Cultural Consideration of Resilience for Chinese Immigrant Children and Adolescents

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The current article provides cultural considerations about resilience for Chinese immigrant children and adolescents for mental health professionals by 1) reviewing resilience and culture literature relevant to Chinese population and 2) reporting a pilot empirical study that compared Chinese and American middle school students’ perception of resilience on the ClassMaps Survey. Overall, the literature on resilience and culture suggests that across cultures, including the Chinese culture, there are common resilience factors for children and adolescents. These factors include social support (such as positive adult-child relationships, peer friendships, and positive home-school/parent-teacher relationships) and individual characteristics (such as self-control, self-determination or goal determination). Enhancement of these factors would promote all children and adolescents’ resilience, including Chinese immigrant children and adolescents. However, research also suggests that the expression and interpretation of the resilience factors, as well as the resilience mechanism, would depend on the culture. For Chinese students, academic self-efficacy does not play a significant role in resilience in school as for American students. Cultural strengths such as strong family relationships and Taoist and Confucianist approaches to adversity could be used for improving resilience among Chinese immigrants. It is hoped that, with cultural considerations, mental health professionals will facilitate resilience among Chinese immigrant children and adolescents more effectively.


Key Words: resilience, culture, Chinese immigrants

INTRODUCTION

In the process of development, it is normal for children and adolescents to face risks and negative life experiences at different times. Research in developmental psychopathology suggests that environmental variables in children’s ecology play important roles in their mental health outcome and that the accumulative effect of multiple risk factors is associated with psychopathology development. However, research has also found that many children and youth achieve developmental success, such as educational achievement, and psychological well-being despite exposure to multiple risks and adversities. Researchers call this phenomenon resilience. Identifying resilience factors and mechanisms could be informative for efforts to prevent psychopathology, promote psychological well-being, and intervene in mental illness. With the emphasis on the importance of the characteristics of social environments for children and youth, decades of research in risk and protective factors have consistently identified a set of resilience factors that serve as buffers to help children develop successfully even when exposed to multiple risk factors. These resilience factors are found to be not only within the individuals (e.g., good intelligence and high self-efficacy) but also in their social contexts. In fact, the majority of the resilience factors are in children’s social environment such as family (e.g., a close relationship with at least one caregiver and effective parenting) and school and community (e.g., access to responsive and high quality schools and positive adult models). More importantly, researchers agree that resilience is the result of the interaction of an individual child’s characteristics and the social factors in their ecology, including their family, school, and community. Due to its emphasis on the social and cultural factors that enhance resilience and psychological well-being, research on resilience is especially important for mental health service providers in working with culturally diverse children and adolescents. This article informs readers about resilience and culture relevant to the Chinese population based on a review of current research and a pilot empirical study about school resilience with Chinese adolescents. Cultural considerations of resilience for Chinese immigrant children and adolescents will be discussed.

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 REVIEW 
Cultural Research on Resilience 
Cultural research on resilience has been a recent development in resilience research. It explores the cultural and contextual variations of the resilience process because of the important role of an individual’s ecology in resilience development. Cultural research on resilience also addresses the fact that the bulk of current research in resilience is conducted in Western individualistic cultures and mostly in the U.S. Ungar提出的 ecological conceptualization of resilience for culturally diverse populations that emphasized the need to focus more on the ecology that facilitates positive outcomes or resilience. In this conceptualization, whether a factor is an accepted and meaningful resource for resilience to a child depends on the child’s context and culture. In addition, whether a child is resilient is determined in his or her own context and culture. This raises the question of whether the set of consistently identified resilience factors in the Western literature can be applied to culturally diverse children, adolescents, and those who recently immigrated to the U.S.

Empirical research that examines the cultural variation of resilience-promoting characteristics has found a set of similar characteristics amongst individuals and their environments across different cultures: self-determination, aspiration, positive peer relationship, family support, community/school support, and educational engagement. It appears that the cultural differences are mainly in how these resilience factors are expressed in the context and how the individual interacts with these environmental factors. In other words, there seems to be a set of similar helpful factors to individuals across cultures even though how these factors work or the mechanism of resilience largely depends on the context and culture. For example, in the qualitative study by Theron et al that investigated the resilience factors of South African youth, a list of similar characteristics were identified by the local South African adults although they may name the factors differently, including resilient personality, dreamer (self-determination), educational progress (school engagement), acceptance (of the reality with difficulties), value driven (positive values as defined by the local culture), and active support systems (immediate and extended families, peers, social support services, and school and community). However, in descriptions of family and community supports and peer relationships, there were no identifications of specific significant adult mentors or positive relationships with the nuclear family in South African youth resilience; instead, supportive systems including the networks among families, schools, and communities were prominent, which is consistent with the African collectivist cultural values that emphasize the experiences of a family-community rather than an individual supportive person or the nuclear family. This suggests that how these factors were expressed and the understanding of the mechanisms of the South African youth resilience depends on the South African cultural values and context.

Resilience in Chinese Cultural Context 
It is not surprising that Chinese perspectives of resilience feature unique cultural views. For example, in Taoism, adversities are often interpreted from a positive and dialectic/dualist approach. Thus, adversity is not necessarily viewed as negative but viewed as an opportunity for positive changes. Confucianism emphasizes the importance of personality cultivation and developing one’s potential and ability to cope with adversities. Self-control and moderate opinions are considered the means to social harmony. In addition, Taoism emphasizes the rule of dualism, revealing the cyclical swing between extremes (e.g., adversity and success). Thus, a person influenced by the Taoist and Confucianist philosophies may have a different interpretation of adversity than a person with a typical Western understanding (e.g., adversity as obstacles). Hue’s qualitative investigation of Hong Kong teachers’ interpretations of student resilience illustrated these unique Chinese perspectives of resilience. Consistent with the Confucianist value of self-cultivation, the study found that Hong Kong Chinese teachers first emphasized students’ natural inner strength or “inner-power” of self-determination, self-control, and self-reflection. Furthermore, the teachers viewed problems in students’ life as opportunities to develop social competence. Thus, encountering problems was not as important as being able to make a correction. This is also consistent with the Taoist interpretation of adversity.

Although limited, the current empirical studies about resilience in Chinese students concur with cultural research on youth resilience by identifying a similar set of resilience factors for Chinese children and adolescents including goal determination, social support, family support, positive cognition, and self-control of emotions. Out of the social resilience factors in specific contexts, peer relationships are consistently evidenced to generally enhance Chinese students’ resilience. However, research regarding parent-child and teacher-student relationships suggests that the academic overemphasis in Chinese education system may mitigate the roles of these typical protective factors found in Western student populations. For instance, a caring relationship with teachers did not predict a lower level of depression. Poor parental supervision and family conflict were not significant predictors for Chinese adolescents’ academic outcomes. Thus, there might be already sufficient educational support present in schools for Chinese adolescents. Other research suggests that although lack of parental support can lead to greater risk for depression, parent over-involvement can contribute to more internalized problems. However, recent research reported that Chinese middle school students perceived a more positive teacher-student relationship than did American students. These conflicting findings warrant caution in interpreting the resilience factors of parent-child and teacher-student relationships with Chinese immigrant students.

For the individual resilience factors in the Chinese cultural context, research suggests that self-determination, goal determination, and self-control are emphasized in the resilience of Chinese students and are interpreted as the “inner power” or “inner strength” of the individual student. The emphasis on self-determination and self-control are consistent with research findings about Chinese
students’ high achievement motivation and self-control. In
the context of Chinese collectivist culture and its high value
on education, Chinese students’ high academic achievement
motivation is considered family- and socially-oriented, which
supports the idea of goal orientation or self-determination in
the resilience literature for Chinese students’ educational
success. Studies in child development have reported that
behavioral and emotional self-control is a theme of
Chinese socialization; those from the Chinese culture view
behavioral self-control (e.g., affect control, low level of
physical activity, reserved public behavior) as one of the
important socialization goals for Chinese children, which is
conducive to both the child’s school success and overall
social harmony.

Consistent with the Western literature, Zhang et al. found
that individual students’ meaningful participation, their goals
and aspirations, problem solving, and self-efficacy could help
with depression. However, research on Chinese students’
academic self-efficacy does not seem to support that it is a
resilience factor, as academic self-efficacy is not found
related to student academic achievement. Despite Chinese
students’ outstanding academic performance and high
achievement motivation, their academic self-efficacy is
consistently reported lower compared to their Western
counterparts, even though students with high achievement
generally demonstrate higher self-efficacy. It is possible
that the highly competitive examination system in Chinese
schools and high expectations produce many failure
experiences, which does not enhance academic self-
efficacy. Another possible reason might be that the sense of
academic self-efficacy contradicts the traditional Chinese
cultural virtue of humility and modesty. Chinese students
are expected to remain humble and modest amidst academic
success.

In summary, current research suggests that Chinese scholars
and educators apply a similar ecological approach to student
success as the Western ecological approach. The limited
research on resilience factors with the Chinese population
indicates that in general, there is a set of similar resilience
factors (both social and individual related to student academic achievement. Despite Chinese
students’ outstanding academic performance and high
achievement motivation, their academic self-efficacy is
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cultural virtue of humility and modesty. Chinese students
are expected to remain humble and modest amidst academic
success.

PILOT STUDY ON CLASSROOM RESILIENCE
In order to empirically examine the similarities and
differences in resilience between Chinese and American
adolescents, we conducted a cross-cultural study with
Chinese and American middle school students.

Methods
Sample. We used the ClassMaps Survey on 184 randomly
selected 7th and 8th grade students from a middle school in an
economically developed area in Eastern China. The pilot
study used a companion sample of 7th and 8th grade American
students (n=570) from the study of Doll, et al. Although the
U.S. sample was larger, the two groups did not differ much in
gender and grade proportions (See Table 1). A Goodness of
Fit test results suggest there was no significant gender (p = .130) and grade (p = .554) frequency differences between the
Chinese and US samples.

Instrument. Anonymously, the participants completed in their
classrooms the Chinese version of the CMS that was
translated and modified based on Brislin’s back-translation
procedure. The only modification made was to change all the
survey items to a question format due to the applicability in
Chinese classrooms based on comments from a panel of
Chinese teachers and principals.

The CMS was developed based on the empirical findings in
developmental resilience and educational research and has
been evidenced to have robust psychometric properties with
students in 3rd to 8th grade. It originally operationalized
seven factors that promote student success and resilience.
Later, a factor of peer aggression was added and included in
peer relationship. The final version, CMS 2007, has 55 items
in eight subscales, four of which describe social relational
aspects of the classroom and three of which describe the
student characteristics (See Table 2). A 4-point Likert Scale
(Never, Sometimes, Often, Almost Always) is used for each
item. In this study, the original seven subscale/factors (47 items) of the CMS were used because the companion sample
was limited to seven subscales.

Analysis. An independent t-test was conducted to compare
the group differences between the U.S. and Chinese students’
mean scores on the subscales. The significance level (α) of
.01 was used in this analysis.

Results Table 3 presents the group mean differences between the two
sample groups. The data suggest that the two groups had no
significant difference in teacher-student relationships, self-
determination, and peer relationships but differed significantly
on academic self-efficacy, behavioral self-control, and peer
conflict. Chinese students had significantly higher scores on
peer conflict, behavior self-control, and the home-school
relationship while American students had significantly higher
scores on academic self-efficacy.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONALS
Overall, the literature on resilience and culture suggests that
across cultures, including the Chinese culture, there is a
similar set of resilience factors (both social and individual
factors) for children and adolescents. Thus, even though the
bulk of research in resilience is conducted in the Western
countries, service providers may apply the knowledge of
these common factors with Chinese immigrant children and
adolescents and other ethnic minority populations. There are
two groups of resilience enhancing factors: social factors and
individual factors. The social factors include positive adult-
child relationships such as parent-child and teacher-student
relationships, supportive peer relationships that could result
in peer friendships and less peer conflict, and positive home-
school/parent-teacher relationships that would contribute to
the alignment of educational and developmental goals and home-school communication and collaboration. The individual factors include self-control, self-determination or goal determination, and self-efficacy. Enhancement of these factors would promote all children and adolescents’ resilience, including Chinese immigrant children and adolescents.

Table 1. Demographics of the ClassMaps Survey (CMS) Participants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>China</th>
<th>US</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>47.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>50.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7th</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>53.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8th</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>46.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Resilience Factors and Subscales in the ClassMaps Survey.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Resilience Factors</th>
<th>Subscales</th>
<th>Number of Items</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Environmental factors</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher-student relationship</td>
<td>My Teacher (MT)</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer relationship</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer friendship</td>
<td>My Classmates (MC)</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer conflict</td>
<td>Kids in this Class (KTC)</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer aggression</td>
<td>I Worry That (IWT)</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home-school relationship</td>
<td>Talking With My Parents (TWP)</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual factors</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic self-efficacy</td>
<td>Believe in Me (BIM)</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-determination</td>
<td>Taking Charge (TC)</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavioral self-control</td>
<td>Following Class Rules (FCR)</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Mean Differences Between the US and Chinese Groups.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subscale</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>US (SD)</td>
<td>China (SD)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Self-Efficacy</td>
<td>3.31(.58)</td>
<td>2.98(.59)</td>
<td>6.656</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher-Student Relations</td>
<td>3.42(.58)</td>
<td>3.39(.58)</td>
<td>0.694</td>
<td>.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Determination</td>
<td>2.89(.58)</td>
<td>2.90(.59)</td>
<td>-0.108</td>
<td>.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer friendships</td>
<td>3.51(.61)</td>
<td>3.47(.65)</td>
<td>0.708</td>
<td>.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavioral Self-Control</td>
<td>2.60(.66)</td>
<td>2.81(.74)</td>
<td>-3.465</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home-School Relationships</td>
<td>2.55(.77)</td>
<td>2.86(.64)</td>
<td>5.377</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer conflict</td>
<td>1.92(.72)</td>
<td>2.88(.69)</td>
<td>-15.839</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

However, research in resilience and culture also suggests that the expression and interpretation of the resilience factors, as well as the resilience mechanism, would depend on the culture. For Chinese immigrant youth, mental health service providers should first be aware of and gain more knowledge about the unique Chinese interpretation of adversity and risk factors, which are often considered as opportunities for improving competence. With Chinese immigrant clients, mental health service providers may adopt this perspective and help the Chinese immigrant youth and his or her family to take a more positive view of the current difficulties and instill hope. Since this perspective aligns with the Chinese immigrant client’s culture, such discussions could also enhance the therapeutic relationship.

As research on Chinese students’ resilience suggests, some resilience factors such as the parent-child relationship, teacher-student/home-school relationship, and self-efficacy may not work the same way as in Western culture. Chinese culture values education. Chinese parents have been reported to be over-involved in their children’s education. As previously reviewed, when the academic pressure from the student’s ecology (e.g., family and school) is too high, it could mitigate the facilitative role of parent-child and teacher-student relationships in promoting resilience and psychological wellbeing. Mental health service providers should collect as much information as possible regarding these factors before making recommendations. Our finding from the pilot study (that Chinese middle school students
Research regarding academic self-efficacy with Chinese students does not support its role in enhancing resilience and psychological wellbeing. The emphasis on academic self-efficacy contradicts Chinese cultural beliefs and values of modesty and humility, even though it greatly contributes to resilience and psychological wellbeing for U.S. youth.

Our findings from the pilot study concur with the previous literature, suggesting American participants scored significantly higher than Chinese participants on academic self-efficacy. It is important for mental health service providers to know that Chinese students, and possibly recent Chinese immigrant students, might not have high self-efficacy even if they have high academic achievement. Considering the context of American schools where individualistic cultural values such as self-efficacy and confidence are encouraged, Chinese immigrant students’ low self-efficacy might not be beneficial for their cultural adjustment to the American schools. It may be helpful for mental health professionals to educate Chinese immigrant youth regarding the importance of self-efficacy in American culture and gently encourage self-efficacy. With the knowledge of Chinese cultural values regarding self-efficacy, mental health professionals should be more prepared to make clinical judgments on when and how to hold the conversation regarding self-efficacy.

In addition, literature consistently suggests that peer relationship is a resilience-enhancing factor for Chinese students and that Chinese students have better peer relationships compared to American students. However, our pilot study found that the Chinese middle school participants scored significantly higher on peer conflict than their American counterparts although there was no difference on peer friendship. The Chinese participants’ significantly higher scores on peer conflict might be associated with heavy academic competition caused by the overemphasis on academics and high academic pressure in Chinese schools. Thus, it is important for mental health service providers working with Chinese immigrant students to pay more attention to the perceived academic competition and peer relationships among middle and high school students.

CONCLUSION

The current article provides cultural considerations about resilience for Chinese immigrant children and adolescents for mental health professionals by 1) reviewing resilience and culture literature relevant to Chinese population and 2) reporting a pilot empirical study that compared Chinese and American middle school students’ perception of resilience on the ClassMaps Survey. Overall, the literature on resilience and culture suggests that across cultures, including the Chinese culture, there are common resilience factors for children and adolescents. These factors include social support (such as positive adult-child relationships, peer friendships, and positive home-school/parent-teacher relationships) and individual characteristics (such as self-control, self-determination or goal determination). Enhancement of these factors would promote all children and adolescents’ resilience, including Chinese immigrant children and adolescents. However, self-efficacy does not play a significant role in resilience for Chinese students as for American students. In addition, a few cultural strengths could be used when improving resilience among Chinese immigrants, such as emphasizing strong family relationships and support, collectivism, and Taoist and Confucianist approaches to adversity. In summary, it is hoped that, with cultural considerations, mental health professionals will facilitate resilience among Chinese immigrant children and adolescents more effectively.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

None.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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