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Special Issue

**Asian Families in Crisis:
Resilience, Choices and
Self-determination**



Department of Social Work and Psychology
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This compilation of papers were presented at the Symposium "Resilience in Family Crisis: Implications for Social Policy and Services" held on 11-12 May 2001. It was jointly organised by the Centre for Advanced Studies, the Department of Social Work and Psychology and the Faculty of Law, National University of Singapore. Sponsorship was by Singapore Pools Pte Ltd and Kwan Im Thong Hood Cho Temple.

Editorial

The research on family resilience is growing and discussion on this topic is still rather limited. It is a fascinating area which deserves attention because the understanding of the dynamics of resilience amongst family members will enable social workers to find more effective strategies to assist families to deal with the crises they face. Resilience can act as an antigen to counter the social challenges and the setbacks that are faced by family members and individuals. However impoverished a family or a person is, there is still much resilience in store for dealing with various trying situations faced. So family resilience must be seen as a cumulative strength that can be tapped for meeting at times unexpected changes confronted by family members.

This special issue focuses on the resilience of individuals as well as families in handling and overcoming crises in their lives. It consists of eight papers presented at the Symposium on "Resilience in Family Crisis: Implications for Social Policy and Services" held in Singapore in May 2001. The compilation of papers for this issue will provide readers with some insights into ways by which Asian families exercise their coping choices which illustrate their self-determination and resilience. In addition, the papers cut across disciplines such as health, social, ethno-cultural and legal dimensions. Such a diverse discourse will be very enriching to professionals who are trained in one discipline. We need to address why some families manage to ride through a crisis and "bounce" back while others are less able to do so. Why do some individuals display high levels of hardiness and capacity to withstand adversities while others slide into a state of dysfunction? Are professionals resilient themselves to deal with their clients and social situations?

These are crucial questions that social work practitioners as well as helping professionals seek answers to. It is hoped that some of these answers can be found in the articles that follow. In a small way, this set of papers add to the growing body of literature on Asian ways of dealing and growing through a crisis. K. Young (1983) pointed out in her book *Coping in Crisis*, that crises are often opportunities

for growth, one of which may be the strength of character that develops from the experience.

While stresses are unavoidable in life, the skill of developing resilience is an art that many would like to have but cannot achieve. What are some protective factors that assist us to face adversity? Tan explains in her paper that a positive marital relationship and family environment are two factors which explain better parental adaptation to pediatric illness. Ho and Seng recommend the use of the life cycle approach and family systems perspective in the treatment of severe health and mental illness respectively. Sohanah and Ow studied the protective factors that explain the resilience of children in divorced families and found that the Islamic worldview provides a framework for understanding life and its ups and downs. The choices made by clients and their families are discussed by Kaan and Ong, who speak from the legal perspective. These two papers draw our attention to the importance of the socio-legal context within which clients make their choices, thereby exercising their self-determination. Nair, Pang and Soh highlight the resilience of children from violent families, and the ways they adopt to cope with their life situations. This study highlights the importance of caring adults, community resources and the emotional and interpersonal intelligence of the children themselves as protective factors contributing to their resilience.

Osman, Cheung and Suppien offer the results of an intervention, "The Healthy Start Programme", and analyse how it could have increased the resilience of families with very young children. The Family Support Workers offer timely advice and training to young couples who feel overburdened and guide them to handle the stressors inherent in the life stage they are experiencing. Chan and Chan elaborate on the use of "Body-Mind-Spirit Transformation Therapy" as an intervention suitable in the Asian Context, to build client resilience.

It becomes apparent that resilience is a process, and to appreciate its effectiveness we need to examine various issues from the developmental perspective. In addition, the socio-cultural and legal context have bearing on the dynamics of the resilient factor.

An interesting question to ponder over is, do resilient children develop into resilient adults? Since protective factors include both intra-personal and interpersonal elements, it would seem that the answer would not always be "Yes."

In sum, this special Journal publication raises many fascinating issues, underscoring the need to recognise and emphasise strengths within clients. Clients however impoverished, do have the capacity to deal with crises in their own ingenious ways. They can always find ways to cope at their best. Sometimes professionals treat them as helpless and take control over their lives, thereby unintentionally decreasing their self-confidence. Professionals must encourage those who seek their support to learn to deal with their crises. It is by learning to do things on their own that they become more hopeful and confident to shed their learned helplessness. When helping professionals take charge of the lives of their clients, then their help will be useless as they diminish the self-help capacity of their clients.

As professionals seeking to nurture positive coping skills, and facilitate the growth of their client's capacities for resilience and buoyancy in times of adversity, knowledge of the protective factors is essential. Research enables us to recognise the risk factors and successful clients reveal the dynamics of resilience. In identifying social, psychological and familial factors which make hardy and resilient persons, we can sharpen further the cutting edge of practice.

In dealing with family resilience, we cannot ignore the social support networks available. Families who have elaborate formal and informal support networks are more often than not more resilient than those who have less support networks. Much research on support networks have shown this to be the case. In fact, the capacity to draw support from informal support networks like friends, neighbours, workmates and relatives are critical to making of the resilience of families. Better resilience is due to the cushion provided by strengths drawn from the informal support networks as each member of these networks has various tangible and intangible resources which can be utilised by the family members or the individuals in crises. Informal support networks act as a buffer and a social defence against social abrasions confronting family members, and provide opportunities for affected family members to recuperate and become more resilient.

Besides good practice skills, social workers and helping professionals must themselves have the resilience to deal with the limitations of resources of their clients, organisations, and environment. They must have the passion and the tenacity to withstand various kinds of obstacles and stay focused to help their clients deal with their crises. One cannot

beat one's chest and give up that easily. Worse still, if we drown ourselves with the frustrations arising from the change we hope to bring to our clients' social situations, then our own resilience wears down and we become incapacitated in helping our clients. Professionals can become more resilient if they can build good networks with resourceful individuals and organisations, thus enhancing their efforts to enrich the lives of those who want to improve their lives.

Kalyani Mehta and S. Vasoo

Reference

Young, K. (1983). *Coping in Crisis Hong Kong*: Hong Kong University Press.

Enhancing Resilience and Family Health in the Asian Context *

Cecilia L.W. Chan & Edward K.L. Chan

Social workers can facilitate the formation of a new form of resilience to cope with the ever-changing social context of individuals and families. The resilience can be established through a new form of "Body-Mind-Spirit Transformation Therapy". Through working with chronic patients, dying patients, bereaved families, infertile couples, divorced women and disadvantaged children, the authors have developed a new intervention approach of Transformation Therapy which emphasised the building strength and resilience of individuals. This approach incorporates the body, the mind, the spirit as well as the social participation to help transform clients in "turning curses into blessings" and "transformation through pain". This growth-oriented approach help build a healthy body, healthy mind and a healthy sense of meaning of life in society. Specific examples of individuals and groups are used to illustrate how individuals and families changed into being more resilient through transformation therapy.

In the midst of the search for excellence, financial crisis, globalisation, there are strong cries for enhancing hardiness and resilience of individuals in order to make society more competitive. The family is the basic unit of support in society. Asians rely heavily on the family as their sole source of energy and change. It is therefore crucial to examine how we can enhance the resilience of individuals and families in the rapidly changing socio-economic-political environment especially after the Asian financial crisis (Walsh, 1998).

* Part of this paper was presented in the Keynote Address of "Resilience and Family Health" at the Symposium on Resilience in Family Crisis: Implications for Social Policy and Services, organised by the National University of Singapore, May 11– 2, 2001.

Families experience normal developmental issues of childbirth, dating, marriage, health, illness, study, work, unemployment, old age, disability and death. There are individuals who suffer more as they may be born into families with abusive or irresponsible parents, broken homes, families in poverty, heavily polluted communities or politically unstable societies. Family members help each other through difficult times and share their achievements together. Besides being helpful, families can hurt as well. Families can hurt so much that individuals become depressed and some may even kill themselves. Yet, there are individuals who become good citizens despite the fact that they were in adverse situations when they were young. The first author grew up in a single-parent family and that is probably why she has special passion to help people in need. This article will examine the process of "Transformation Through Pain" and "Turning Curses into Blessings" by using examples of resilient individuals to illustrate how they can change their lives despite challenges and traumatic circumstances.

Challenges of Contemporary Post-Traditional Families

Families are experiencing new dynamics of continuous tension between traditional expectations of filial piety, authority, patriarchy, parental control and responsibilities as well as contemporary utilitarian cultures of egoism, pragmatism, calculation, efficiency, alienation among family members. The second and third generation of the post-war baby boomers and their parents now live in a new technology-driven consumer-oriented society, quite different from what their parents and grandparents had experienced when they were young.

Would there be new expectations and aspirations that may lead to conflicts and disharmony? The Confucian attitude of obedience, filial respect and compliance to authority are replaced by a new morality of diversity, idiosyncrasy, confrontation and daring search of excellence. The virtues of hardwork, the cautious and conservative styles of the old-timers are replaced by speculative, progressive search for quick returns in the finance market. The beauty of this mix of the old and the new in Asian societies has provided a dynamic fluidity of growth energy prepared to face the brand-new world of challenges and incongruence. Yet, for those who are less adaptive, such tensions

may become a source of threat, friction, frustration, hostility, and even destruction.

There are increasing numbers of divorce, depression, youth crime, non-performers in schools, chronic illnesses and mental health issues, domestic violence, gang activities, drugs, alienation, mistrust and general unhappiness among people in the post-industrial urban societies. Families breakdown, elderly persons feel that they are a burden, parents are helpless and children are lost. Traditionally, the family is the main source of support and energy to cope with adversities and difficulties. In what ways can we enhance the resilience of families and individuals in times of health, financial, emotional, social, moral, legal and spiritual crisis?

Sau-Chu was a Grade 9 graduate and she started working in her teens. After getting married, she became a full-time home-maker. The husband physically abused her for 10 years. She lost her self-esteem and self-confidence. When her husband started to abuse the children, Sau-Chu took her children and went to Harmony House in Hong Kong, a shelter for battered wives. A psychologist described her as “a wet mother cat with two wet kittens” because she was shaking and had totally lost her confidence. After thinking through it carefully, Sau-Chu decided on a divorce. She worked during the day and went to evening school to complete her secondary education. She set up a Single Parents’ Association while she was studying for her Diploma in Social Work. She worked in Harmony House after her social work training and volunteered in helping other single parents after work. Now she gets funding support for her Association and she has become the paid Director of the Association serving other single parents. From Sau-Chu’s experience, we can see that she has turned her suffering into an energy of care for other fellow-sufferers. Her agency is now providing support and help to many other single parents who are desperate and lost. Sau-Chu’s resilience is a good example of how one can turn one’s curse into blessings for other people.

Resilience: Transformation Through Pain into a New Source of Energy

Problem families with low resilience may result in multi-generational chaos and problem behaviour. The multi-generational welfare-family

with teenage pregnancy, unemployment, poor educational attainment, drug addiction and mental health problems in the United States is often cited as examples of chronic welfare dependency and poverty cycle. However, if the family is resilient, the individuals in these families will work hard to make a living while becoming more passionate and understanding as well as committed to the welfare of other people (Chan, 2000).

The transformed and resilient families will be able to unconditionally love, forgive and accommodate each other in the family (Chan & Wong, 2000). Individuals in the family truly respect other members as unique and of equal rights. After overcoming traumatic experiences, family members may be more caring towards each other. Family and collective interests will take priority over individual interests. Members are happy and willing to make personal sacrifices for the family cohesion and social solidarity. When the families are being confronted with issues of health/illness, wealth/poverty, frame/humiliation, success/failure, position of power/imprisonment, gains/loss, the family will have the strength to keep members together to overcome difficulties and barriers.

Challenges Confronting Families During Good Times

In healthy, wealthy, successful, powerful and influential families, there may be issues of high expectation and unrealistic hopes on children. Children of professors may not aspire to an academic career as they may find it hard to outperform their parents. Children of CEOs (Chief Executive Officers) will be regarded as under-achievers if they want to be social workers or artists. Children of celebrities cannot misbehave and have to present themselves properly even if they are young. Like celebrities, adults or children living under the limelight and camera face many restrictions. With adequate resource support and guidance, these children may climb the social ladder with no difficulty. Yet, parents may be too busy to spend time with their family while their children are raised by domestic helpers whose main duty is to serve and not to train their young "masters". These young masters will not know how to serve and contribute. They may become self-centred and have no idea of what suffering is like.

Challenges Confronting Families During Bad Times

Children in families with chronic illness, poverty, abuse, humiliation, failure, and conflict with the law are often being denigrated. They would grow up in shame and would want to prove themselves. Some work hard to achieve but there may be others who take short-cuts and look for quick money. The eldest children in the family often assume leadership positions as they are forced into taking care of younger siblings. It is through bad times that children mature quickly, take responsibilities and become more resilient. Adversity may also breed bad habits and deviant values when survival is the primary concern. The quality of parenting is of crucial importance in affecting the path of development of the child. Having someone who cares and loves them would be the determining factor on whether a person can become resilient or otherwise. Children in single-parent families develop great empathy for other people because the remaining parent can still provide them with good quality of care and nurture (Chan & Wong, 2000).

The Self and the Family

The self-interest-orientation and the family-orientation are often taken as polarities. In fact, quite on the contrary, some types of individual pathology among children is closely related to problems of the marriage or communication of the parents. Anorexia, obsessive-compulsive behaviour, truancy, drug abuse, gambling, addictive behaviour of young persons are often closely tied to power conflict and poor communication within the family or among the parents. We try to find out what is wrong with the individuals without realising that it is the interaction that should be blamed (Lee, 1998). The close enmeshment among family members among Asian families creates problems of lack of privacy, suffocating love and domination by parents, intrusiveness of family members on individual behaviour, career choices which hampers the necessary growth through trial-and-error. Heavy emotional enmeshment reinforces heavy dependency on each other (Chan, 2000a). When something goes wrong with the family, these individuals who are so enmeshed may not be able to survive.

Pros and Cons of Intimate Family Relationships

	Pros	Cons
Intimate and enmeshed family relationships in Asian cultures which emphasised so much on the family	High intimacy Feel good and comforting Unconditional love and forgiveness High mutual dependency High levels of trust and identification High commitment to collective well-being Support during times of difficulties/trauma	Intrusive owing to lack of boundary Suffocating love because of lack of personal space Members may be over-controlling socially and emotionally Over-dependent on other members, lack ability to survive on one's own Severe hurts during bereavement Family can be source of trauma Spoil children during times of affluence

Love and protection is essential for the healthy growth of a child but indulgence and over-protection can also be suffocating. It is therefore crucial for parents and individuals to be reminded of the concept of resilience and “growth through pain” as the awareness of the importance of “turning curses into blessings” will bring strength to personal resilience (Levin, 1987). Since there is no single formula for family solidarity and harmony, formulating rigid family policy may not be very helpful. One size does not fit all. Respect for every individual as a unique human being, not as the possession of someone else, will be of utmost importance.

Social System and Family Health

A solid social infrastructure will be able to provide individuals and families with a safe and secure environment for growth and development. Social provision of housing, medical and mental health services, education, old age protection, social and community development, services for disadvantaged group, etc. can contribute to the building of a healthy and resilient society. Accommodation for deviance, people who are different, will also

be crucial. The trust that people can be resilient and grow out of their suffering will be essential. The culture of acceptance and support will make a difference.

Family and Health Projects in Hong Kong

The Department of Social Work and Social Administration of the University of Hong Kong runs a Practice Clinic. The clinic runs pioneering empowerment services for women with depression; persons with chronic illness, dying, bereavement, loss and grief; people with issues of infertility, menopause, sexual fulfillment in marriage, sexual orientation, equal opportunities; victims of abuse, incest, rape, sex workers, children who witnessed violence; children whose parents have mental illness, who are in prison, are addicts (drug/gambling), bankrupted, or have passed away.

These services are organised under a Body-Mind-Spirit empowerment framework in which individuals are trained to focus on their “gains through loss”. Resilient survivors are identified and they are invited to share their experience with other fellow-sufferers as good role models. Clients are taught breathing techniques, helped to express their emotions and provided with social support so that they re-establish their meaning of life (Chan & Fielding, 2000).

Shui-Ching is an SLE (Lupus) patient. She developed skin conditions and pain on her joints for a few years until she was finally diagnosed with SLE. She suffered from her illness and the severe side-effects of the treatment. When her condition became more stable, Shui-Ching participated actively in a self-help group for SLE patients. She began to participate in the formation of the Alliance of Patients Mutual Help Organisations since 1991. She is now the Chairperson of the Alliance that is serving more than 30 patient organisations with over 10,000 members and she sits on the Board of the Hospital Authority to represent patients' interests. She claimed that she is very proud of having this illness which has given her such invaluable opportunities to learn and serve other chronic patients.

Promoting Family Resilience: Body-Mind-Spirit Intervention

In order to enhance the resilience of individuals and families, the authors adopted a body-mind-spirit approach in working with clients. The model focuses on the total well-being of the person physically, mentally, socially, emotionally and spiritually. It is through a strength-focused intervention that clients are encouraged to grow through pain and suffering. By perseverance and resilience, the individuals grow emotionally and spiritually. Survivors are encouraged to help other people and contribute to collective action of advocacy. For example, cancer survivors devote their time to help other newly diagnosed cancer patients. They also participate in dance and fashion shows to promote public acceptance of cancer survivors. They find meaning out of their own suffering. While being confronted with the possibility of death, cancer patients have to consolidate on what are the more important things in their life. Reflection on issues of life and death often has transformed individuals. Quite a number of cancer patients participate in *qi-gong* exercises and alternative healing methods to fight cancer. Exercise, massage and physical activities are found to be helpful in maintaining good quality of life for cancer patients (Leung, 1997).

Asian Philosophies

Resilience is a concept that is familiar to the East and the West. In the West, there is a saying "No Pain, No Gain." In the East, we have Buddhist teachings and lifestyles of non-material attachment, Taoist philosophy and health practices, Confucian teachings and morality for the welfare of the collective, plus a great variety of folk religion, rituals, ghost and ancestor worship. The Buddhist teachings promote the concept of non-attachment and nothingness as "the more one wants, the more one suffers" (Chan, 1997; Yang, 1995). The Taoist philosophy suggested that one should let go and accept life as ever-changing and unpredictable (Chan, 1997; Yang, 1995a). The rich mix of traditional cultural values and contemporary belief systems fosters great potential for mindfulness and spirituality pursuit in the Asian environment.

Transformation: Physical

The authors adopt a number of physical exercises in their groups and work with clients. By training of body, the therapist is also training the mind, will-power and perseverance of the clients. By instructions on breathing, clients are asked to breathe in energy from the Cosmos and bring in joy and peace through the *Qi* (energy). Clients regain a sense of control over their health. By moving their body or massaging acupuncture points, clients can increase their sense of control over their health without talking about their emotions. Asians are not used to talking about their feelings. We like doing or thinking instead of talking about how we feel.

The health practice knowledge on what to eat, what to cook, what to do in maintaining health, reducing pain and living longer, are warmly welcomed by Asians. Social workers can utilise some of these concepts in promoting body awareness and self-acceptance. Individuals report a gain in physical strength, trust in their body and being more in touch with themselves.

Transformation: Emotional

People become emotionally stuck when they cannot accept their mishaps in life, their mood swings, especially negative emotions and thoughts, and cannot effectively express their emotion. For a person to be transformed emotionally, he/she will have to cultivate peace of mind and a sense of tranquillity. In order to do that, one must be ready to let go and forgive. If one can appreciate love and concern from others, he/she will be able to maintain a positive attitude despite downturns in health and business.

Spiritual Transformation: Growth through Pain

Some people have a hard time getting over their traumatic experiences, loss and pain. Overwhelmed by a strong sense of loss of control, they are resentful of their God, turn depressed and angry, sad and fearful, dispirited or aggressive, bitter and cynical about life, jealous and suspicious, revengeful and unforgiving, self-pitying and socially destructive. They are a miserable lot stuck with the negativities in life (Barnard, 1990).