

HIGHER EDUCATION IN ARMED CONFLICT REGION OF SOUTHERN THAILAND: ASSOCIATION BETWEEN H.M KING BHUMIBOL ADULYADEJ'S SUFFICIENCY ECONOMY PHILOSOPHY AND RESILIENCE

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Abstract

Background: This research aimed to examine the association between resilience and lifestyle in line with H.M. King Bhumibol Aduyadej's sufficiency economy philosophy (SEP) among university students studying in restive insurgent areas of Southern Thailand.

Methods: Data were collected on a single occasion between 8 August 2018 and 8 October 2018, at Prince of Songkla University, Pattani campus, located in the restive areas of Southern Thailand. A total of 443 university students were assessed using the 20-item Thai Resilience Quotient screening test, and 35-item questionnaire for lifestyle following H.M. King Bhumibol Aduyadej's SEP. Data were analyzed by using R software package for descriptive analysis, Chi-square and logistic regression.

Results: Of the 443 university students who participated in the survey, most participants were Thai, female and Muslim (94.1%, 80.3% and 75.5%, respectively). Most of them perceived that they lived sufficiently, following H.M. King Bhumibol Aduyadej's SEP, together with normal or higher than normal level of resilience (67.9% and 64.8%, respectively). The association between resilience in total to perception of lifestyle, in line with H.M. King Bhumibol Aduyadej's SEP, was statistically significant. Resilience was categorized by domains of emotional stability, willpower and coping skill (all p-values<0.001). Sufficient living according to the late king's SEP was found to be 3.42 times higher than in students who lived non sufficiently (95%CI=2.24, 5.22).

Conclusion: Resilience and self-perceived lifestyle according to H.M. King Bhumibol Aduyadej's SEP were found to have a statistically significant association among university students who studied in restive insurgent areas of South Thailand.

Keywords: King Bhumibol Adulyadej, sufficiency economy philosophy, resilience, armed conflict, university students, Thailand

Introduction

The insurgency and political turmoil in Thailand's Southern Border Provinces (SBP), comprising three provinces namely Patani, Yala, Narathiwat and some parts of Songkhla province have been ongoing since 2004. In the 15 years from January 1, 2004 to October 14, 2019; 20,427 violent situations were officially reported with; 7,045 people killed and another 13,197 injured (1). Therefore, local young people, including university students studying in the restive

area, have had to live in hostile environments while at risk of suffering mental diseases, such as, Post-traumatic stress disorder and substance-related disorders (2).

However, Ford et al. (2018) reported that 81.2% of 11,135 young adults aged 18-25, who lived in areas of conflict, demonstrated normal or higher than normal ranges of happiness. Most of them were ready to move forward with their lives and showed some habituation to the insurgency (3). These results generated the pertinent question of "How

do these young people live happily under the adverse conditions?”. Answers to this question may lead to a new strategy of mental well-being promotion, especially in those armed restive areas. According to a study on medical doctors who worked in these areas, 99% of them were found to have burnout syndrome (4). However, 84.3% also reported a normal or higher than normal range of resilience, even though they worked under these stressful circumstances (5). For these reasons, the present study focused on university students’ resilience, as it is; “the ability to bend but not break, bounce back, and perhaps even grow in the face of adverse life experiences” (6).

Previous studies on youth and resilience in other countries revealed that experience of discrimination by ethnicity, race and ethnic identity was associated with resilience in youths of color (7). Intelligence, nurturing parenting, and parent–child relationship quality were found to be contributing factors associated with resilience in early childhood. However, parental romantic partner relationship was significantly related to resilience in adolescence (8).

Studies on youth and resilience in Thailand are scarce. In one study, family relationships and quality of rest were found as associative factors of resilience, but the population in the study comprised only physicians who worked in restive areas (5). Moreover, resilience itself is not only a trait but also the “process of adapting well” (6). Thus, the researchers tried to discover any paradigm or philosophy within the context of Thailand that may explain this phenomenon.

Sufficiency Economy Philosophy (SEP) was introduced to the people of Thailand by H.M the late King Bhumibol Adulyadej (King Rama IX) of Thailand more than 40 years ago. The SEP focuses on “sustainability” which embraces “moderation, reasonableness and prudence” based on “proper knowledge and morality” (9). In 1997, the Asian Financial Crisis adversely affected Thailand’s economic system. The late King’s SEP, based on the middle path of Buddhism was widely promoted by the Thai government as a national policy, to cope with many crises occurring nationwide. The core concept of King RAMA IX’s SEP, which is partially adapted from Buddhist economics, aims to enhance proper consideration (moderation), based on logic (reasonableness) and to build skills of risk management (prudence) in people. Its effectiveness as a core philosophy in handling the crisis contributed to its incorporation into the long-term strategy of Thailand (10).

In 2015, Jatchavala and Pitanupong found that, those who did not live sufficiently according to H.M King Rama IX’s SEP had abnormal scores of general health screening, with 1.6 times the abnormalities of those that lived sufficiently. In contrast, those who lived sufficiently were 2.2 times happier than those who did not (11). Moreover, Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis by Barua and Tejavivaddhana (2019) also revealed that SEP improved Thai people’s well-being in several dimensions (12).

Hence, the key objective of this study was to examine the association of resilience and lifestyle following H.M. King Rama IX’s SEP among university students who studied in the restive areas, and to find alternative approaches towards sustainable improvement of mental well-being in the vulnerable population such as, civilians who live in the insurgent areas or war-zones.

Materials and Methods

This survey has a descriptive cross-sectional design. Following endorsement by the ethic committee for verbal consent (REC number: 61-071-3-1), participants were approached by research-assistants, who were psychiatrists and psychologists. The participants completed the self-administered questionnaires on a single occasion between 8 August 2018 and 8 October 2018 at Prince of Songkla University, Pattani campus. Randomization was simple and convenient as the researcher was accompanied by research assistants when approaching participants at lecture rooms classified into the three schools of the faculty: health science, social science and pure/applied science.

Measures

The self-reported questionnaire was divided into 3 parts:

1. Personal information: such as age, gender and domicile.
3. Thai Resilience Quotient screening test (20-item Thai RQ) developed by the Department of Mental Health, Ministry of Public Health, Thailand, consisting of three domains: emotional stability, willpower and coping skills. Internal consistency was confirmed with Cronbach’s alpha of 0.838, together with normal range of resilience between 55 and 69 (13).
3. The 35-item questionnaire of subjective sufficiency lifestyle according to the philosophy of H.M. King Bhumibol Adulyadej, which was developed by the first author before being approved by three economics and mental health experts. Internal consistency was confirmed with Cronbach’s alpha coefficient of 0.67. In addition, the cut-off point was reported to be 40 by a pilot study from 2011 (10). The questionnaire has 5 domains; 30 items for self-perceived moderation, reasonableness and prudence in their daily lives, and 5 items for their attitude toward seeking more knowledge and respecting morality.

Statistical analysis

Every statistical procedure was completed by using the R software package. Descriptive statistics were presented as demographic characteristics of the participants, frequency, percentage and articulate mean. Association analysis was conducted by Chi-square and logistic regression.

Results

Demographic data and associated factors

Table 1: Crude analysis of association between demographic data and resilience quotient

Demographic data	Total N (%)	RQ<55 (N=155)	RQ≥55 (N=287)	Chi-square p-value
Gender				0.444
Male	87 (19.7)	34 (22.1)	53 (18.5)	
Female	354 (80.3)	120 (77.9)	233 (81.5)	
Age: Median (IQR)	20 (19, 21)	20 (19, 21)	20 (19, 21)	0.036 ^a
Ethnicity				0.313
Thai	414 (94.1)	142 (92.2)	271 (95.1)	
Malay/Chinese	26 (5.9)	12 (7.8)	14 (4.9)	
Religion				<0.001*
Buddhism	103 (23.5)	20 (13.2)	83 (29.1)	
Muslim and others	335 (76.5)	132 (86.8)	202 (70.9)	
Hometown				0.007*
Songkhla province	64 (14.8)	24 (16.2)	40 (14.2)	
SBP of Thailand	240 (55.7)	95 (64.2)	144 (51.1)	
Other provinces in Southern Thailand	117 (27.1)	25 (16.9)	92 (32.6)	
Other province in other parts of Thailand	10 (2.3)	4 (2.7)	6 (2.1)	
Dropping-out ideation				0.045*
Never	227 (51.4)	67 (43.2)	159 (55.6)	
Sometimes	197 (44.6)	81 (52.3)	116 (40.6)	
Always	18 (4.1)	7 (4.5)	11 (3.8)	
Debts				0.549
No	167 (38.0)	54 (35.3)	112 (39.3)	
Yes but	202 (46.0)	76 (49.7)	126 (44.2)	
Yes and	70 (15.9)	23 (15.0)	47 (16.5)	
Source of Loan				0.624
- Formal loan				

No	18 (6.7)	8 (8.2)	10 (5.8)	
Yes	252 (93.3)	90 (91.8)	162 (94.2)	
- Non-formal loan				0.579
No	242 (89.6)	86 (87.8)	156 (90.7)	
Yes	28 (10.4)	12 (12.2)	16 (9.3)	
History of psychological disease				1 ^b
No	434 (99.8)	151 (100)	282 (99.6)	
Yes	1 (0.2)	0 (0)	1 (0.4)	
Birth order				0.011*
Others	193 (44.8)	74 (49.7)	119 (42.2)	
Eldest child	122 (28.3)	48 (32.2)	74 (26.2)	
Youngest child	116 (26.9)	27 (18.1)	89 (31.6)	
Stressful perception toward insurgency				0.915
Yes	153 (35.3)	52 (34.7)	101 (35.7)	
No	281 (64.7)	98 (65.3)	182 (64.3)	

a=p-value from Wilcoxon rank sum test

b=p-value from Fisher's exact test

RQ = Thai Resilience Quotient screening test (20-item Thai RQ)

* p-value<0.05

The majority of the 443 participants were Thai, female university students (94.1% and 80.3%, respectively). Only 23.5% of them were Buddhist. No mental illnesses were recorded in all participants (99.8%). More than half of them lived in the provinces facing the armed conflict and have no intention of dropping out from their educational programs (Table 1).

Regarding their socio-economic status (Table 1), 61.9% of the participants had their own debts, mostly in the forms of formal loans (93.3%). Nevertheless, almost half of them did not feel burdened by their debts (46.0%). Most of the students denied experiencing constant stress regarding the daily violence. By using crude analysis, age, religion, drop-out ideation from their studies and birth order were associated factors which impacts on resilience in this population. Older students seemed to be more resilient than younger ones (p-value by using Wilcoxon rank sum test= 0.036). Buddhists and youngest children showed more resilience than other religions and other birth orders (p-value<0.001 and p-value=0.011, respectively).

Level of resilience and lifestyle following H.M. King Bhumibol Adulyadej’s sufficiency economy philosophy

Table 2: Lifestyle according to H.M King Bhumibol Adulyadej’s sufficiency philosophy

	N (%) Total (n=443)	Median (IQR)
Sufficiency lifestyle		
Not sufficient (<40 score)	137 (30.9)	37 (34, 38)
Sufficient (≥40 score)	301 (67.9)	44 (42, 46)
Missing value	5 (1.1)	-
Total	443 (100.0)	42 (39-45)

Most of the participants perceived that they lived sufficiently following H.M King Bhumibol Adulyadej’s SEP (67.0%) (Table 2). At the same time, most of the students displayed normal or higher than normal range of resilience (64.8%). The highest prevalence of normal or higher than normal level of resilience among the three domains was coping skill (75.0%) and the lowest was emotional stability (66.6%) (Table 3).

Table 3: Association between sufficiency lifestyle according to H.M King Bhumibol Adulyadej’s sufficiency philosophy and resilience in total

Resilience Quotient screening test	Sufficiency lifestyle		Chi-square p-value
	<40 (n=137)	≥40 (n=301)	
Levels of resilience			<0.001*
Less than normal range (<55 score)	74 (54.0)	77 (25.6)	
Normal and higher than normal range (≥55 score)	63 (46.0)	224 (74.4)	
Median (IQR)	54 (48, 60)	61 (54, 66)	<0.001 ^{a*}
Odds ratio	1	3.42 (95%CI =2.24, 5.22)	<0.001 ^{b*}

a=p-value from Wilcoxon rank sum test

b=p-value from Wald’s test

* p-value<0.05

Association between resilience quotient and lifestyle according to H.M. King Bhumibol Adulyadej’s sufficiency economy philosophy

Table 4: Association between sufficiency lifestyle according to H.M King Bhumibol Adulyadej’s sufficiency philosophy and resilience categorized by domain

Resilience Quotient screening test	Sufficiency lifestyle		Chi-square p-value
	<40 (n=137)	≥40 (n=301)	
Emotional stability			<0.001*
Less than normal range (<27 score)	62 (45.9)	78 (26.0)	
Normal range (27-34 score)	65 (48.1)	196 (65.3)	
Higher than normal range (≥35 score)	8 (5.9)	26 (8.7)	
Median (IQR)	27 (24, 29)	29 (26, 32)	<0.001 ^{a*}
Willpower			<0.001*
Less than normal range (<14 score)	62 (45.9)	52 (17.4)	
Normal range (14-19 score)	67 (49.6)	217 (72.6)	
Higher than normal range (≥20 score)	6 (4.4)	30 (10.0)	
Median (IQR)	14 (12, 16)	16 (14, 18)	<0.001 ^{a*}
Coping strategy			<0.001*
Less than normal range (<13 score)	51 (37.8)	54 (17.9)	
Normal range (13-18 score)	80 (59.3)	226 (75.1)	
Higher than normal range (≥19 score)	4 (3.0)	21 (7.0)	
Median (IQR)	13 (11, 15)	15 (13, 17)	<0.001 ^{a*}

a=p-value from Wilcoxon rank sum test

* p-value<0.05

In total, perception of lifestyle according to H.M. King Bhumibol Adulyadej’s SEP was significantly associated with resilience quotient (p-value<0.001). When categorizing by domain of resilience, a statistically significant association between each domain and lifestyle following King Rama IX’s SEP was also found (p-value<0.001) (Table 3 & 4). Students who lived according to the SEP displayed a level

of resilience 3.42 times higher than those who did not live according to the SEP (95% CI=2.24, 5.22).

Discussion

Many associated factors were found relating to higher education in this study. It is of utmost importance that Universities located in armed insurgent areas are concerned of any dropout ideation amongst their students and to develop steps in enhancing students' resilience. Parenting style is one of the interesting issues to study in resilience, due to the association of birth order. Besides, the factor of age was also of interest, as it could be used to research the process of developing resilience from year-to-year.

Compared with previous studies on H.M. King Bhumibol Aduyadej's SEP and mental health in Thailand, these young people studied perceived that they lived more sufficiently than other age-groups of the population in Bangklam district, Songkhla province (74.4% and 53.5%, respectively) (11). Even though the main population in the study in 2015 were Buddhists (11), and that the H.M. King Bhumibol Aduyadej's SEP was derived from Buddhist economics (14), Muslim students were the majority participants in our study and they were found to live-more sufficiently than the previous population studied.

However, H.M. King Bhumibol Aduyadej's SEP has both a spiritual and philosophical approach (14). Similar to other philosophies, no one can claim that researchers exactly comprehend the meaning of "sufficiency economy", which may lead to several vague interpretations. Thus, we could not accurately confirm that the 35- item Sufficiency lifestyle questionnaire used in this study and the previous one (11) was correct. For this reason, the questionnaire should be revised by a panel of multi-disciplinary experts, to make it more accurate and up-to-date.

Regarding the principles of H.M King Rama IX's SEP based on the "middle way" (*majjhimā paṭipadā*) in Buddhism, Buddhists may seem to understand the concept and the theory easily. This is due to the prominence of the middle pathway in their religion. Nevertheless, the concept of sufficiency economy and livelihood that leads to self-sufficiency and contentment does not only exist in Buddhism "*Qana'ah*" or self- contentment in Islamic philosophy means sufficient life, which is based on a sufficient or reassured soul ("*Nafs-ul-Mutmainnah*") and leads to a "good wholesome life" or "*hayatan tayyibah*" (15). The similarity of this core concept may illustrate that religion is not a limitation of H.M King Rama IX's SEP for the main population in the study as target areas were predominantly Muslim. Based on Islamic philosophy, the way of "*qana'ah*" is self-control of a human's means toward his provision and environment by being disciplined regarding material abundance (15). This model bears resemblance to the moderation, reasonableness and

self- immunity of H.M King Rama IX's SEP, which mental health care providers and policy makers could make use of to promote resilience and sense of well-being among the population in the insurgent conflict area of Southern Thailand. H.M King Rama IX's SEP may also be utilized as a new model of resilience building for people facing adversity in war-zones or other insurgent areas, once we have adequate studies to prove this assumption.

Limitation

Although this study is the first study on the association of SEP and resilience, the cross-sectional and quantitative design of the study could assist us to understand more about the factors associated with resilience, rather than just cause and effect. Another possibility is the crossing over of several concepts of resilience and sufficiency economy. Presently, we cannot precisely identify King Rama IX's SEP, as a paradigm of resilience in the restive insurgent areas of Southern Thailand. The data represented only a possibility from the statistical association. The authors suggest further studies of resilience to gain more significant data to promote mental health wellbeing. Incorporating a cohort design with qualitative method, such as in-depth interview, would enhance understanding of how the late King's philosophy of sufficiency economy is interpreted and adapted in daily life.

Conclusion

Most university students who studied at the campus located in the insurgent armed conflict areas of Southern Thailand perceived that they lived sufficiently based on the H.M. King Bhumibol Aduyadej's SEP, according to the questionnaire. They also showed mostly normal or higher than normal levels of resilience. The association of overall resilience, categorized by domains with perceived lifestyle in line with H.M. King Bhumibol Aduyadej's SEP, was found to be statistically significant.

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Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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