The Self, Relationships, and Subjective Well-Being in Asia
Psychological, Social, and Cultural Perspectives

Edited by
Allan B. I. Bernardo
Ma. Cecilia Gastardo-Conaco
Ma. Emma Concepcion D. Liwag
The Self, Relationships, and Subjective Well-Being in Asia: 
Psychological, Social, and Cultural Perspectives

Edited by Allan B. I. Bernardo 
Ma. Cecilia Gastardo-Concepcion 
Ma. Emma Concepcion D. Liwag

Copyright © 2007 by Kyoyook-Kwahk Sa Publishing Company
424-31 Ahyun-dong, Mapo-Ku, Seoul, Korea
Tel. 82-2-363-6431, Fax 82-2-393-4366
E-mail: kyoyook@chol.com

All rights reserved.
No part of this book may be reproduced by any means, or transmitted, or translated into a machine language, without the written permission of the authors.

ISBN 978-89-254-0073-0
Printed in Republic of Korea
Chapter 1

Forged in Fire: Silver Kris in the South China Sea Indigenous Strengths of Singaporean Chinese and Malays

Weining C. Chang

In the recent years we have been conducting a series of empirical studies aimed at identifying indigenous psychological constructs that constitute resilience in different cultural communities in Singapore. A three-dimensional construct was identified for the Chinese—a malleable self-belief, emotional self-regulation, and coping flexibility. In the Muslim, mostly Malay, community, a three-dimensional construct of "Religiosity"—religious beliefs, religious attribution, and religious practice form the resilience factor. In this presentation, I will briefly introduce the conceptualization of these constructs and the series of empirical studies we conducted that testify to the efficacy of these resilience factors in (1) coping with daily stress, (2) coping with job-related stress, and (3) coping with exposure to family violence. It is argued that while in the West, especially in North America, psychological development takes place in a context of the expectation for peace and

1) This project was partially funded by University Research Grant # R-107-000-038-112 given to the author by the National University of Singapore Research Council.

2) Empirical studies reported in this report were conducted by Shahiraas, Ruben-Wen Sivam, Mohd Isms bin Mohd Isa, Poo Tong Jui, Christopher Low, Sherry Teo, Y. P. Chan, Yiping Lee and Jessie Koh, students and assistants attached to the Asian Cultural Psychology Project under the author's supervision.
unlimited resources, Asian psychological development takes place in a context of either real or anticipated crises, and limited resources. Therefore, socialization in Asia prepares children for survival and thriving in adversity. The resilient factors identified in the Asian communities contain a more modest belief in the individual's efficacy in control over the environment, a relatively external attribution to others and/or to divinity. This diminished confidence in conquering the world, however, is counteracted with a strong belief in self-directed control and regulation. The adjustment values of such resilient factors within the context of indigenous Asian cultures are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

In this paper, I would like to introduce the series of studies we have been conducting in Singapore with the aim to identify the culturally informed individual difference factors that contribute to the resilience of Singaporean Malay and Chinese. Our attention has been specifically drawn to the indigenously constructed personality factors that enable the Singaporeans to cope with challenges in life. The history of Singapore has been a history of immigrants living under unsympathetic colonial rules, surviving foreign invasions and more recently, economic crises and SARS. In the last incident, Singaporeans have been considered exemplary in coping with SARS and SARS-related stress. In the wake of SARS, Singaporeans are now facing the renewed challenges of economic downturns and continued threat of international terrorism. Will Singapore survive? My prediction is positive; Singaporeans not only will survive but will thrive. They have characters that were informed by a history of surviving in difficult times and facing challenges beyond their control. Singaporeans often consider their existence a miracle, and take pride in their resilience against hardship. Growing up in adversity, Singaporeans consider that they have a character forged in fire.

Psychological Resilience

The construct of resilience in contemporary psychological literature refers to a dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity. Implicit within this notion are two critical conditions: (1) exposure to significant threat or severe adversity, and (2) the achievement of positive adaptation despite major assaults on the developmental process.

Following Werner's groundbreaking studies on children in Hawaii (Werner, et al., 1971; Werner & Smith, 1977), research on resilience expanded to include survival against multiple adverse conditions such as socioeconomic disadvantage and associated risks, parental mental illness, maltreatment, chronic illness, urban poverty and community violence, and catastrophic life events. The thrust of these early efforts was primarily focused on personal qualities of "resilient children"; such qualities as autonomy or high self-esteem have been considered to be sources of resilience (see Masten & Garmezy, 1985; Masten, Garmezy, Tellegen, et al. 1988). We termed the personal qualities of these children that enable them to survive multiple and severe conditions of adversity, "psychological resilience". More recent studies suggested that "psychological resilience" is a multidimensional process rather than a single personality construct. In the present context, we use the term psychological resilience to refer to the multidimensional dispositional constructs and the dynamic processes between them that moderate or mediate the impact of adverse conditions on the individual, constructs and processes that offer protection against adverse effect and promotion for healthful outcomes.

Cognitive Mediators of Resilience

Contemporary studies in mental health and adjustment to daily stress seem to focus on the cognitive factors that underlie the construction of the phenomenological experiences of the self and the world (Abramson, Alloy, Hankin, Clements, Zhu, Hogan & Whitehouse, 2000). Individual differences in these cognitive factors would somehow determine whether the individual would see the environmental stressors or catastrophes as
either barriers or as challenges. For instance, the dysfunctional cognitive style (Abramson et al., 2000), that is attributing failure to internal, global and stable factors, was found to be linked to hopelessness and pessimism. Hopelessness and pessimism would give rise to depression and other maladaptive psychological functioning (see Gillham, 2000 for a review). On the other hand, cognitive hopefulness, agency hope, and pathway hope, and a positive outlook of life, optimism are considered resilience-generating in association with positive adjustment outcomes (Gillham, 2000). Indeed, an impressive body of empirical studies has identified the relationships between these cognitive constructs and positive adjustment of individuals in most Western populations.

Contemporary research on the Asian people seems to suggest that they have higher levels of the maladaptive or dysfunctional cognitive styles, for instance, lower optimism (E. Chang, 2000; Heine & Lehman, 1995), and lower global individual self-esteem compared to that of their Western counterparts (Heine, Lehman, Markus, & Kitayama, 1999) and relatively external locus of control or attribution for social interpersonal events (Morris & Peng, 1994). More recently, we have found that university students in Singapore perceived lower control over examinations than Western students attending the same university and taking the same examination (Chang & Teo, 2002). A study conducted earlier with the predominantly Chinese student body of the National University of Singapore has revealed that the students take responsibility for both success and failure in academic as well as personal events, indicating lower ego-protection in these participants (Chang, Bin Osman, Tong, Koh, & Tan, 2002). These empirical findings in Singapore suggest that there might be factors moderating the relationships between environmental challenges and the adjustment outcomes. A logical conclusion drawn from the above studies in Singapore is that there might be factors indigenous to the people of Singapore, distinct from the above-mentioned cognitive mediators identified in the West.

**Resilience as a Culture-specific Construct**

I came to a realization that, just as challenge is specific to the geopolitical ecology of the country, resilience is also specific to the culture: To serve the function of enhancing and protection, factors of resilience have to be specifically informed by the challenges the people encounter. We decided to look into the culture, defined as the shared values, attitudes and behavioral patterns of the ordinary people in their normal everyday life in the community (Chang, 2000) in the present context. We also looked into sociological and anthropological studies of the people in Singapore to identify characteristics of Singaporean Malays and Chinese. We thus derived two potential sources of information from which to search for factors of resilience in Singaporean Malay and Chinese people: writings about cultures of Singaporeans and the normal everyday life of contemporary Singaporean Malays and Chinese. From each source, I looked for shared beliefs and practice, and the personality characteristics that correspond to these shared beliefs and practice. Schwartz (1976) observed that individual personalities within a community form a distribution in the statistical sense, of the shared beliefs and practice of the culture; with this in mind, it can be said that culture and personality are two sides of the same coin. Culture represents a measure
of the belief and practice at the aggregate level, while personality represents a measure of the same belief at the individual level.

I believe in the functionalist notion of culture (White, 1947): Culture as shared beliefs and practice, is not a stale, static entity; nor are these beliefs and practices arbitrary. For a culture to survive, it must fulfill the functions of (1) helping to protect the people from challenges to the community, that of internal integration and external survival; and (2) promoting the collective well-being of the people in the community. The same applies to the elements of culture; for a culture element to survive, this belief or practice must be able to address certain needs of the people, it has to provide the function to help the survival or well-being of the people. In other words, for a belief or practice to be generally adhered to by its people, it has to prove the function of enhancing the well-being of the people or protecting the people from environmental challenges. The enhancing and protecting functions are those that define a resilience factor.

In other words, I am proposing that the resilience factors of a people have to be found within the culture indigenous to the people rather than imported from foreign sources, albeit with impressive scientific support. This is because most of the published scientific studies have been conducted within the cultural context of the researchers. These studies address the environmental challenges inherent to the particular culture in which the researcher and participants live. I am not sure that the resilient factors discovered from those studies are valid resilient factors. However, these factors provide protection against the specific environmental challenges of the people in the particular historical and geopolitical locale of the participants. Do the same resilient factors provide protection and promote the well-being of people who live in a different geopolitical locale and are facing different challenges?

**Self-expansion Versus Self-management**

When I was driving in the Great Plains of North America, sometimes for hours without seeing another human being, I came to an appreciation of the "rugged individualism" of the contemporary cultures of America (Hsu, 1981). In the North American Great Plains, population density is small; self-reliance has to be the key to survival, giving rise to a mentality that highly regards independence, high individual self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977), and high internal control over the environment as resilient factors. It is also not coincidental that all of these factors are (1) individually based and (2) imply an expansion of the individual self. In a crowded and resource-poor Asia, could self-expansion still be a key to survival? We found that a more humble but a more realistic belief in the self, and the self’s efficacy in being able to work with, rather than against its environment to be central to the survival of Asians (Chang, Chua, & Toh, 1996). This realistic and humble estimate of the self, however, is aided with a belief in self-directed control and regulation, a yielding of control over the world to external sources, be it God or the political authorities. This recognition of external, nonself powers, however, ironically gives rise to a strategy of self-empowerment by aligning oneself with the sources of power, be it religion or other people. Within this cultural context, self-efficacy might mean to be able to control/regulate one's own emotions and behaviors. Optimism might be derived not from positive self-evaluation but from the belief that the self is malleable, and that there are benevolent higher powers in charge of life events. Hope might be defined as having the belief that the crisis would be resolved with the aid of others and the higher power. The meaning of life is to be derived not in terms of individual gain and temporary achievement, but in a long-term salvation, and the integrity of the person embedded within the community. The manifested coping strategies then would be in a mode that works with the environmental forces, that is, a flexible reaction to the perceived demand of the environment.

**Stress-and-coping in the Asian Context**

We looked into how children (Chua & Chang, 1996), adolescents (Chua & Chang, 1997), and young and old adults (Chang, Chua, & Toh, 1996) cope with their daily stress in Singapore and found tell-tale signs of some culture-specific factors that might "buffer" between the stressors and the self; in many cases, these factors might actively promote positive
outcomes. A common characteristic of the coping responses evidenced among the Malays (Norzarina, Ihsis, & Chang, 2003) and Chinese in Singapore (Chang, Chua & Toh, 1996) is their preference in using self-directed coping strategies; that is, they tend to change their own thoughts, feelings, and behaviors in order to accommodate the reality. This preference for self-directed coping suggests (1) an external attribution over stressful events, and (2) a belief in the efficacy of changing the self. I believe that, in these beliefs lay the key to resilience inherent in the Asian people.

**Resilience of Singaporeans**

As argued previously, to search for the resilient factor of a people, one has to look for it within the culture that is indigenous to the people. Our search for cultural characteristics of Singaporean Malays and Chinese yielded two distinct ideological or belief systems, each representing a legacy of a great civilization: For the Chinese, the Buddhism-Taoism tampered Confucian teachings; for the Malays, Islam combined with the indigenous beliefs and practice of the pre-Islamic Malays.

Our empirical studies also bear out the hypotheses we had in mind, that what the people cherish the most also provides the protection or resilience function that enables the people to weather the specific challenges they face.

**Resilience in the Confucian Context**

Our search into the popular cultures of Singapore has yielded three inter-related concepts concerning the self, and coping against daily stress of the Chinese: (1) a belief that the self is malleable, (2) that the life project is for continuously cultivating/regulating the self, and (3) to flexibly cope with whatever challenges life might unleash against the individual. I will elaborate on them further.

**Incremental beliefs of the self.** In the Confucian context, the self is considered as an ever evolving, dynamic, and flexible agent (Tu, 1985), and the project of life is a proactive process leading from the isolated independent self to a self that is dynamically integrated with the community. The growth and maturity of the self is in the flexible integration with others rather than “individuation” from the community. Within this context, “resilience” factors that might help the individual cope with stress in life would involve the sense of self-efficacy in terms of actively seeking integration with, rather than conquering the environment.

Our measurement of the implicit Chinese self-beliefs are inspired by popular proverbs, such as “People were born similar to each other; it is learning that sets them apart!” (San Zhi Jin, Anonymous, no date), and “Like a piece of jade-in-the-rough, people need polishing (learning) in order to become a useful instrument” (Chinese Proverb). These popular adages contain the folk wisdom that intimately informs the Chinese people on how to conceptualize the self (that is, it is like a diamond in the rough and needs continued shaping in order to bring out the shine!), and to see a world and others as challenges and opportunities for self-cultivation. A Junzi – a Confucian gentleman, or accomplished person, therefore, zhiqiang buxi – never stops empowering the self by continued learning (Confucius, circa 250 BC). Eight items were initially conceptualized to measure this construct; factor analysis yielded two factors that are meaningfully interpretable: Incremental beliefs and Entity beliefs, with coefficient alphas at .75, and .63 respectively.

**Emotional self-regulation in the Confucian world.** With the Confucian self-ideal, the Chinese people would see obstacles and frustrations encountered everyday as challenges for learning and further development of the individual. More constructively, the self needs to see trials and tribulations as the opportunity for further growth. The self is seen as engaged in an ever-growing process; this process of growth, however, is in conjunction with the growth of the community.
Again, we found this in Menfucius' writing: "If Heaven intends to bestow great responsibility on the individual, it must inflict bitter suffering to his heart and will, and enslave his flesh and bones" (Mencius, Circa 200 AD). Therefore, the Chinese are admonished to take life's difficulties with the patience of Job of the Christian Bible. The frustrations or suffering however, in the Confucian world, are not meant to test one's piety to a divine being as in the Christian world, but as privileges bestowed to the individual for further growth.

Indeed, we have identified proverbs as well as expressions containing these beliefs in our interviews with young Chinese people in Singapore. We have collected and organized this folk wisdom in terms of practical admonitions on how to manage success, failures and setbacks in life into our measure of "emotional self-regulation" to be presented here. Items were generated by the authors and compiled into a scale. The final scale evidenced an internal alpha of .74 (Low & Chang, 2003), which though not high, is acceptable and indicates that these proverbs do form a coherent psychological construct.

Coping flexibility. Finally, our continued investigations on stress-and-coping in the normal everyday context of Singapore have led us to the conceptualization and construction of a measure for "coping flexibility" (Hong & Chang, 2003). As mentioned earlier, when faced with the same stressors, Asian children used more self-directed coping strategies, but more importantly, they demonstrated more and more varied coping strategies (W. Chua & Chang, 1997; A. Chua & Chang, 1997) and are more attentive and more responsive to the perceived demands of the situation. These observations led us to conceptualize a "coping flexibility" (CF) construct as an underlying mechanism that regulates the use of different coping strategies (Hong & Chang, 2003). We have found that CF to be a useful construct in mediating between the stressors and the adaptive outcomes. We therefore, consider CF a necessary ingredient of the resilience process of Chinese children.

MULTI-FACET CONFUCIAN RESILIENCE CONSTRUCT — PRELIMINARY EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

We conducted a preliminary empirical study (Chang, Koh, Low, & Lee, 2002). The result suggested that there is a coherent three-dimensional construct, inclusive of incremental self-beliefs, emotional self-regulation, and coping flexibility. We are presenting the results in the attached figure. We found the three-dimensional resilience constructs and their measurement to be of strong psychometrical properties and were associated with significant levels of lowered depression.

Since the construction and validation of this Chinese Resilience Scale (Chang, Koh, Low, & Lee, 2002), a series of empirical studies have been conducted to further test the resilient function of this construct: Poo and Chang (2003) investigated how children exposed to family violence coped with their daily stress, and found that these three resilient factors either in combination or individually provided moderating effects on anxiety and depression. Sivam and Chang (2003) found that this resilient construct moderated the impact of year-end performance evaluation on incumbent employees of a multinational company. To validate the "Chinese-ness" of this resilience factor, Low and Chang (2003) found that Chinese adolescents in Malaysia also subscribed to these resilience beliefs and practice, and that those with higher beliefs in these factors were lower in depression. These pieces of empirical evidence of the Chinese resilience construct derived from a wide diversity of predominantly Chinese samples provided convincing testimony of the efficacy of these factors.

Resilience In the Malay Singaporeans — Religiosity

Islam is a defining characteristic of the contemporary Malay culture of Singapore4. Like any other religion in a relatively traditional society,

4) I like to thank Mohd Isnis bin Mohd Isa of the National University of Singapore for his research into the Malay Muslim culture of Singapore.
Islam to Singaporean Malays is not only a religion but also a way of life. To a Malay person, Islam provides a worldview, a set of every day practice and a general meaningful framework with which the individual interprets her life events. In other words, to the Singaporean Malay, Islam is culture, a shared and collective wisdom from which the individual draws inspirations and guidance in terms of how to live one’s life. To search for resilience factors in Singaporean Malays, we looked into a concept of religiosity of Malay Muslims.

Religiosity, used in the present context denotes a personal attitude towards religion and religion-related daily practice, rather than religion as an organized institution. James (1961) distinguished between institutional religion and personal religion. Institutional religion refers to the religious group or organization, and plays an important part in a society’s culture. Personal religion refers to the individual’s spiritual experience. I define religiosity in terms of three components: religious beliefs, religious attribution, and religious practice.

Religious Beliefs and Practice

Individual religiosity has been investigated by psychologists before. However, religion has never been a favorite topic for scientific investigation (Baumeister, 2003). The bias of contemporary psychologists against research in religion was often caused by the fact that most Western psychologists are not religious and view religion as outside of the realm of psychology. However, in many countries/cultural communities, religion is a fact of life. Our ideas about God are important indicators of how we view the world. Therefore, religiosity is not only a spiritual concept but a form of culture. Erikson (1963) considered religions to be important influences in successful personality development because they are the primary way that cultures promote the virtues associated with each stage of life. It is also suggested (Erickson, 1963) that religious practices or even rituals facilitate this development. As the structural element of the culture, religion to a great extent shapes the formation of the personality. Within these cultural communities, it is the personal belief in religion and the religion-related practice that helps the individual in weathering environmental challenges and promoting physical and mental health (Miller & Thorensen, 2003).

Islam: As a Religion and Its Role In Coping and Stress

The functions of Islam in providing resilience effect are four-fold (Isnis & Chang, 2003): It provides (1) a meaning of life, (2) a structure with which to frame and reframe life events including stressful events, (3) a belief in God as almighty and omnipresent (therefore one is supported and is not alone in the struggle in life), and (4) religious practice that helps to symbolically cleanse the person for redemption, in so doing re-affirm the meaning of life.

Meaning of life. Islam recognizes that humans need to have a sense of significance and meaning. Islam as a religion provides the meaning and a way to construct meanings in life (Pargament, 1997; 2003) The main tenets of Islam are submission to a single God, religious belief, and religious practice, the achievement of salvation via accomplishments of ‘acts’ deemed as ‘positive’. The proper execution of these ‘acts’ such as praying five times daily and acts of goodwill, will render upon the believer a sense of significance and an increase in self-esteem, which arise out of fulfilling a requisite (i.e. an act that is to be rewarded on judgment day) (Yahya, 2003). Crises in life may threaten one’s sense of significance. Many believers use Islam in order to regain and maintain that which is significant in life. An alternative strategy is religious framing, which is important as this shapes the perception of whether a crisis or stress factor is tenable or untenable. This mode of thinking enables a Muslim to interpret or reinterpret or reframe things so that the sense of meaning and significance is maintained.

In Islam, there are two ways of interpreting a stressful or significant event, the ‘Qada’ and ‘Qadr’, meaning a belief that something happens either because the Koran/God has predetermined it, or the second belief that whatever the Koran implies is meant to be consistently renegotiated with modern precepts and happenings (Hasan, 2003). We therefore consider a belief in God and attribution to God being important components in the resilience of Muslim Malays.
Religious support. The second function of religiosity in stress-and-coping is that of religious support; the believers feel as though they are not alone in their struggle against stress. Muslims are encouraged to believe that stress and crises are but events meant for them to struggle through and by it, become stronger. It is similar to the above mentioned Emotional Self-regulation belief of the Chinese. Islam proclaims that ‘we shall not charge a soul with more than it can bear’ and that ‘no soul shall bear another’s burden’ (Zahra, 2002). The Islamic God is viewed as a helping partner, and a group of like-minded people may lend a sense that they are receiving help during a time of need. Many Muslims’ parting shot of “God is with us” especially during events of extreme stress and crises often reflect a form of religious coping. It is this belief in God that gives strength to the Muslim in time of difficulty to be motivated to face the stressor as a challenge provided by God. Comforted by the belief that “God will provide”, a Muslim feels secure that things will never go too badly. Religious beliefs therefore provide protection against psychological stress and promote psychological well-being.

Religious practice. In terms of protection against adversity and promotion for well-being, Islam prescribes that certain acts or objects are ‘off-limits’(Hasan, 2003). In the consumption of food products and drinks, Muslims are forbidden to consume pork, lard, alcohol, gelatin derived from the marrow of animals, cold-blooded animals, and meat of animals which have not been slain by other Muslims. Murder, violence, extramarital sex, and adultery among others are also outlawed by the religion. Avoiding these activities helps Muslims maintain an ongoing sense of purpose, that they are headed in the right direction. Another practice is that of ritual purification within the religion. This offers Muslims a way to address personal failures and inadequacies. Individuals are required to take ablution before praying, chant verses in order to increase esteem, and many other rituals meant to exorcize either spirits or inner demons and fears. By participating in purification rituals such as confession or repentance (something deemed very important amongst moderate Muslims), individuals can reconcile their ideal, countless prayer services and vigils that have been performed.

Summarizing the above discussion, I propose a three-component construct of religiosity that includes religious beliefs, religious practice, and religious attribution as resilience for Muslim Malays.

Pargament (1997) reviewed empirical studies of spiritualness, religion, and coping and revealed four general findings regarding the question of how spiritual-religious coping practices relate to psychological coping outcomes. First, spiritual-religious coping was particularly important with highly stressful, largely uncontrollable situations in North America. Second, the methods were often significant predictors of coping outcomes even after nonspiritual coping methods were statistically controlled. Thus, spiritual religious coping seems to play a distinctive role in coping, especially in uncontrollable stressors. Thirdly, coping methods with positive impact included (1) perceiving a spiritual relationship with a trustworthy and loving God, (2) activities such as prayer, (3) religious reappraisal promoting the sense that growth can come from stressful events, and (4) receiving support from fellow members of a religious congregation (Pargament, 1997). The four functions mentioned by Pargament (1997) coincide with our construct of religiosity, religious beliefs, religious attribution, and religious practice.

Thus, leading up to the study conducted by Isnis and Chang (2003), with three samples of Malay Muslim children in Singapore, aged 6, 9, and 12. Because of practical limitations, all three samples contained only male participants. Religion was investigated as a possible source of resilience in coping against daily stress, which included events in different life domains classified as common daily stressors by Malay Muslim children aged 6 to 12 years in Singapore. First, it was hypothesized that Malay-Muslim children will significantly utilize religion-focused self-directed control coping strategies in domains viewed as generally uncontrollable, such as family and authority as compared to the academic domain which would most probably be coped with using either primary or relinquished coping. Second, it was predicted that children will report a significantly more positive outcome for these secondary religious-spiritual coping strategies used. Thirdly, Malay-Muslim children who view religion as an important element in their normal everyday life will exhibit a resilience in the form of a lesser likelihood to practice relinquished coping or simply...
giving up. Results of this study revealed that belief in the religion and the adherence to the practice of religion predicted less relinquish control with stressors (the act of giving up), higher frequencies of using self-directed coping strategies (that is changing the self in order to accommodate events), and higher positive emotions. The results indicate that there is a predominant active control utilized by the children with a high religiosity rating. The negative correlation between religion and relinquished control (giving up) points to the fact that religion is a form of resilience and the protective processes shield the child from the stressors faced as well as prohibit them from actually ‘giving up’. These children also brought up instances whereby their relatives or family would warn them against giving up and to leave matters they cannot control ‘up to God’. This belief acts as a protective process against relinquished control. The advocating of spiritual-religious coping methods by their community is a positive reinforcement of this. Thus this points to religion being established in Malay Muslim children as a form of emotional resilience.

Religious Attribution

We have identified that the function of religiosity is in providing a framework of meaning with which to interpret events in life, including both positive and negative events. Since the conclusion of the above mentioned study (Isnis & Chang, 2003), Shahira and Chang (2003) has conducted in Malaysia an email survey of Malay professionals (N= 108, males and females, mean age = 32), with at least tertiary education, to further investigate the role of religiosity in coping against occupational stress. These authors found that attribution to God was positively associated with subjective well-being and job satisfaction, but negatively associated with depression and job-related stress. These differential relationships with the positive and negative outcomes in life provided strong evidence for the hypothesis that attribution to God, an external attribution, is highly adaptive to these Malay Muslim professionals. Our subsequent interviews with selected respondents suggested that they considered that attribution to God provides an understanding and acceptance of stressful events in life; such “resignation”, yielding control to a higher power, provided relief to the respondents. Understanding that adversity in life is “God’s design”, the Malays believe that God must and would provide solutions to His believers. As in Isnis and Chang’s (2003) study, the respondents with high God attribution, instead of giving up on coping, showed a higher level of active coping, by changing one’s cognition and using behaviors to cope with job-related difficulties.

These two studies with Singaporean (Isnis & Chang, 2003) and Malaysian Malays (Shahiraa, & Chang, 2003) in combination suggested that a multidimensional religiosity construct does provide protection against the negative impact of life events. More importantly, it provides the confidence and the motivation for the individual to actively face life’s challenges and to engage in productive coping. This religiosity also predicts a pattern of coping responses characterized by active self-directed coping, e.g., changing the self in order to accommodate the reality. More studies in Malay Muslims are planned to more systematically validate the religiosity measure and their effects in promoting positive adaptive outcomes and reducing negative outcomes guided by our conceptual framework (see Figure 1).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Indigenous cultures, made of shared beliefs and practices, are products of a collective adaptation against environmental challenges. Cultures indigenous to the people are formed with collective efforts in coping with the challenges specific to the social and environmental niche. Therefore, an indigenous culture is a wealth of practical wisdom accumulated from a history of collective trial-and-error to survive and to thrive. It was our hypothesis that the resilience of a people could only be found in their indigenous culture rather than imported from other locales and other social historical spaces.

In contrast to the low population density and resource richness of the West, Asia is crowded and resource poor. Out of a history of largely uncontrollable and often unpredictable adversity, Singaporeans developed
their own ways of protection and promotion. In North America, self-expansion is resilient; in Singapore, self-development is resilient. In North America, perceived control over external events provides resilience; in Singapore, control over the self provides resilience. Finally, drawing from each of their own cultural heritage, the Singaporean Chinese construct resilience from the popular Confucian teachings and practice; the Singaporean Malays construct resilience by empowering themselves with their religious beliefs, attribution, and practices.

In this report, I have provided conceptual and empirical explorations of the constructs that constitute resilience in two cultural communities of Singapore, each representing the heritage of a great civilization in the world. Our series of empirical studies found that the belief systems cherished the most by the people also provide protection for its believers. In a world replete with political turmoil and natural calamities, Singaporeans have found their traditional beliefs helpful and comforting. With a history of political and ecological events highly uncontrollable and enormously threatening, Singaporean Chinese and Malays not only survived but have created economical miracles in which they take tremendous pride. Like the silver kris adorning Singapore's national carrier, they truly have characters forged in fire.

References


Chapter 1. Forged in Fire


Society of Personality and Social Psychology, American Psychological Association, San Antonio, TX, USA.


Shahiraa, S. H., & Chang, W. C. (2003). Coping with organizational stress in...