

Applying Risk and Resilience Framework in Examining Youth's Sustainability in Coping with Life's Challenges

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Abstract—This paper presents a study of youth's sustainability in coping with their life challenges from the risk and resilience conceptual framework. Specifically, the study examined the negative life events experienced by female and male respondents and how they cope with their challenges. A total of 428 youths (between 16-25 years old) participated in this study. Results showed that there seemed to be differences in the types of negative life events experienced by both female and male respondents. Female respondents seemed to be slightly more affected with emotional problems whereas male respondents seemed to be more prone to substance abuse and truancy. The mean scores of coping abilities of the respondents as a whole were generally fair ($M = 3.37$, $SD = .38$) with respondents reporting higher mean scores in Problem-Focused than Non-Productive Coping. The author concludes that individuals, who construe positive aspects of their experience, are better adjusted to problems and thus reflect their sustainability to meeting challenges in today's world.

Index Terms—Coping Abilities, Negative Life Events, Resilience, Risk

I. INTRODUCTION

Risks that imply vulnerability and adverse outcomes have been enumerated by several authors (Haggerty, Sherrod, Garnezy & Rutter, 1996; Kaplan, 1999; Werner & Smith, 1992). A review of the literature of risk reveals that the concept has developed over a long period of time, and over the course of its development has gone through several "iterations" (Doll & Lyon, 1998). Risk, technically, is a probability describing as any influence that increases the likelihood of the onset of a problem or maintains a problem (Fraser, Richman & Galinsky, 1999).

The first generation of studies was conducted by psychiatrists and psychologists who focused on demonstrating that negative life experiences were related to the development of mental health problems (Garnezy, Masten & Tellegen, 1984; Radke-Yarrow & Sherman, 1990). The findings from these studies are important in terms of demonstrating that being exposed to adverse circumstances during childhood was correlated with a heightened risk for many negative developmental outcomes (Doll & Lyon, 1998).

The third generation of risk studies transformed the study of risk to the study of resilience in individuals which has become the central integrative framework for the study of

psychological problems in children and adolescents (Masten, 1994). The roles of risk, competence, vulnerability, and protective factors are some of the topics of concern (Wang, Haertel & Walberg, 1994). In developmental psychopathology, adaptation is judged according to psychosocial milestone called developmental tasks.

In youth, major delays or failures in these developmental tasks are often the basis for evaluation of psychopathology (Masten & Reed, 2002). The findings demonstrated that some children who were at risk were able to "beat the odds" (Werner & Smith, 1982, 1992). It is within this exciting new field of study that the construct of "resilience" emerged (Wang et al., 1994).

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Risk and Resilience Concept

Rutter (1987) conceptualised risk and resilience as opposite poles "of individual differences in people's response to stress and adversity" (p.316). Risk encompasses the negative circumstances that an individual faces which are associated with poor outcomes. Resilience represents the positive counterpart of vulnerability and risk factors (Werner & Smith, 1982, 1992). Resilience is a complex construct that involves the interaction between adversity and an individual's internal and external protective factors – as well as developed competencies – that allow one to overcome adversity (Garnezy, Masten & Tellegen, 1984; Kaplan, 1999; Ungar, 2005).

In his recent presentation, Rutter (2010) conceptualized resilience as relative resistance to environmental risk experiences and not just social competence or positive mental health. There is a universal finding of individual differences in people's responses to all kinds of environmental hazard and evidence of 'steeling' effects in which successful coping with adversities that lead to improved functioning in individuals.

Walsh (2003) remarked that perhaps a more apt metaphor for resilience is "bouncing forward" in facing unanticipated future challenges. In order to adapt to a changing world, one must construct a new sense of normality as one copes with one's life. Resilient persons are not those who passed through the crisis unscathed, or simply bounce right back. Rather, they are those who:

"...struggled on, experiencing pain and suffering in the process. ...Instead, over time, those who are resilient strive to integrate the fullness of their experience into the fabric of their lives, into the person they later became and the relationships they develop. (Walsh, 2003, p.58)

Studies related to Resilience and Coping

Jew, Green and Kroger (1999) examined the correlation

between resilience and coping among 392 participants of seventh through twelfth grade students from a rural western school district. They found persons scoring higher on the resiliency scale are likely to demonstrate better academic skills and competence as well as display a wider scope of coping skills than are less resilient peers. Their pioneering work may indeed be a significant contribution to the study of resilience as it offers researchers a simple to understand model that lends itself well to empirical testing.

The broaden-and-build theory by Fredrickson (2001) predicts that positive emotions are useful in coping. Recent study conducted by Tugade and Fredrickson (2004) further expanded this theory into the realm of coping, suggesting that positive emotions guide present coping behaviour. By examining psychological resilience from subjective, cognitive, and physiological angles in the three studies conducted, Tugade and Fredrickson (2004) provide greater insight into the reasons why resilient individuals are able to effectively cope with stressful experiences, whereas others facing similar conditions do not fare as well. Thus, through exploration and experimentation, adolescents may be able to build an arsenal of effective coping resources that help buffer against negative emotional life experiences.

In the Asian context, Chan (2000) conducted a study to examine the effect of hardiness (resilience) in reducing psychological distress through positive cognitive appraisals and adaptive coping on 245 Chinese secondary school students in Hong Kong. These students were from Form 4 to Form 6 (age 13-18 years). Hardiness, life events, coping strategies, and psychological distress were assessed. It was found that although high resilient students, compared to low resilient students, did not appraise positive events as having greater impact. They perceived that negative events had significantly lesser impact. In addition, low resilient students reported using passive and avoidant coping strategies significantly more frequently than high resilient students.

In Singapore, Lim (2002) investigated the use of coping strategies and the differences in personality traits between 147 students of high and low risk in academic failure in a typical neighbourhood school. The study found that there were significant differences in the use of coping strategies between students of high and low risk of academic failure. High-risk students were found to have significantly lower scores on adaptive coping strategies than students of low risk of academic failure, particularly in adaptive beliefs such as perceived academic competency, positive self-esteem and learning goal orientation. In general, adaptive coping strategies seem to be positively related with resilient personality traits that are in essence positive affective states such as emotional stability, self-control, self-discipline and low anxiety.

Based on the risk and resilience framework, a study was conducted on the youths in Singapore. Two questions were used to guide this study. Firstly, what are the negative life events experienced by female and male participants? Secondly, how do they cope with their negative life events?

III. METHODOLOGY

The 428 youths (age between 16 and 25 years) were

selected based on their spread across different schools or organisation groups, gender, race, age and educational level considerations. The research process took both quantitative and qualitative stance, as recommended by Barton (2005), as well as Ungar and colleagues (2005) in resilience research.

The 15-item Negative Life Events were selected from several child and adolescent life events scales such as scales by Frymier and colleagues (1992) and Gonzales, Gunnoe, Jackson & Samaniego (2007). Negative life events in this study were categorised as personal-related factors (five items), family-related factors (five items), and school-related factors (five items) which happened in the recent months. Each participant indicates his/her responses to a dichotomous scale as "Yes" or "No".

The Coping Abilities Scale was adapted from the short-form of the *Adolescent Coping Scale* (ACS) (Frydenberg & Lewis, 1993). These items were empirically derived by means of conceptual grouping and factor analyses. The Coping Abilities Scale assesses a comprehensive range of coping strategies of adolescents on a five-point Likert-type scale, ranging from one (didn't do it) to five (used a great deal). Cronbach alpha reliability coefficients for the subscales problem-focused coping, non-productive coping, and social support, were .66, .54 and .70 respectively, and the coefficient for the overall total scale was .69.

A series of descriptive statistics namely frequency and percentage and chi-square were conducted to analyse the quantitative data. For qualitative data, the responses to open-ended questions were content analysed, organized, and coded into themes and categories to shed light on the central questions that were posed in this study.

IV. RESULTS

Negative Life Events of Participants

Participants were asked to indicate the negative life events that happened to them during the past twelve months based on three dimensions of problems related to self, family, and school. Table I presents a description of the types of negative life events experienced by both male and female participants.

Results show that the first two most commonly experienced negative life events were related to family problems, namely encountering parents' arguments or quarrels and having to deal with a family member who was seriously ill or injured. Altogether 75 respondents (or 17.5%) reported that they were affected by their parents' arguments or quarrels while 70 participants (or 16.4%) reported that they had to deal with a family member who was seriously ill or injured. Significant gender differences were found only in respondents being affected by parent's arguments or quarrels, where $\chi^2(1, N = 428) = 9.45$ at $p < .01$. Female participants ($n = 58$ or 22%) appeared to be statistically more affected by parents' arguments than male participants ($n = 17$ or 10.4%). In other words, twice as many female participants seemed to be affected by parents' arguments or quarrels than male participants.

Faring badly in school tests or examinations seemed to be the second concern of the participants. Out of 65 participants (or 15.2%), 45 female respondents (or 17%) and 20 male respondents (or 12.2%) indicated this school-

related problem. It appears that a great majority of the participants, who were mainly students ($n = 369$ or 86.2%)

in this study, were concerned about their academic performance

TABLE I: COMPARISON OF NEGATIVE LIFE EVENTS EXPERIENCED BY PARTICIPANTS BY GENDER (N = 428)

Dimen-sions	Variable Item	Gender				χ^2	p-value		
		Male (n = 164)		Female (n = 264)				Total (n = 428)	
		n	%	n	%			n	%
Self	Sickness/ injury	25	15.2	21	7.9	46	10.7	5.60	.01**
	Physically/ sexually abused	1	.6	2	.7	3	.7	.03	.85
	Emotional problem(s)	18	11.0	42	15.9	60	14.0	2.04	.15
	Substance abuse	12	7.3	7	2.7	19	4.4	5.19	.02*
	Conflict with friend(s)	21	12.8	39	14.8	60	14.0	.32	.57
	Loss of close family member	16	9.8	31	11.7	47	11.0	.41	.52
	Disagree-ment with parent(s)	20	12.2	38	14.4	58	13.6	.42	.52
Family	Family member with sickness or injury	23	14.0	47	17.8	70	16.4	1.06	.30
	Parents' argument/quarrels	17	10.4	58	22.0	75	17.5	9.45	.01**
	Parents' separation or divorce	3	1.8	9	3.4	12	2.8	.93	.33
	Disagreement with principal or teacher	6	3.7	6	2.3	12	2.8	.71	.39
School	School suspension	4	2.4	3	1.1	7	1.6	1.07	.30
	Absence from school	11	6.7	7	2.7	18	4.2	4.13	.04*
	Faring badly in tests/examination	20	12.2	45	17.0	65	15.2	1.85	.17
	Major failure	17	10.4	15	5.7	32	7.5	3.21	.07

Note. Significance level for chi-square statistics for two-way tables of percentages.
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

On the other hand, there were significant gender differences in respondents who overused of cigarettes, drugs, or alcohol, where $\chi^2 (1, N = 428) = 5.19$ at $p = .02$; and in respondents who were absent for more than 15 days of school, where $\chi^2 (1, N = 428) = 4.13$ at $p = .04$. Slightly more male participants appeared to be more prone to substance abuse or absent themselves from school than female participants.

In short, there seemed to be differences in the types of negative life events experienced by both female and male participants. Female participants seemed to be slightly more affected with emotional problems whereas male participants seemed to be more prone to substance abuse and truancy. This finding is somewhat consistent with Dekovic's (1999) finding in that females are more likely to be affected emotionally rather than males.

TABLE II: SCORE RANGES, MEANS, AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS ON COPING ABILITIES OF PARTICIPANTS (N = 428)

Variable	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
Coping Abilities^a	1 - 5	2.04	5.00	3.37	.38
Problem-Focused Coping	1 - 5	1.75	5.00	4.00	.55
Non-Productive Coping	1 - 5	1.25	5.00	2.94	.60
Social Support	1 - 5	1.00	5.00	3.08	.63

Note. Scales are bold-faced. ^aCoping Abilities Scale consists of Problem-Focused Coping, Non-Productive Coping, and Social Support subscales. When summing up for Coping Abilities scale, Non-Productive Coping are reversed-scored.

Coping Abilities of Respondents

Table II shows the mean scores of coping abilities of the respondents as a whole were generally fair ($M = 3.37$, $SD = .38$) with participants reporting higher mean scores in

Problem-Focused than Non-Productive Coping. On the other hand, participants reported lower mean scores in measures that were not related to resilience such as Non-Productive Coping ($M = 2.94$, $SD = .60$).

In other words, the results seem to suggest that the respondents seem to employ more problem-focused coping and seek social support rather than non-productive coping. Thus, taken as a whole, the results seem to suggest that generally the respondents were more likely to be individuals who could be able to adapt to the new environment wherever they went.

In terms of social support, there were 330 respondents (or 77.1%) who often (or a great deal) shared their happiness and sadness with their friends rather than talked to their teachers/supervisors or asked a professional person for help. Seven out of every ten youths ($n = 300$ or 70.1%) indicated that they often (or a great deal) shared problems with someone close. In fact, less than a third of the participants ($n = 143$ or 34.8%) turned to family for emotional support.

Verbatim Responses of Respondents in Coping with Life's Problems

Further elaboration on verbatim responses showed that 133 of the respondents (or 31.1%) attributed their abilities in overcoming their life's problems to problem-solving. Remarks such as:

"I always tackle the problem instead of avoiding and hiding from reality"
(ID 21),

"I take problems as it is, accept, manage, and deal with them" (ID 341).

In short, three out of every ten participants ($n = 133$ or 31.1%) attributed to their problem-solving abilities in overcoming their life's problems.

As many as 82 participants (or 19.2%) attributed to having optimistic attitude. They believed in looking "at the brighter side of things" (ID 7 and ID 96) and taking "things in (their) own stride" (ID 2). "Positive thinker is a born winner" (D 103).

Some 54 of the participants (or 12.6%) attributed to

qualities such as perseverance in overcoming their problems. Participants explained that they did “not give up easily when I meet with a problem” (ID 150 and ID 365) because they believed that “perseverance yields success” (ID 58). With perseverance, the participants were determined to overcome their problems. As one participant succinctly elaborated:

“I believe I have the determination and tenacity to overcome problems in my life. When I am determined and paused to solve a problem, I will not give up until I solve it. I am also willing to seek help when I need it.” (ID 133)

Another participant remarked that other than his own skills and strength, he felt that he needed support from friends and family. He elaborated:

“I believe that things will work out and that I have the skills and strength to solve any problems that comes my way. I will also have my friends and family to help me” (ID 146).

In other words, other than their own skills and tenacity, the participants also resorted to social support in overcoming their life’s problems.

Only 14 of the participants (or 3.3%) indicated that they were not able to overcome their problems because “I have the tendency of avoiding problems, rather than overcoming them” (ID 279). Another participant remarked that she did not “seem to believe in myself anymore” (ID 166). In other words, a small minority of the participants appeared to resort to non-productive coping and seemed to be negative in overcoming their life’s problems.

V. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Negative life events have been well-documented in pre-adolescents and adolescents, especially in adaptation competence (Dumont & Provost, 1999). However, negative life events of youth in relation to resilience, especially those ages between 17 and 25, have not been investigated. Thus, the result may add to new findings, especially in local studies, on how older youths coped with their life’s problems.

In retrospect, at least nine out of every ten respondents ($n = 414$ or 96.6%) felt that they were able to overcome life’s problems. The respondents had attributed their abilities to overcome life’s problems to problem-solving, optimistic attitude, and perseverance as deemed necessary to overcome life’s problems. Besides support from family and friends, even prayer to God was considered as useful in overcoming life’s problems. In other words, a great majority of the participants appeared to resort to productive coping rather than non-productive coping in helping them to overcome their life’s problems.

These findings are consistent with the resilience literature that resilient youths employed problem-focused coping as a means of adaptation (Chan, 2000; Jew, Green & Kroger, 1999; Lim, 2002). In the face of difficult or stressful situations, the way the participants responded might be helpful in dealing with the situations. Respondents who used problem-focused coping were able to adapt to their difficult situations. Effective coping strategies contribute to a reduction in stress and are important underpinnings for well-being (Frydenberg, 1997).

The majority of the participants might likely to seek social support from friends or someone close rather than consult adults such as teachers, counselors, and even family members. These young participants seem to be closer to their peers and friends rather than adults. The results seem to show that these participants are likely to seek social support from their peers and friends in coping with their problems. The findings are quite consistent with Furrer and Skinner (2003), Wentzel (1997, 1999) and Dekovic (1999) who found that peer support played more important role in youths’ lives as they reach adolescence.

From the above findings, one can infer that the youths on a whole generally coped well. Productive coping involves the individual capacity to manage problems in order to adapt to environmental situations. Werner and Smith (1982, 1992) believe productive coping involves the ability to influence and have control over personal needs and environmental demands. In other words, it appears that youths who employ productive coping strategy may likely to cope better than youths who employ non-productive coping strategy.

The findings showed that youths who were able to overcome life’s problems and negative life events focused on productive coping and were positive in outlook. Thus, it is very likely that youths who possess attributes of resilience are more likely able to adapt to the challenges faced as compared to non-resilient youths. The author concludes that individuals, who construe positive aspects of their experience, are better adjusted to problems and thus reflect their sustainability to meeting challenges in today’s world.

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