

Undergraduate Student Stress, Coping and Resiliency in Thai Higher Education: A Call for a Positive Psychology-Based Intervention

Douglas Rhein and Ian McDonald, Mahidol University International College, Thailand

Date Received: 22 May 2020 Revised: 13 July 2020 Accepted: 28 July 2020

Abstract

Mental health issues within Asian higher education continue to be problematic for educators, administrators, and policy makers. Within the Thai context, specific concerns surrounding student orientation practices, social and academic culture, and avoidance of psychological treatment tend to lead to a greater prevalence of undiagnosed distress. Student stress, anxiety, and lack of resiliency are detrimental to the adjustment to higher education as well as to the overall education experience. As the prevalence of psychology disorders continues to increase among Thai students, this article calls for the integration of positive psychology-based interventions within the Thai hazing ritual commonly referred to as SOTUS or *Rap Nong*. The use of specific positive psychology interventions with a culturally integrated focus within the Thai system will increase positive coping strategies, decrease stress and anxiety, and create a more positive learning environment. The development of positive coping mechanisms can be facilitated through the introduction of positive psychology-based interventions within the Thai higher education system.

Keywords: *Positive psychology, resiliency, stress, interventions, higher education*

Introduction to Common Mental Health Issues in Thai Higher Education

Attending university is an important and often stressful experience for students and presents students with new psychological challenges. It is argued that the commonly practiced *Rap Nong* (SOTUS) hazing rituals should be thoroughly integrated with various positive psychology-based interventions in an effort to reduce stress, anxiety, and depression. This is critical to the development of resilience and specific coping strategies, for most undergraduates enter higher education at an age often associated with the onset of mental health problems (Kessler et al., 2007). Arnett (2000) used the term emerging adulthood to describe this stage of development when students are adjusting to challenges involved in facing new academic and social situations as well as the transition from adolescence. While many view the experience as exciting, constructive and react positively, significant numbers of students suffer from the negative consequences of this transition. To date, much of the research on undergraduate stress, anxiety, and depression has a Western emphasis, yet these issues also impact students in Asia (Peltzer et al., 2017). Therefore, it is necessary to explore student stress and seek practical methods of reducing the negative impact of stressors.

Theories of stress originated with a physiological orientation (see Selye, 1976), led to psychological approaches to stress within the cognitive paradigm (see Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; McGrath, 1982). More recently, cognitive theories of stress have focused on the relationship between the individual and the situation. The processes central to stressor mediation identified as significant are the appraisal of the stressor, coping mechanisms employed, and potential development of resilience. In this article we explore student stress and outline the role stress plays among students in higher education within the Thai context in association to the related cognitive processes associated with stress. Intervention might be initiated through weekly freshmen seminar meetings at colleges throughout Thailand. Stress is broadly considered the reaction to a stressor but the nature of a stressor is subjective. For some students writing an essay is more stressful than giving a presentation and yet for others the opposite is true. From this perspective, stress is a normal part of life and should be embraced (McGonigal, 2015), yet in academia it is also a common source of concern among students (Goldman & Wong, 1997) and faculty (Misra et al., 2000).

Research in Thailand has indicated that there are some stressful life events associated with psychological problems, which include social relationships, immediate family members, teachers, poor

health, lack of interest in course content, and failed personal relationships (Thanoi et al., 2010). This study indicated that adolescents who experienced stressful events may become depressed. The negative reactions to the aforementioned stressors have been described in multiple studies (Rungsan et al., 2017; Thanoi et al., 2010). Additional research from Thailand indicated that students with higher levels of stress and lower levels of psychological well-being were more likely to consume alcohol, had a greater risk of depression, and experienced sleep disturbances (Calderon et al., 2019). The latter has been shown to be negatively correlated with emotional problems, anxiety, and suicidal ideation (Sarchiapone et al., 2014). While much of the research reported tends to focus on negative outcomes as opposed to intervention for well-being (Naci & Ioannidis, 2015), it is important to identify the activities that impact student experiences, health, and functioning.

SOTUS or *Rap Nong*—A Wrong Rite of Passage

Rap Nong or SOTUS is a series of events and activities, often weeks long, where new students gather together to meet senior students. Essentially, it is the introduction to the university culture and way of doing things. These SOTUS rituals involve various activities from singing and dancing to forced binge drinking, scandalous behavior and occasionally fatalities, as regularly reported in the local press (Saiyasombut & Voices, 2015). SOTUS is the Thai version of fraternity or military hazing in the United States, but it is conducted in Thai in universities. SOTUS stands for Seniority, Order, Tradition, Unity, and Spirit. The purpose of this article is to persuade Thai academic institutions to accept that, given the increasing prevalence of stress, anxiety, and a lack of coping strategies, the *Rap Nong* events should be integrated with positive psychology interventions. SOTUS continues today as it is commonly understood as a valuable tradition and, given Thailand is a hierarchical society, first year students must learn to accept hierarchical relations and thus develop obedience to upperclassmen (Winichakul, 2015). Obedience to power and order and the uncritical acceptance of tradition is the antithesis of the mission of higher education today. Given the real psychological problems students are facing, it is necessary to integrate specific aspects of the SOTUS events with the development of coping mechanisms and methods to create greater well-being. The creation of a positive vehicle to ease the transition to higher education should assist students with learning and developing a more positive attitude towards their education (McInnis et al., 2000). Whether one considers initiation rituals of *Rap Nong* a rite of passage, a community ritual, a ritual of power and authority, or an important tradition (Chamchoy & Burford, 2019), this article attempts to demonstrate that positive psychology-based interventions would be of greater long-term benefit than the rituals of the SOTUS system. The subsequent section of this article will introduce positive psychology in general and then specific interventions to be integrated into the SOTUS system.

Positive Psychology Based Intervention

Due to the increased prevalence of mental health issues in Thai undergraduate programs, greater attention should be given to this student cohort. The potential of resilience training and the introduction of resilience-based practices has the potential to reduce stress (Steinhardt & Dolbier, 2008). It is reasonable to assume that assisting incoming undergraduate students to develop or improve the quality of this transition will improve their overall mental health and potentially have an impact on their academic performance. Therefore, the introduction of resilience intervention strategies aimed at improving coping skills may prove beneficial to reduce student stress during the freshmen seminar or during the SOTUS activities.

The field of positive psychology emphasizes the importance of cultivating mental health in addition to eliminating mental illness, which has been the recent primary focus of psychology (Seligman et al., 2006). Efforts to understand and develop happiness and well-being have been around for many years. The modern emphasis commenced with William James' concept (1902) of 'healthy mindedness,' and later in ideas from humanistic psychologists, including Rogers' concept of the fully functioning person, Maslow's call to study healthy people to understand self-actualization, and others (historical overview—Froh, 2004). However, the field of positive psychology began in 1998, when Dr.

Martin Seligman formally called for psychologists to emphasize research on human excellence and goodness, character strengths, and building the best things in life. Seligman did not suggest replacing the study of mental illness, but he claimed that the almost exclusive focus of psychology on understanding and treating psychological problems did not do much to contribute to the development of thriving individuals or communities (Seligman, 1998; Seligman & Czikszentmihalyi, 2000). The disease-model perspective that had dominated psychology for so long approached mental illness with the goal of eliminating psychopathology, assuming that the absence of mental illness equals mental health. Positive psychology posits that mental health is more than the absence of psychological disorders and is concerned with the study of all that is good in life and on developing methods to improve well-being for individuals, families, and communities (Seligman & Czikszentmihalyi, 2000).

Many organizations and countries have taken notice of Seligman's call and are focusing on the importance of improving individual well-being. For example, Bhutan has formally adopted the happiness of its people as its principal goal; France and England have launched initiatives to measure national well-being; China and Australia are considering adding official happiness measures to economic measures of prosperity, just to name a few (see Bok, 2011 and Donaldson et al., 2015 for a review). More recently, Scotland, New Zealand, and Iceland also have made well-being a priority (Fisher, 2019). With so many potential benefits, the question then becomes, are there effective ways to improve our well-being? Evidence from studies in positive psychology suggests that the answer is yes (Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009; Donaldson et al., 2015). Frederickson (2001) proposed the broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions to better understand this process. This theory states that positive emotions, such as love, interest, pride, contentment, and joy, are able to broaden an individual's attention and habitual way of thinking and acting. Positive emotions set people on a path that, over time, builds lasting personal, physical, cognitive, emotional, and social resources (Frederickson et al., 2008). For example, the urge to play and to be creative is broadened by the experience of the positive emotion of joy. Engaging in different types of play is known to build enduring physical, cognitive, and social resources (Frederickson, 2001). Similarly, the positive emotion of pride, after an achievement, broadens by stimulating the urge to share the news with others and to think of new and more challenging goals in the future. Sharing news can build enduring resources by strengthening existing social bonds and attachments as well as increasing the individual's self-confidence and feeling of efficacy. Subsequent work has found a causal relationship between learning to generate positive emotions and increased life satisfaction, and that the effects increase with time (Frederickson & Joiner, 2018). Additional reports of meta-analyses of positive psychology interventions (PPIs) have shown consistent beneficial effects on subjective and psychological well-being and depression (Hendriks et al., 2018). With sustained effort and training, then, positive psychology research suggests that levels of well-being can be increased.

Positive Psychology in Asia

Around Asia, the influence of positive psychology has spread rapidly. From nationwide initiatives in schools across Bhutan, to more targeted applications in India, Singapore, and China, countries in the region are implementing programs aimed at improving well-being (Seligman & Adler, 2018). For example, in 2010, Beijing Normal University School of Psychology hosted the International Conference on Positive Psychology and Education. Likewise, Tsinghua University hosted a 2010 conference on positive psychology aiming to improve well-being in educational institutions (O'Brien, 2010). Tsinghua University also runs a Positive Psychology Research Center, highlighting the importance of the topic (Seligman & Adler, 2018). Clearly, there is an interest in the potential benefits of incorporating elements of positive psychology into classrooms in Asia.

With the spread of these ideas comes the need to carefully consider how relevant the findings of experiments using primarily Western samples of education are to non-Western populations and educational systems. The theoretical perspective of cultural psychology assumes that psychological processes and culture complement each other. Implicit in this assumption is the belief that processes of the mind (e.g., conceptions of happiness and well-being) are not uniform across cultures and that

a set of constructs and measures that is valid in one culture may not be meaningful in another cultural context (Shweder, 1991; Lu & Gilmour, 2004). Of central importance, then, in considering the use of exercises in non-Western cultures is whether meaningful differences exist in the conception of happiness and well-being, and what culturally acceptable routes exist for its attainment.

Research into positive psychology exercises using non-Western samples is still quite limited in scope and in quality (Hendriks et al., 2018). Initial studies suggest that certain activities are universally beneficial, while others may benefit from being modified to 'fit' the specific culture (Ng & Lim, 2019). For example, the individualist view held in European and North American cultures strongly defends the independence of the self in relation to others. Happiness in Western cultures tends to be described using factors such as frequency of experience of positive emotions, self-esteem and affirmation of personal worth through personal achievement (Uchida et al., 2004; Lu & Gilmour, 2004). Seeing oneself as intelligent, talented, or kind may therefore effectively protect the Western individual from the anxiety of seeing oneself as stupid, talentless, or cruel. Comparatively, the collectivist view seen in East Asian cultures emphasizes harmony in social relationships and interpersonal connectedness. This suggests that well-being in collectivist cultures depends on one's ability to fulfill social roles and obligations as well as one's readiness to respond to social expectations. Compassion, support, and mutual sympathy are seen as ways to happiness in East Asian Cultures (Uchida et al., 2004). So, adapting positive psychology interventions to fit the values and beliefs of the culture may increase their overall effectiveness.

Positive Psychology Interventions

One area of positive psychology that has particular relevance for educators is the development of PPIs. The PPIs are activities designed to increase positivity in daily life and, subsequently, coping skills and resilience. Many PPIs have been developed and tested, and some consistently have shown significant positive effects on increasing well-being. The next section briefly describes seven categories of PPIs with examples (Parks & Titova, 2016; Boehm et al., 2011), which should be integrated into the SOTUS system.

Gratitude. The purpose of this group of PPIs is to cultivate feelings of gratitude toward people or other external conditions that have changed one's life for the better in some way. They may be focused on the act of reflection or also can include an active social component. For example, keeping gratitude journals, such as "Count Your Blessings" is a PPI that asks students to write down three or more good things that happened and to reflect on why. Some evidence shows that doing this activity once per week is more effective than doing it every day (Duckworth et al., 2005). Other studies have found that actively expressing gratitude has beneficial effects (Parks & Titova, 2016). "The Gratitude Visit" is a PPI that asks people to first think of someone who did something that has changed their life for the better. Once one has chosen the influential person they wish to focus on, then they are asked to write a letter of gratitude to this person explaining what they did and the effect it has had on their life. Finally, participants are asked to make an appointment with the influential person and to read the letter to them face to face (Seligman, 2011, pp. 30–31). Variations of these activities has shown that well-being may be improved by decreasing depressive symptoms, increasing the experience of positive emotions, and improving health (Parks & Titova, 2016). Gratitude-based interventions that strengthen social connections may be a good cultural fit with Asian cultures that emphasize strong familial bonds and feelings for the group (Hendricks, et al., 2018).

Kindness. Research has found that PPIs promoting kindness enhance well-being, whether through prosocial spending, or other deliberate kind acts not involving money. Kindness and happiness often occur together and reinforce each other (Parks & Titova, 2016). One useful PPI involves spending small amounts of money on others, rather than on themselves, for example, buying a meal for a homeless person, or buying a coffee for a friend. Researchers found that money, when spent on others, can lead to higher well-being. In "Performing Acts of Kindness," participants are asked to perform five acts of kindness for others in one day. Studies have found this to be more beneficial than doing one kind act

per day for a week (Lyubomirsky et al., 2004). PPIs such as these fit well into Buddhist cultures, which stimulate feelings of compassion for others and encourage meaningful acts of kindness.

Savoring. Savoring activities ask people to pay close attention to activities that normally give them enjoyment, but that they may take for granted, so that such pleasant experiences can be appreciated, intensified or prolonged. In other words, stop and smell the roses in life (Lyubomirsky, 2008, pp. 191–193). PPIs designed to increase savoring may be focused on developing savoring as a general skill to be applied across different situations, or as a specific skill to be taught and practiced. In one PPI, participants were asked to take 2–3 minutes per day to reflect on two pleasurable experiences, and to prolong their enjoyment by attending to them. For example, a person might concentrate on the many aspects of a favorite fruit, noting the smell, texture, appearance, and flavor. Another savoring PPI involves teaching participants to photograph things that are beautiful and meaningful to them (Parks & Titova, 2016). “Replaying One’s Happiest Days” is a PPI that asks students to take 10–15 minutes and think privately about their happiest experience. It may be important not to write the experience down or share it (Boehm & Lyubomirsky, 2009). Savoring PPIs, then, can range across sensory, cognitive and emotional stimuli. Research suggests focusing one’s awareness on all parts of an experience can lead to benefits, including fewer depressive symptoms, more positive emotions, and higher levels of well-being (Parks & Titova, 2016). Asian populations, with varied natural wonders and rich cultural achievements in art, food, and music, should benefit greatly from savoring interventions.

Empathy. Meaningful social relationships are essential to well-being (Seligman, 2011). PPIs that focus on strengthening social connectedness aim to develop empathy for others. “Loving Kindness Meditation” is a PPI that teaches people to cultivate warm, loving feelings for self and others by focusing their attention first on a loved one (such as a close relative), and then expanding these feelings to include themselves and then other people. Researchers have found that regular practice of Loving Kindness Meditation has robust benefits, including decreases in depressive symptoms, as well as increases in positive behaviors and emotions. (Frederickson et al., 2008). Other activities to increase empathy focus on developing the self-other overlap and the ability to see things from another’s perspective, resulting in increased understanding and stronger social bonds (Parks & Titova, 2016). Learning the skill of responding actively and constructively to good news from a friend or loved one developed one’s empathy and has been shown to strengthen relationships (Seligman, 2011). Another PPI involves making a new social connection, however small, each day for a week. Examples include chatting with a classmate they do not know well, or asking a worker at a favorite restaurant about their day. Participants are asked to choose a day to spend an hour with an important person and to do something meaningful to connect with them. Then, they are to write down what they did and how it made them feel. As mentioned above, collectivist societies value activities that strengthen an appreciation of strong, interdependent relationships (Hendriks et al., 2018). Thus, the benefits from PPIs cultivating empathy are likely to be amplified.

Optimism. Optimism based PPIs develop the ability to create positive expectations for the future and to modify present behavior to more effectively follow these ideals. The “Best Possible Self” activity asks participants to imagine their life as it would be if everything went well in all areas, including career, relationship, lifestyle, etc., and write about it for 15 minutes (Lyubomirsky, 2008). In another version, called “Life Summary,” people are asked to write a one to two-page biography of their life as if summarizing the successes and accomplishments of a long, fruitful life. They are then asked what they can do in the present to begin creating that life (Seligman et al., 2006). In an effort to maximize its benefits, Sheldon and Lyubomirsky (2006) found that having participants regularly reflect back on what they wrote strengthened and prolonged its positive effects. Societies that emphasize harmonious relations over individual achievement can use optimism PPIs such as the “Life Summary” and the “Best Possible Self” to enhance an individual’s ability to successfully fulfill their culture’s expected social roles and obligations.

Strengths. Character strengths are innate qualities that are energizing, intrinsically motivating to use, and feel authentic (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). PPIs targeting the identification and use or

development of one's character strengths lead to increased well-being and fewer depressive symptoms (Lyubomirsky, 2008). For instance, clients may be asked to complete the VIA survey of character strengths, which identifies their top character strengths. Simply identifying strengths can have positive effects. However, using them in new ways or developing them is more impactful than simply identifying them (Seligman et al., 2005; Seligman, 2011). More specifically, asking people to identify their top five character strengths, then use them in novel ways every day over the course of a week has been shown to increase positive emotions and well-being (Parks & Titova, 2006). For example, a person with the character strength of vitality/zest might volunteer to do an activity at work. Someone high on appreciation of beauty could attend a concert and savor the experience. Since these PPIs involve doing things that are intrinsically pleasing, it follows that increasing their frequency and variety would affect well-being positively. Another PPI asks people to compare their strengths, identify some they share with a family member, friend, or classmate, and plan an hour that taps into one or more of their shared strengths (Seligman, 2011). While identifying and using character strengths has universal appeal, PPIs involving family, friends, or larger groups may be particularly well suited for cultures that emphasize harmony and the success of the group over the individual.

Meaning. Having meaning in one's life is an important predictor of life satisfaction. Many PPIs facilitate a better understanding of what brings meaning, and help us identify actions that can enhance their achievement. One such activity involves setting intrinsic goals that will lead to autonomy, competence or relatedness (Lyubomirsky, 2008). For example, deciding to join an adventure club that requires weekly attendance and regular interaction with others satisfies the intrinsic need to relate to others. Similarly, setting a goal to learn a skill, such as playing a musical instrument, or photography techniques, will lead to feelings of worth that are intrinsically rewarding. Other meaning-based PPIs focus on meaning-making after negative events, though reflection or writing, can help develop effective coping skills (Parks & Titova, 2016). Reflecting on and selecting goals that satisfy needs and pursuing them is intrinsically rewarding and produces larger gains in well-being than the pursuit of circumstantial material goals (Sheldon et al., 2010). Like many of the PPIs, aligning one's personal goals with activities that are meaningful to the culture and society are likely to have a positive impact in collectivist societies.

Why These Interventions

It is important to note that the interventions discussed herein are a process to assist students with the development of resilience and are not necessarily generalizable to other stressors. The ability to adequately ameliorate potential protective mechanisms varies contextually and temporally (Vanderbilt-Adriance & Shaw, 2008). As with other behavioral and cognitive interventions, the impact on the participants also depends on the individual and the organization or environment which the individual is interacting in. When considering the value of PPIs in an educational setting from the point of view of the cultural dimension described above (individualism vs. collectivism), it becomes clear that culture may mediate the effectiveness of some positive psychology strategies. For example, the Western individualist values of self-improvement, self-expression, and the pursuit of individual goals seem to indicate a suitable fit with the PPIs that develop the individual (see above). If one's culture values affirmations of individual worth (e.g. "I" am "smart"), it follows that the PPIs of identifying and using personal character strengths, pursuing goals that are meaningful to the individual, or imagining one's ideal future would be more appropriate, and perhaps more effective, than cultivating gratitude.

On the other hand, individuals coming from collectivist cultures that emphasize self-control, interdependence, maintaining positive relationships, and fulfilling expected roles in society would likely benefit more from using PPIs that cultivate feelings of gratitude (see above). More specifically, expressing one's gratitude to a significant other, or performing acts of kindness for others, both highlight an awareness of interdependence with others, promote harmony and demonstrate effort toward maintaining positive social relationships. Some PPIs may be adapted to better fit the culture's focus. For example, the PPI of pursuing goals meaningful to the individual may be changed slightly to focus on pursuing group goals. Similarly, the PPI of imagining one's ideal future could be adapted

slightly to encourage the imagining of successfully fulfilling social obligations. There are many cultural factors to consider when deciding how to incorporate PPIs into a classroom or curriculum, and there is no one-size-fits-all approach to improving well-being, even within a single culture. Questions concerning individualism vs. collectivism, religiosity, restrictions on activities, customs with long histories, and more, all have clear and direct impact on which PPIs to use.

Cognitive Appraisal and Coping Strategies

People tend to behave in predictable patterns based on the agents of socialization within their culture. These agents, be they religion, media, family education systems, or government shape the understanding and stress responses of the people. The concept of culture is necessary to contextualize the appraisal, coping, and resilience as found in the Thai context. The development and support of an emic perspective within this theoretical paradigm is supported by Mahoney and Bergman (2002) who agree that the specific sociocultural responses to stressors and the development of context specific resilience must be considered. Depending on the culture, there are variations to the appropriate strategy to implement when confronted with a stressor (Kim, 2008). However, not all cognitive and behavioral patterns produce positive results or are conducive to mental health. Therefore, the ability to effectively appraise and cope with stressful events is necessary to maintain positive mental health.

Cognitive appraisal is defined as the process of evaluating whether an interaction is relevant to one's well-being and if so, how (Folkman et al., 1986). During stressful life events, students often implement two cognition processes that are important to their ability to understand the stressor. Primary cognitive appraisal is the process of evaluating the importance or significance of the event. Secondary appraisal involves one's ability to overcome, cope or improve life with the stressor (Lazarus, 1993). Both primary and secondary cognitive appraisals interact to determine how individuals respond to stressors in the environment.

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) defined coping as "the constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person" (p. 141). When students encounter stress, anxiety, and other emotionally distressing experiences, coping is considered the most relevant aspect of the psychological study of situational adaptation. While there are many different patterns of coping and frameworks for analysis, the work by Lazarus (1993) began to distinguish between the major types of coping styles and concluded that the two major forms were (i) emotion focused coping that is based on decreasing the emotional distress through specific cognitive strategies, managing the reaction to the stressor as opposed to manipulating aspects of the situation causing the stressor and (ii) problem focused coping that is based on eliminating or deteriorating the intensity of the stressor via problem solving, removing the stressor or removing oneself from the influence of the stressor (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). It is acknowledged that problem focused coping strategies are beneficial when the stressor is within one's control whereas emotion focused coping is better suited to responding to stressors that are beyond one's control. These adaptive coping strategies often are implemented concurrently whereby the individual utilizes both to successfully overcome the impact of a stressor (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). An additional coping style, avoidance coping, was later suggested (Endler & Parker, 1990) that included the tendency for individuals to avoid stressful situations, yet avoidance coping is associated with an increase in psychological dysfunction (Higgins & Endler, 1995).

Men and women respond to stress and cope differently. Women are more likely to choose emotion focused coping strategies while men are more likely to choose problem-focused coping strategies (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). It has also been shown that women are more likely than men to ruminate or employ emotion focused coping (Thoits, 1995). This has an impact on the gender-based experience of stress as emotion-based coping strategies are often less effective at reducing stress when compared to problem-focused coping strategies (Carver et al., 1989). This variance in the gendered pattern of rumination may explain partially why adolescent males in Thailand are more likely to exhibit behavioral problems (truancy, drug and alcohol usage, and aggression) whereas adolescent females are more likely to experience negative affect such as stress, anxiety and depression

(Charoensuk, 2007; Pengpid & Pelzer, 2012). Overall, the role of cognitive appraisal and student coping strategies are both important in gaining a better understanding of student stress.

Developing Resilience

An additional cognitive process linked to the reduction of student stress and the negative outcomes of unhealthy coping strategies is the development of resilience. Early research on resilience (Block & Block, 1980) referred to this as 'ego-resilience' and categorized resilience as a trait which one either has or does not have. Thus, the early notion of resilience involved traits or protective factors (Rutter, 1985). As resilience research became more prominent in the 1990s, many of the conceptual models explored the individual protective characteristics as opposed to the process of overcoming stressors or life adversities (Luthar et al., 2000). These have since been developed and refined to include specific characteristics such as hardiness (Bonanno, 2004), self-efficacy (Gu & Day, 2007), and self-esteem (Kidd & Shahar, 2008).

A debate began to emerge regarding the conceptualization of resilience as a trait as opposed to a process (Windle, 2011). The concept of resilience as a combination of protective factors implies that one could develop these factors through cognitive and behavioral change. This began the transition from conceptualizing resilience as a trait to a process. Soon thereafter, Agaibi & Wilson (2005) defined resilience as a "complex repertoire of behavioral tendencies" (p. 197). This transition demonstrates one of the problematic aspects of defining resilience. Some researchers approach this construct as a trait yet others conceptualize resilience as a process. This discrepancy hinders the veracity of scholarly findings related to resilience (Davydov et al., 2010). Yet this failure to operationalize the construct and develop specific measurement tools has not driven this complex phenomenon into obscurity as exhibited by the work of scholars (Luthar, 2006; Rutter, 2006; Rutter, 2012; Walsh, 2015). While the definition of resilience may be problematic, most agree that resilience involves both the ability to overcome adversity and some form of positive adaptation to the situation (Luthar, 2006). In an effort to operationalize a variable for this intervention proposal, it is necessary to clearly define one's terms. Therefore, the working definition used in this proposal is based on the work of Luthar et al. (2000), which argued that resilience is "a dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity" (p. 543).

Appraisal, Coping and Resilience—The Meta-model of Stress

It is important to differentiate coping and resilience as occasionally these terms are used interchangeably, yet they are conceptually distinct (Campbell-Sills et al., 2006). Coping is the positive or negative cognitive response to a stressor whereas resilience, once developed, is a positive characteristic that is present even prior to a stressor and positively influences the appraisal and coping responses. As such, the development of resilience has a protective impact that subsequently influences the stress appraisal and coping processes.

The interaction between people and the environment is an integral aspect of stress, appraisal, coping, and the development of resilience. The meta-model of stress (Fletcher & Fletcher, 2005) indicates that stressors are a reaction to our environment and are interpreted by the responding sensation and perception processes that activate the appraisal and coping sequences. This results in positive or negative responses and resilience development or failure. Therefore, each variable is related to and influences the stress response process whether it be biological via sensation and perception of stimuli or through metacognition in response to the emotional appraisal and the chosen coping mechanism.

The ability to improve university student resilience and coping strategies would likely have a positive impact on an institution's ability to more effectively manage student stress levels and thus potentially decrease anxiety and depression (Houston et al., 2017). Given the increased psychological and behavioral issues Thai undergraduates face, there is a growing need for universities to develop comprehensive and innovative interventions designed at improving the quality of their mental health. An intervention should increase resilience, assist in the development of greater coping skills, and have

the potential to positively impact student's mental health and academic ability. Steinhardt and Dolbier's work (2008), which involved the use of a resilience intervention course included psychoeducation, cognitive-behavioral therapy techniques, rational emotive therapy, and other cognitive components, found that college participants reported greater resilience, coping skills, and less stress. Additionally, the development of cognitive appraisal techniques and analysis of typical students' coping strategies allows the participants the opportunity to develop greater resilience. This is exemplified in further research by Leppin et al. (2014), who conducted a meta-analysis on resilience intervention programs aimed at improving resilience and the associated mental health issues. They concluded that the intervention programs had a positive effect on the participants. More recently, use of the Resilience and Coping Intervention has been used with undergraduates to demonstrate the important link between these two cognitive processes (First et al., 2018). In summary, stress, cognitive appraisal, coping, and the development of resilience are important concepts that impact student mental health. The development of resilience is a personal asset that has the potential to protect students from the negative appraisal of academic or social stressors and reduce the negative coping strategies (such as avoidance), which can positively influence other mental processes such as the promotion and development of meta-cognition. As students learn various methods to develop resilience, they should begin to give greater consideration to the nature of a stressor, their tendency to opt for certain healthy or unhealthy cognitive appraisals, and begin to use more positive cognition strategies, such as introspection and metacognition. Both educators and school psychologists are morally and professionally obligated to develop tools and practices that help students develop more effective appraisal, coping mechanisms, and the protective elements that eventually lead to resilience. An effective method of completing this is through the implementation of positive psychology interventions, which involve the above-mentioned variables, as well as a greater focus on positive psychology and well-being as outlined by the work of Seligman (2011).

Conclusion

In this article the implications of stress and anxiety for educators and administrators was examined, particularly in the Thai context, by exploring some of the most effective positive psychology interventions in recent scientific literature, and describing how these currently are being used in educational settings. Finally, the PPIs were discussed in relation to the cultural dimension of individualism vs. collectivism. There is much interest internationally in the practical application of concepts from positive psychology to the classroom and these PPIs should be incorporated into the first-year student orientation or seminar sessions. The literature available on the use of PPIs gives reason to be excited about potential changes in what many feel has become a problematic educational system. It is important at this early stage of development for educators and administrators to consider carefully the impact that cultural differences might have on the effectiveness of the methods they choose to incorporate. Well-being researchers are aware of the influence that culture has on how a group defines happiness, as well as socially acceptable methods of attaining it. This awareness must be expanded and used to guide the development and testing of culture specific PPIs, as well as their integration into existing schools. To summarize, stress, anxiety, and the lack of coping skills has a significant negative impact on a student's adjustment to the undergraduate experience. There are many cognitive processes associated with this including appraisal, the development of both adaptive and maladaptive coping mechanisms, and the subsequent development of resiliency. The PPIs discussed herein are intended to decrease unhealthy cognitive tendencies and introduce concepts of coping and resiliency to support all first-year students. The integration of these PPIs into the SOTUS or *Rap Nong* system should be considered by educational administrators and policy makers within the Thai context. The authors suggest that this system be incrementally introduced to the Thai higher education system and data analyzed to determine if this is a suitable method to reduce student stress and positively impact the development of resilience.

References

- Agaibi, C. E., & Wilson, J. P. (2005). Trauma, PTSD, and resilience: A review of the literature. *Trauma, Violence and Abuse, 6*(3), 195–216. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1524838005277438>
- Arnett, J.J. (2000). Emerging adulthood: A theory of development from the late teens through the twenties. *American Psychologist, 55*(5), 469–480.
- Block, J. H., & Block, J. (1980). The role of ego-control and ego resiliency in the organization of behavior. In W. A. Collins (Ed.), *Minnesota symposium on child psychology* (pp. 39–101). Erlbaum.
- Boehm, J. K., & Lyubomirsky, S. (2009). The promise of sustainable happiness. In S. J. Lopez (Ed.), *The Oxford handbook of positive psychology* (2nd ed.; pp. 667–677). Oxford University Press.
- Boehm, J. K., Lyubomirsky, S., & Sheldon, K. M. (2011). A longitudinal experimental study comparing the effectiveness of happiness-enhancing strategies in Anglo Americans and Asian Americans. *Cognition & Emotion, 25*(7), 1263–1272.
- Bok, D. (2011). *The politics of happiness: What government can learn from research on well-being*. <http://press.princeton.edu/chapters/i9107.pdf>
- Bonanno, G. A. (2004). Loss, trauma and human resilience: Have we underestimated the human capacity to thrive after extremely aversive events? *American Psychologist, 59*(1), 20–28.
- Campbell-Sills, L., Cohan, S. L., & Stein, M. B. (2006). Relationship of resilience to personality, coping, and psychiatric symptoms in young adults. *Behaviour Research and Therapy, 44*(4), 585–599.
- Calderon Jr., R., Pupanead, S., Prachakul, W., & Kim, G. (2019). Happiness, perceived stress, psychological well-being, and health behaviors of Thai university students: Preliminary results from a multinational study on well-being. *Journal of American College Health, 1*–9.
- Carver, C. S., Scheier, M. F., & Weintraub, J. K. (1989). Assessing coping strategies: A theoretically based approach. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 56*(2), 267–283.
- Chamchoy, P., & Burford, J. (2019). Academics' participation in initiation ceremonies: Charting contested meanings and mixed possibilities for orienting Thai freshmen. *Teaching in Higher Education, 1*–16.
- Charoensuk, S. (2007). Negative thinking: A key factor in depressive symptoms in Thai adolescents. *Issues in Mental Health Nursing, 28*(1), 55–74.
- Davydov, D. M., Stewart, R., Ritchie, K., & Chaudieu, I. (2010). Resilience and mental health. *Clinical Psychology Review, 30*(5), 479–495.
- Donaldson, S. I., Dollwet, M., & Rao, M. A. (2015). Happiness, excellence, and optimal human functioning revisited: Examining the peer-reviewed literature linked to positive psychology. *The Journal of Positive Psychology, 10*(3), 185–195.
- Duckworth, A. L., Steen, T. A., & Seligman, M. E. P. (2005). Positive psychology in clinical practice. *Annual Review of Clinical Psychology, 1*(1), 629–651.
- Endler, N. S., & Parker, J. D. (1990). Multidimensional assessment of coping: A critical evaluation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 58*(5), 844–854.
- First, J., First, N. L., & Houston, J. B. (2018). Resilience and coping intervention (RCI): A group intervention to foster college student resilience. *Social Work with Groups, 41*(3), 198–210.
- Fisher, D. (2019, October, 30th). "Wellbeing worldbeaters: New Zealand, Scotland and Iceland." *Institute of Welsh Affairs (IWA)*. <https://www.iwa.wales/agenda/2019/10/wellbeing-worldbeaters-new-zealand-and-scotland/>
- Fletcher, D., & Fletcher, J. (2005). A meta-model of stress, emotions and performance: Conceptual foundations, theoretical framework, and research directions. *Journal of Sports Sciences, 23*, 157–158
- Folkman, S. & Lazarus, R. S., (1980). An analysis of coping in a middle-aged community sample. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior, 21*, 219–239.
- Folkman, S., Lazarus, R. S., Dunkel-Schetter, C., DeLongis, A., & Gruen, R. J. (1986). Dynamics of a stressful encounter: cognitive appraisal, coping, and encounter outcomes. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 50*(5), 992–1003.
- Folkman, S., & Moskowitz, J. T. (2004). Coping: Pitfalls and promise. *Annual Review of Psychology, 55*, 745–774.
- Fredrickson, B. L. (2001). The role of positive emotions in positive psychology: The broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions. *American Psychologist, 56*(3), 218–226.
- Fredrickson, B. L., Cohn, M. A., Coffey, K. A., Pek, J., & Finkel, S. M. (2008). Open hearts build lives: Positive emotions, induced through loving-kindness meditation, build consequential personal resources. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 95*(5), 1045–1062.
- Fredrickson, B. L., & Joiner, T. (2018). Reflections on positive emotions and upward spirals. *Perspectives on Psychological Science, 13*(2), 194–199.

- Froh, J. J. (2004, May/June). The history of positive psychology: Truth be told. *NYS Psychologist*, 16(3), 18–20. <https://scottbarrykaufman.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Froh-2004.pdf>
- Goldman, C. S., & Wong, E. H. (1997). Stress and the college student. *Education*, 117(4), 604–611.
- Gu, Q., & Day, C. (2007). Teachers resilience: A necessary condition for effectiveness. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 23(8), 1302–1316.
- Hendriks, T., Schotanus-Dijkstra, M., Hassankhan, A., Graafsma, T. G. T., Bohlmeijer, E., & de Jong, J. (2018). The efficacy of positive psychological interventions from non-western countries: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *International Journal of Wellbeing*, 8(1), 71–98.
- Higgins, J. E., & Endler, N. S. (1995). Coping, life stress, and psychological and somatic distress. *European Journal of Personality*, 9, 253–270.
- Houston, J., First, J., Spialek, M., Sorenson, M., Mills-Sandoval, T., Lockett, M., First, N., Nitiéma, P., Allen, S., & Pfefferbaum, B. (2017). Randomized controlled trial of the Resilience and Coping Intervention (RCI) with undergraduate university students. *Journal of American College Health*, 65(1), 1–9.
- Kessler, R., Angermeyer, M., Anthony, J., de Graaf, R., Demyttenaere, K., Gasquet, I., de Girolamo, G., Gureje, O., Haro, J., Kawakami, N., Karam, A., Levinson, D., Mora, M., Browne, M., Posada-Villa, J., Stein, D., Tsang, C., Aguilar-Gaxiola, S., Alonso, J., ... Ustün, B. (2007). Lifetime prevalence and age-of-onset distributions of mental disorders in the World Health Organization's World Mental Health Survey Initiative. *World Psychiatry*, 6(3), 168–176.
- Kidd, S., & Shahar, G. (2008). Resilience in homeless youth: The key role of self-esteem. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 78(2), 163–172.
- Kim, Y. Y. (2008). Intercultural personhood: Globalization and a way of being. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 32(4), 359–368.
- Lazarus, R. (1993). Coping theory and research: Past, present, and future *Psychosomatic Medicine*, 55(3), 234–247.
- Lazarus, R. S., & Folkman, S. (1984). Stress, appraisal, and coping. Springer Publishing Company.
- Leppin, A., Bora, P., Tilburt, J., Gionfriddo, M., Zeballos-Palacios, C., Dulohery, M., Sood, A., Erwin, P., Brito, J., Boehmer, K., & Montori, V. (2014). The efficacy of resiliency training programs: A systematic review and meta-analysis of randomized trials. *PLoS ONE*, 9(10), e111420. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0111420>
- Lu, L., & Gilmour, R. (2004). Culture and conceptions of happiness: Individual oriented and social oriented SWB. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 5(3), 269–291
- Luthar, S. S., Cicchetti, D., & Becker, B. (2000). The construct of resilience: A critical evaluation and guidelines for future work. *Child Development*, 71, 543–562
- Luthar, S. S. (2006). Resilience in development: A synthesis of research across five decades. In D. Cicchetti & D. Cohen (Eds.), *Developmental psychopathology: Risk, disorder, and adaptation* (pp. 739–795). Wiley.
- Lyubomirsky, S. (2008). *The how of happiness: A new approach to getting the life you want*. Penguin.
- Lyubomirsky S., Sheldon K.M., & Schkade, D. (2005). Pursuing happiness: The architecture of sustainable change. *Review of General Psychology* 9(2), 111–131.
- Lyubomirsky, S., Tkach, C., & Sheldon, K. M. (2004). Pursuing sustained happiness through random acts of kindness and counting one's blessings: Tests of two six-week interventions. *Unpublished raw data*.
- Mahoney, J., & Bergman, L. (2002). Conceptual and methodological considerations in a developmental approach to the study of positive adaptation. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, 23(2), 195–217.
- McGonigal, K. (2015). *The upside of stress: Why stress is good for you*. Penguin/ Random House.
- McGrath, J. (1982). Methodological problems in research on stress. In H. W. Krohne & L. Laux (Eds), *Achievement, stress, and anxiety*, (pp. 19–48). Hemisphere.
- McInnis, C., James, R., & Hartley, R. (2000). Trends in the first year experience in Australian universities. *Department of Education Training & Youth Affairs*. <http://hdl.voced.edu.au/10707/18781>
- Misra, R., McKean, M., West, S., & Russo, T. (2000). Academic stress of college students: Comparison of student and faculty perceptions. *College Student Journal*, 34(2), 236–245.
- Naci, H., & Ioannidis, J. (2015). Evaluation of wellness determinants and interventions by citizen scientists. *The Journal of the American Medical Association*, 314(2), 121–122.
- Ng, W., & Lim W. (2019) Developing positive psychological interventions: Maximizing efficacy for use in eastern cultures. In L. van Zyl and S. Rothmann Sr. (Eds.), *Positive psychological intervention design and protocols for multi-cultural contexts* (pp. 277–295). Springer.
- O'Brien, E. (2010). *Happiness and positive education in China*. <http://positivepsychologynews.com/news/elaine-obrien/2010090213318>

- Parks, A. C., & Titova, L. (2016). Positive psychological interventions: An overview. In A. Wood and J. Johnson (Eds.), *The Wiley handbook of positive clinical psychology* (pp. 223–231). Wiley-Blackwell.
- Peltzer, K., Yi, S., & Pengpid, S. (2017). Suicidal behaviors and associated factors among university students in six countries in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). *Asian Journal of Psychiatry*, *26*, 32–38.
- Pengpid, S., & Peltzer, K. (2012). Alcohol use and associated factors among adolescent students in Thailand. *West Indian Medical Journal*, *61*(9), 890–896.
- Peterson, C., & Seligman, M. E. (2004). *Character strengths and virtues: A handbook and classification* (Vol. 1). Oxford University Press.
- Rungsang, B., Chaimongkol, N., Deoisres, W., & Wongnam, P. (2017). Suicidal ideation among Thai adolescents: An empirical test of a causal model. *Pacific Rim International Journal of Nursing Research*, *21*(2), 97–107.
- Rutter, M. (1985). Resilience in the face of adversity: Protective factors and resistance to psychiatric disorder. *The British Journal of Psychiatry*, *147*(6), 598–611.
- Rutter, M. (2006). Implications of resilience concepts for scientific understanding. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, *1094*(1), 1–12.
- Rutter, M. (2012). Resilience as a dynamic concept. *Development and Psychopathology*, *24*(2), 335–344.
- Saiyasombut, S., & Voices, S. (2015, May 1). *Sanctioned sadism: Thai universities' barbaric hazing culture*. Asian Correspondent. <https://thaienews.blogspot.com/2015/05/sanctioned-sadism.html>
- Sarchiapone, M., Mandelli, L., Carli, V., Iosue, M., Wasserman, C., Hadlaczky, G., Hoven, C., Apter, A., Balazs, J., Bobes, J., Brunner, R., Corcoran, P., Cosman, D., Haring, C., Kaess, M., Keeley, H., Keresztény, A., Kahn, J., Postuvan, V., Mars, U., ... & Wasserman, D. (2014). Hours of sleep in adolescents and its association with anxiety, emotional concerns, and suicidal ideation. *Sleep Medicine*, *15*(2), 248–254.
- Seligman, M. (1998). Building human strength: Psychology's forgotten mission. *APA Monitor*, *29*(1).
- Seligman, M. (2011). *Flourish: A visionary new understanding of happiness and well-being*. Simon and Schuster.
- Seligman, M., & Adler, A. (2018). Positive education. In J. F. Helliwell, R. Layard, & J. Sachs (Eds.), *Global happiness policy report* (pp. 52–73). Global Happiness Council.
- Seligman, M., & Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2000). Positive psychology: An introduction. *American Psychologist*, *55*(1), 5–14.
- Seligman, M., Rashid, T., & Parks, A. (2006). Positive psychotherapy. *American Psychologist*, *61*(8), 774–788.
- Seligman, M., Steen, T., Park, N., & Peterson, C. (2005). Positive psychology progress: Empirical validation of interventions. *American Psychologist*, *60*(5), 410–421.
- Selye, H. (1976). *The stress of life* (rev. ed.). McGraw-Hill.
- Sheldon, K. M., Abad, N., Ferguson, Y., Gunz, A., Houser-Marko, L., Nichols, C. P., & Lyubomirsky, S. (2010). Persistent pursuit of need-satisfying goals leads to increased happiness: A 6-month experimental longitudinal study. *Motivation and Emotion*, *34*(1), 39–48.
- Sheldon, K. M., & Lyubomirsky, S. (2006). How to increase and sustain positive emotion: The effects of expressing gratitude and visualizing best possible selves. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, *1*(2), 73–82.
- Shweder, R. A. (1991). *Thinking through cultures: Expeditions in cultural psychology*. Harvard University Press.
- Sin, N., & Lyubomirsky, S. (2009). Enhancing well-being and alleviating depressive symptoms with positive psychology interventions: A practice-friendly meta-analysis. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, *65*(5), 467–487.
- Steinhardt, M., & Dolbier, C. (2008). Evaluation of a resilience intervention to enhance coping strategies and protective factors and decrease symptomatology. *Journal of American College Health*, *56*(4), 445–453.
- Thanoi, W., Phancharoenworakul, K., Thompson, E., Panitrat, R., & Nityasuddhi, D. (2010). Thai adolescent suicide risk behaviors: Testing a model of negative life events, rumination, emotional distress, resilience and social support. *Pacific Rim International Journal of Nursing Research*, *14*(3), 187–202.
- Thoits, P. A. (1995). Stress, coping, and social support processes: Where are we? What next? *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, Spec. No., 53–79.
- Uchida, Y., Norasakkunkit, V., & Kitayama, S. (2004). Cultural constructions of happiness: Theory and empirical evidence. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, *5*(3), 223–239.
- Vanderbilt-Adriance, E., & Shaw, D. (2008). Protective factors and the development of resilience in the context of neighborhood disadvantage. *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology*, *36*(6), 887–901.
- Walsh, F. (2015). *Strengthening family resilience* (3rd ed.). Guilford Press.
- Windle, G. (2011). What is resilience? A review and concept analysis. *Reviews in Clinical Gerontology*, *21*(2), 152–169.
- Winichakul, T. (2015). The hazing scandals in Thailand reflect deeper problems in social relations1. *ISEAS Perspective*, *56*, 1–9. https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/ISEAS_Perspective_2015_56.pdf