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# An exploratory study of resilience among Hong Kong employees : ways to happiness

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**An Exploratory Study of Resilience Among  
Hong Kong Employees: Ways to Happiness**

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**Abstract**

This chapter introduces resilience as a positive human functioning and discusses its major components in the workplace. This is clearly a key factor that can be related to stress and thereby to well-being and happiness. An exploratory empirical study of resilience of employees in Hong Kong is outlined in the paper. The objectives of the empirical study are to investigate correlates of resilience among Hong Kong employees, and to examine the relationships between resilience work well-being (including perceived work pressure, job satisfaction, and physical/psychological symptoms) and job performance. A

self-administered questionnaire survey was completed by 317 employees (147 males, 165 females, 5 are unidentified) from 10 companies or organizations in the public and private service sectors in Hong Kong between July to October 2004. The results show that resilience is positively correlated with positive affect (positive emotions), self-efficacy, optimism, internal locus of control, and hope. Furthermore, employees who scored highly in resilience reported lower scores in both perceived work pressure and physical/psychological symptoms; but higher levels of job performance and job satisfaction. Similarly, employees with high positive affect (positive emotion) scored lower scores in both perceived work pressure and physical/psychological symptoms; but higher levels of job performance and job satisfaction. It is therefore recommended that employers could provide more staff training to enhance happiness among employees, which could in turn enhance the well-being and profit of the organizations.

## **Introduction**

At the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a positive psychology is strongly advocated in the United States. Many American psychologists have turned their attention from repairing weakness and damage to promoting human virtues (Seligman, 2002). According to Seligman (2002), “the aim of positive psychology is to catalyze a change in psychology

from a preoccupation only with repairing the worst things in life to also building the best qualities in life (p.3)". Seligman further suggested that there are human strengths that can act as buffers against stressed mental illness. These buffers are courage, optimism, interpersonal skills, faith, hope, honesty, perseverance, resilience, putting troubles into perspective, and finding purpose.

Some literature review indicate that employees with positive human functioning report better psychological well-being and job performance (Estrada, Isen, & Young, 1997; Judge, Erez, & Bono, 1998). For example, Estrada et al. (1997) concluded that positive affect (positive emotion) facilitates performance among physicians. Furthermore, Wright and co-workers provided evidence to support the "happy-productive" hypothesis (Wright & Staw, 1999). Tedeschi et al. (1998) suggested that it is better not to talk about Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), but rather to investigate how to promote Posttraumatic Growth (PTG) in overcoming adversity (Affleck & Tenner, 1996). Posttraumatic growth appears to be related to constructs of resilience, hardiness, thriving, stress inoculation, or toughing.

We therefore propose to enhance some human virtues as adaptive coping strategies among employees in Hong Kong. It is important to introduce the idea of individual resilience or, specifically, facets of stress resiliency (such as positive affect or emotion) in

the face of adversity.

### **Resilient Personality**

Ryff and Singer (2003) defined resilience as the maintenance, recovery, or improvement in mental or physical health following challenge. As they suggested, a resilient personality possesses the following facets: physical health, psychological well-being, assertiveness, is verbally expressive, energetic, dependable, open-minded, smart and self-confident. Personality characteristics have also been of considerable interest to researchers studying relations between job stressors and indexes of strains (Cooper, Dewe, & O'Driscoll, 2001). Personality may play an important role in the stress process by influencing individuals' exposure to stressful events. In the job stress literature, the construct of *hardiness* or the "hardy personality" (Kobasa, 1979) has been considered as a resilient quality of an individual's personality. This quality moderates the effects of environmental stressors on individuals' experience of strain and poor health or illness. However, criticism has been raised concerning measurement of hardiness and there is a lack of consistent evidence for the buffering effect of hardiness. These point to a need for the development of a tightened construct of resilient personality as a means to understand how resilience may ameliorate or alleviate the negative effects of stress.

Ryff and Singer (2003) proposed that promotion of human resilience and development of measures of resilient personality are important venues in positive psychology. Masten and Reed (2002) referred to resilience as a class of phenomenon characterized by patterns of positive adaptation in the context of significant adversity or risk. In simpler words, resilience describes the capacity to prevail in the face of adversity.

The review of literature in children, adult, and elderly in Western societies showed factors conducive to resilience to include: positive affect, assertive, verbally expressive, energetic, dependable, open-minded, smart, self-confident, self-efficacy, self-worth, flexible self-concept, and internal locus of control (Mastern et al., 1990; Ryff & Singer, 2003) (see Figure 1).

There is evidence that each of the following constructs predicts resilience: self-mastery (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978), hardiness (Kobasa, 1979), hope (Snyder, 1994), and self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986). Based on research findings in Western societies (e.g., Carver, 1998), several facets of resilient personality (including positive affect, self-efficacy, internal locus of control, and optimism) were hypothesized to be also applicable to Hong Kong employees (see Figure 2).

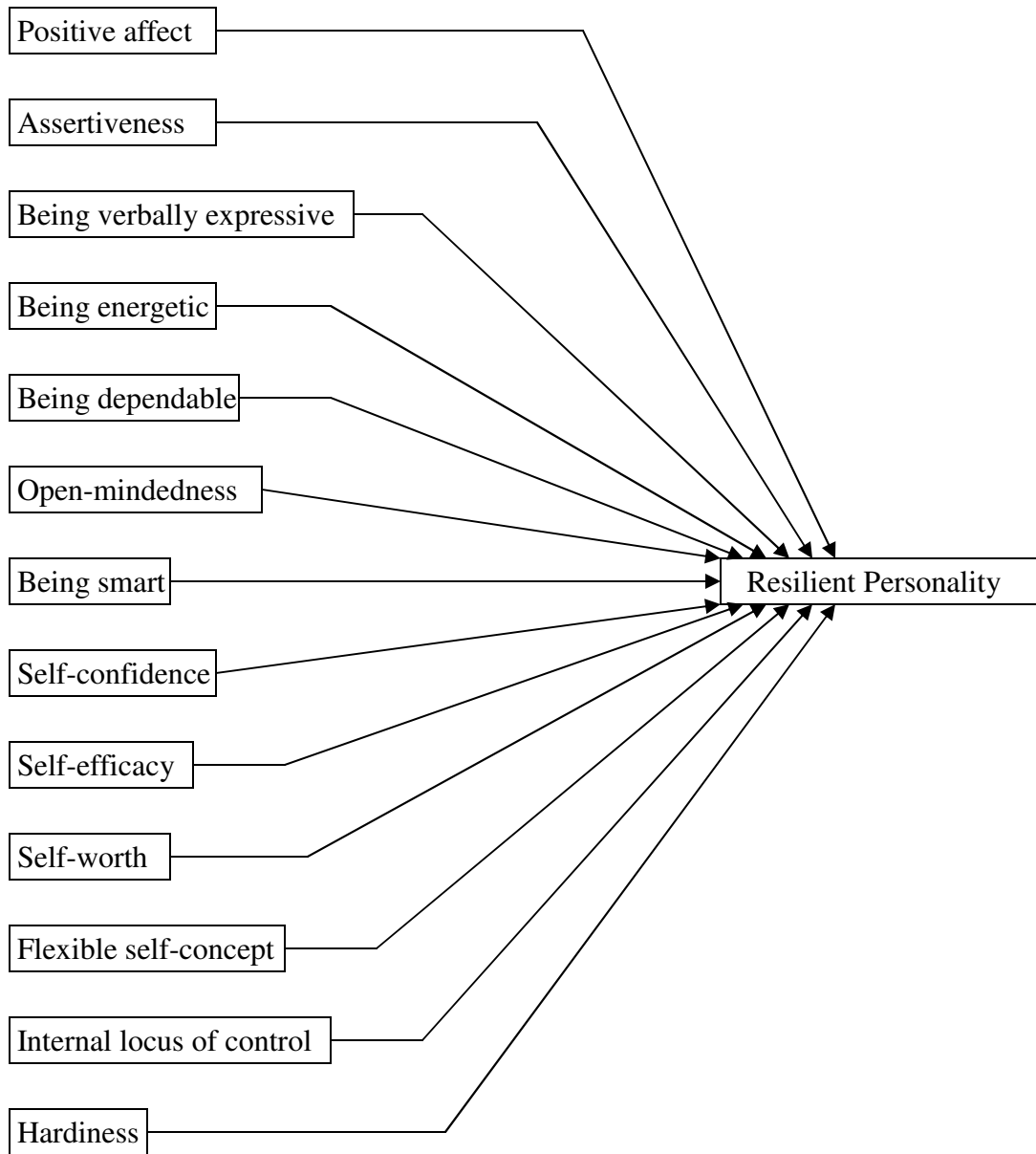


Figure 1. Facets of a resilient personality

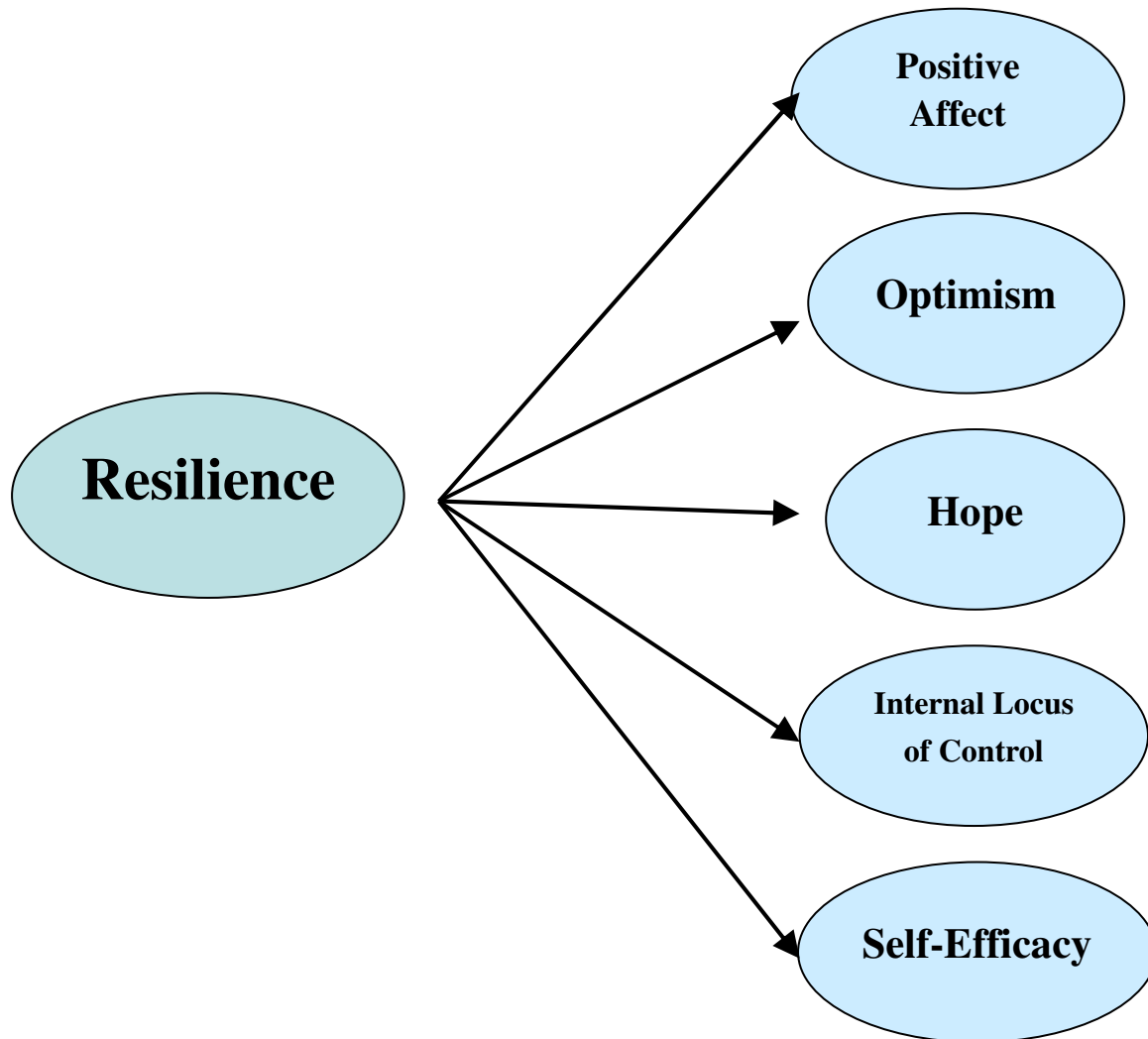


Figure 2. Facet of a resilient personality

### **Positive Affect**

Positive affect, also called positive emotions, implies the experience of pleasant emotions composing joy, contentment, excitement, affection, energy, and happy feelings. As far as its influence on one's life, the overall balance of people's positive and negative affects is found to contribute to their subjective well-being (Diener, Diener, & Diener, 1995). Yet it is also argued that positive affect is not only a signal of optimal functioning,



but it also produces optimal functioning (not just within the present pleasant moment but long lasting as well). In other words, positive affect may help individuals to achieve positive outcomes. This was supported by the research finding that happy people even make more money than unhappy ones (Estrada et al., 1997). Besides, positive affect can promote one's prosocial behaviour. Even a mild positive affect could reduce conflict in organizational settings. Furthermore, positive affect can facilitate cognitive flexibility, creativity and innovation.

### **Optimism**

Optimists are people who expect good things to happen to them. On the contrary, pessimists are people who expect bad things to happen to them (Carver & Scheiver, 2002). Optimists and pessimists differ in how they approach problems, challenges, and they differ in the manner, as well as the success, with which they cope with adversity.

To reiterate, the most important difference between optimists and pessimists is the degree of subjective well-being they feel. When people confront adversity or difficulty, they experience a variety of emotions, ranging from excitement and eagerness to anger, anxiety, and depression. According to Carver and Scheiver (2002), the balance of these feelings appears to relate to people's degree of optimism or pessimism. Optimists often

find dealing with adversity enjoyable. They are quicker to accept challenges, and they engage in more focused, active coping (Carver & Scheiver, 1998).

## **Hope**

The theory of hope has a long history. As summarized by Snyder, Rand and Sigmon (2002), in the 1950s through 1960s, hope was viewed by many previous scholars as the perception that one's goals can be attained. In the late 20th century, more and more social scientists have turned their attentions to hope. Snyder et al. (2002) summarized that hopeful thought reflects the belief that one could find pathways to desired goals and become motivated to use those pathways. In such a view, hope is an element of a healthy cognitive element. It serves to drive an individual's emotions and well-being. Hope may be emotion-based or cognition-based. An emotion-based hope deals with the difference between expected positive and expected negative affect, while the cognition-based hope enables an individual to work towards goals (Snyder, 1994a).

By adding hope as a facet of resilience, we have yet another research framework for understanding and enhancing adaptive ways of functioning. Based on presently available research with students, it appears that hope bears a substantial relationship with academic achievement (Snyder, Cheavens, & Michael, 1999). Hope relates to higher achievement

test scores and higher semester grade point averages (e.g., Curry et al., 1997). In the field of health psychology, hope has been positively implicated in areas such as promoting and maintaining good health and preventing, detecting, and treating illness (e.g., Snyder, 1994b, 1998). As far as psychological adjustment is concerned, hope works through the belief in one's self. As is the case with physical health, hope is also crucial for psychological health. Hopeful thought entails assets such as the ability to establish clear goals, to devise workable pathways, or to motivate oneself to work toward goals. Psychological health is related to people's routine anticipation of their future well-being. In this regard, those with higher levels of hope should anticipate more positive levels of psychological health than persons with lower levels of hope.

### **Locus of Control**

Human beings have a universal motive to exert control or mastery over their environments. Having a sense of control is said to be a critical element in successful psychological adjustment to not only work but also other domains of life. Locus of control is a bipolar construct. The two poles are internal locus of control and external locus of control. People having internal locus of control (called "internals" henceforth) believe that everything is under their control. On the contrary, individuals having external

locus of control (called “externals” subsequently) consider that they are destined by something beyond their control such as fate. Generally, internals report better well-beings than Externals (Spector, 1982). Many studies conducted in work settings in Greater China (HK, PRC and Taiwan) revealed that externals reported lower job satisfaction, worse mental well-being, and greater quitting intention (Siu and Cooper, 1998; Siu et al., 2002). Locus of control clearly fits into the positive psychology paradigm because it emphasizes those areas in which the individuals can exercise control over his or her own development and psychological well-being while recognizing that some situations or events are out of his or her control (may not be worth fighting against).

### **Self-efficacy**

According to Bandura (1997), the most important determinants of the behaviors people choose to engage in and how much they persevere in their efforts in the face of obstacles and challenges are “people’s beliefs in their capabilities to produce desired effects by their own actions” (p.7). This is the basic premise of self-efficacy theory. Many researchers agree that, a sense of control over our behavior, our environment, or our own thoughts and feelings is essential for happiness and a sense of well-being. When the world seems predictable and controllable, and when our behaviors, thoughts, and

emotions seem to be under our control, we would be better able to meet life's challenges, build healthy relationships, and achieve personal satisfaction and peace of mind.

From this perspective, we can infer that self-efficacy can improve happiness at work by enhancing confidence. When people encounter difficulties, self-efficacy can enhance resilience from adversity.

Some recent studies on self-efficacy at work have revealed that stressors would be much more threatening to those who have low confidence in performing their job tasks. Individuals with high self-efficacy are more likely to believe that they can maintain high level of job performance despite the presence of challenging job-related stressors.

Furthermore, the research evidence of managerial self-efficacy (MSE), a certain specific type of self-efficacy, which is more powerful in predicting what people will do in workplaces, reveals that, MSE is positively related to job performance, work attitudes and job satisfaction. Managerial self-efficacy is also found to be negatively related to physical and psychological strains (Lu, Siu and Cooper, 2005).

### **An Exploratory Study of Resilience Among Employees in Hong Kong**

There is a growing research literature on children resilience (Masten et al., 1990) and also resilience in later life (Ryff & Singer, 2003) in the context of life challenge and adversity.

However, studies on employees' resilience are fewer, and studies examining the role of resilience as stress moderator among employees in Hong Kong and other Asian cities almost non-existent. Furthermore, there has been considerable debate and confusion about defining resilience. It is important to find out the key protective factors and resources that account for resilience.

The objectives of the study are to investigate correlates of resilience among Hong Kong employees, and to examine the relationship between resilience and work well-being (including perceived work pressure, job satisfaction, and physical/psychological symptoms) and job performance. Work well-being not only implies absence of illness or diseases, but includes job satisfaction, physical and mental health (Warr, 1987). Therefore work well-being is one component of happiness, which can fit in the study of positive human functioning.

Based on the review of the previous literature, as depicted in Figure 2, we hypothesized that resilience comprises positive affect, self-efficacy, internal locus of control, optimism, and hope. We also hypothesized that employees with high resilience scores would report lower levels of perceived work pressure, less physical/psychological symptoms, but higher levels of job satisfaction and job performance. Concerning the role of positive affect, based on the "Happy-Productive Hypothesis", we expect employees

with high levels of positive affect would report better job performance.

## Method

A self-administered questionnaire survey method was adopted for data collection. A purposive sampling method was adopted to recruit 10 companies for the study from July to October 2004. The selection of companies represented a wide variety of occupational groups, which were representative of Hong Kong's major employee sectors: teaching professionals, banking and insurance, property and estate management, transportation, catering, and personal/health care employees. A detailed description of the sample characteristics is depicted in Table 1.

Table 1

<i>Participating organizations</i>	<i>Occupational group</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Job Level</i>
Company 1	Education (a secondary school)	29	Secondary school principal, teachers, and administrative staff
Company 2	Health care (a nursing home for elderly)	25	Nurse and assistant worker
Company 3	Property and estate management	30	Junior executive and administrative staff

Company 4	Banking	76	Junior executive, middle management staff, and frontline staff
Company 5	Legal profession	15	Judicial supervisor and court interpreter
Company 6.	Transportation	58	Operation and maintenance
Company 7	Catering	25	Management staff and frontline staff
Company 8	Insurance	16	Middle and senior management staff
Company 9	Catering	12	Management staff and frontline staff
Company 10	Personal care (doing social services)	31	Social work officer

The recruited participants were invited to attend a seminar on stress management and the survey was conducted before the seminar. The participants were promised to have their personal profiles in the stress audit as a free service in order to compensate their time in filling in the questionnaires. Items were constructed or adapted based on Western measures.

### **Results of the Study**

The relationships among stressors, stress moderators and stress outcomes were found in



expected directions (see Table 2). In general, participants who scored higher in resilient personality reported lower levels of work pressure, fewer physical/psychological symptoms, higher levels of job satisfaction and better job performance. In our empirical study, we also find employees scored higher in positive affect scored higher in job satisfaction and job performance, but lower in perceived work stress and physical and psychological symptoms.

Table 2. Intercorrelations among variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	0
1. Self-Efficacy	0.86									
2. Optimism	.449**	0.81								
3. Internal locus of control	.220**	.216**	0.80							
4. Hope	.626**	.603**	.244**	0.77						
5. Positive affect	.468**	.594**	.214**	.541**	0.87					
6. Resilience	.763**	.519**	.240**	.642**	.467**	0.78				
7. Perceived work stress	-.171**	-.288**	-.174**	-.204**	-.244**	-.190**	0.82			
8. Physical/psychological symptoms	-.266**	-.410**	-.177**	-.310**	-.351**	-.286**	.483**	0.84		
9. Job satisfaction	.324**	.323**	.334**	.293**	.416**	.326**	-.231**	-.198**	0.86	
10. Self-rated job performance	.365**	.377**	.115*	.403**	.300**	.443**	-0.02	-.139*	.196**	0.70

Note. Reliabilities are shown in diagonal. \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$

## Conclusion and Future Research

Our study is the first to demonstrate empirical support for the beneficial role of resilience and positive affect in the workplace. It can be concluded from the results of our study that

the “Happy-Productive Hypothesis” can be supported. It seems that resilience can buffer an individual from stress. The results of our study have many implications for human resource management practices specifically in training staff the virtues of resilient personality and positive emotions in the workplace. Employers or human resource managers should have the mission of training facets of resilience, including optimism, hope and self-efficacy among employees. Furthermore, ways of encouraging employees to form “happiness habit” are highly recommended. We also suggest future inquiry should assess resilience with indicators that encompass more components of wellness.

The limitation of the study is the non-representative nature of the sample recruited. As the participants were recruited by inviting them to attend a seminar on stress management, this would have made the sample biased in favour of those with higher stress problem.

### **Acknowledgement**

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