An Exploratory Model of Family Resilience Processes & Functioning: A Cultural

Perspective of the Semai Indigenous Communities in Perak, Malaysia

Abstract

Given the challenges experienced by the Semai indigenous communities in Perak, Malaysia and their distinct cultural beliefs, it is important to understand the role of the social and cultural networks in their resilience processes. In particular, further attention needs to be paid to how their families function and shape their beliefs about their lives, as there might be key mechanisms and processes that differ from existing general conceptualizations of family. This grounded theory analysis of 23 Semai *Orang Asli* (indigenous) community members established a model of the Semai's family conceptualization and functioning. Findings revealed that the Semai's concept of family encompasses an extensive network of individuals with their shared relationship with *nyenang* (spirit ancestors) and cultural heritage, which in turn leads them to have a deep sense of shared family identity and connectedness. This worldview guided the Semai's family processes and functioning, captured by the following five dimensions: sharing obligations and responsibilities, making collective decisions, prioritizing community's welfare, sharing of knowledge and resources and willingness to work with everyone. These factors facilitate a conducive and supportive environment aimed at maintaining existing family relationships. This model can guide the development of culturally specific programmes that promote and strengthen indigenous family relationships and resilience.

Keywords: *Family Processes and Functioning, Indigenous Family Model, Indigenous culture, Peninsular Malaysia, Semai, Southeast Asia*

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Unlike the general population, minorities and indigenous communities are subjected to a diverse range of challenges due to their unique socio-political situations. These challenges include cultural suppression, discrimination, eviction from their ancestral lands and the violation of their human rights (e.g., Erni, 2015; Friborg, Sørlie, & Hansen, 2017; IWGIA, 2016). These circumstances have threatened their cultures, languages and livelihoods, forcing them to undergo radical changes and reconfigurations to their beliefs and worldviews (Kirmayer, Sehdev, Whitley, Dandeneau, & Isaac, 2009). As such, their beliefs, values and social practices may differ from the general population, prompting for the need to investigate how their unique culture and cultural beliefs influence their psychological processes. Additionally, the exposure to these challenges may have profound impacts on their general health (Wong, Allotey, & Reidepath, 2018), mental health and well-being (Friborg et al., 2017; Wallace, Nazroo, & Bécares, 2016).

The Semai are a sub-ethnic indigenous community (Orang Asli in the Malay language) that reside in the northern central regions of Peninsular Malaysia (Gomes, 2016; Nicholas, 2000). They are the largest sub-ethnic group who comprise about 28% of the entire Orang Asli population (Endicott, 2016). Some of the adversities experienced by the Semai today can be attributed and traced back to the history of colonization and oppression (Edo, 1998; Masron, Masami, & Ismail, 2013). During the pre-colonial period, the Semai and their Orang Asli counterparts were perceived to be primitive savages (Idrus, 2011). They were viewed as the greatest local source of slaves and were treated with cruelty and injustice. When the Portuguese and Dutch colonized Melaka, this old practice continued. It was not until the arrival of the British that active measures were taken to phase out slavery and to protect the Orang Asli (Idrus, 2011).

During the British administration, specific laws (e.g., Aboriginal Peoples Act 1954) were drafted to protect the Orang Asli. However, post-independence, the motive switched from protection to advancement – where the Orang Asli were viewed as a group who requires assimilation and integration into the general society (Idrus, 2011). Revisions were made to the Aboriginal Peoples Act in 1974 to provide the department powers to control the Orang Asli by creating and regulating Orang Asli settlements, controlling entry into Orang Asli settlements as well as the crops they grow and the use of their lands (Nicholas, 2000), subsequently undermining the Orang Asli's local autonomy over their traditional lands. The effects of such policies continue to impact the Orang Asli today where they continue to be culturally suppressed, and marginalized through deliberate governmental actions and colonial policies. Some of these include forced displacement, degradation of the natural environment surrounding their communities, and cultural discontinuity due to the dispossession of their cultural and ceremonial practices (e.g., Edo, 1998; Gomes, 2016; Nicholas, 2000). Yet, Semai communities have long survived the multiple adversities to their mental and physical well-being, demonstrating high levels of resilience – the ability of a dynamic system to endure and overcome significant challenges (Kirmayer et al., 2009; Masten, 2011).

Over the years, there has been an increase in the number of studies examining resilience processes and mechanisms that facilitate communities' positive adaptation under challenging circumstances. Studies have identified that people draw strength from their social and cultural networks such as their families to overcome challenges (e.g., Burnette et al., 2019; MacPhee, Lunkenheimer, & Riggs, 2015; Prendergast & MacPhee, 2017). These dynamics, interactions and interrelationships were at the heart of weaving a strong and unique fabric of resilience as families act as a foundation of social and emotional support in times of adversities (Burnette et al., 2019; MacPhee et al., 2015). Acknowledging the importance of the role of family in studying resilience, further investigation on how one's

cultural ideals and context influence the complex interactions that occur within these

networks is required. The distinct cultural values and beliefs held by minority and indigenous

communities may provide unique interpretations of family structure and functioning that help

them survive the challenges they face as marginalized groups.

Previous studies of~~n~~ indigenous peoples have indeed recognized family relationships

and functioning as an important factor in shaping resilience (e.g., Carriere, 2007; Chua,

Kadirvelu, Yasin, Choudhry, & Park, 2019; Friborg et al., 2017; Kirmayer et al., 2009). For

example, First Nations children who were separated from their family, community and

culture were found to be more prone to the adverse effects such as emotional instability rising

from negotiated indigenous identity as compared to their counterparts who were not

separated from their families (Carriere, 2007). Meanwhile, Chua et al.'s (2019) systematic

review of indigenous communities demonstrated that the communities who emphasized

social cohesion tended to overcome challenging situations by sharing responsibilities, making

collective decisions and showing openness to collaborate (Chua et al., 2019). While the

existing literature helps identify the factors that promote resilience for indigenous

communities, there is a lack of knowledge on the meaning of family for indigenous

communities and how this may have an impact on their resilience. Therefore, this study aims

to examine how ~~indigenous communities like~~ the Semai community conceptualizes family

and how those~~ey~~ families function to nurture resilience.

Family Processes and Functioning

Families are perceived to be the building blocks of healthy functioning communities,

as they serve as the primary source for the formation of attitudes, behaviors, beliefs and

values (Kirmayer et al., 2009; Ogwo, 2013). They provide a conducive environment for

children to grow into healthy adults and act as support systems for its members (Ungar,

2004). During crises and adversities, families engage in several processes to respond to the

challenges experienced. Families would assist members to make meaning of the challenges experienced and subsequently facilitate a hopeful and positive outlook, enabling the family system to come together to overcome stress, reduce risks of dysfunction and support optimal adaptation (Walsh, 2012), which are vital for nurturing resilience. These processes may vary across different socio- cultural and historical contexts, for they often shape perceptions on the importance of the family, level of commitment to the family, and the degree of dependence on the family for emotional support and decision-making (Park, 2015).

As the ways on how family operates and is understood may vary across cultures and contexts, it is essential to examine them within specific contexts. Traditionally, one may conceptualize the family as "the biological relationship of parents to a child along with the marital or union status of parents" (Manning, Brown, & Stykes, 2014, p. 1). However, the concept of family in other cultures and contexts is predicated on more than just biological factors, or relationships between parents and children. To illustrate, family for many indigenous communities comprised of their extended relations which include multiple generations and all members of their extended family, living and dead (Bang, Nolan, & McDaid-Morgan, 2018; Theron & Theron, 2013). The different ways in which the family is conceptualized highlight the complexity of defining families and how it operates across cultures. This has prompted for further investigation using the emic approach.

The emic approach examines a phenomenon from the accounts of individuals in particular cultural contexts (Helfrich, 1999). This approach assumes that the phenomenon under study may not be similar in all cultural groups. For instance, indigenous family structures in South Africa consist of all members of extended family, living and dead (Theron & Theron, 2013), while traditional family structures of aboriginal communities in Australia revolved around kinship systems where the composition of their households tend to be complex and fluid with adults and children often moving between different households (Qu

& Weston, 2013). The different conceptualizations of family, even within indigenous communities, suggest the need to clarify the definition of a 'typical' family using the emic approach especially in an area which is relatively under-explored. It would also provide local and specific cultural interpretation of the concept of family and how it functions, which cannot be explained by generalized models and theories.

The Current Study

In sum, the literature points to the importance of examining the concept of family and its functioning within specific contexts and cultures. Given the hardships that the Semai indigenous community in Southeast Asia have been faced with, the way they interpret their family and its functioning would provide a better understanding of how they develop and maintain resilience. Furthermore, existing models of family functioning may not be able to accurately explain the processes by which the Semai family operate. Thus, further studies on family functioning would be needed given its role in influencing the physical, social and emotional well-being of a community (Bang et al., 2018). As the concept of family and its functions are diverse in its composition and forms, it is worthy to examine the concept of family and how they influence the lived experience of the community under study. With these goals, this study aimed to utilize the grounded theory approach to build upon these models and subsequently establish a model of the Semai's concept of family and how they function. Specifically, this model will explain the meanings and the structure of family for Semai indigenous communities.

Methods

Strauss and Corbin's (1998) grounded theory was used to develop a model to explain the meaning or structure of the Semai family and how it functions. This approach was deemed the most appropriate as pre-existing theories of family and its functioning may not accurately account for the Semai family (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Additionally, grounded

theory would allow for an emic perspective of Semai community by defining their concepts

of family and its functioning. As such, data collection and analysis for this study were guided

by grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The research

objectives were used to point to an area of inquiry. Subsequently, the emergent data was used

to develop an explanatory theory elucidating the construct of the Semai family and its

functioning free from the restrictions of a preconceived model.

In this study, focus group interviews were conducted to examine the Semai concept of

family and functioning that were not yet in the literature. Focus group discussions (FGD)

allowed the researchers to gain access to the participants' shared views, experiences and

attitudes (Morgan, Krueger, & King, 1998). Additionally, the social context of the focus

group would assist the participants in making meaning of their past and current life

experiences (Hollander, 2004). In this sense, participants were able to develop insights from

what the other participants shared and make meaning out of their own experience (Karasz &

Singelis, 2009). Furthermore, conversations on the positive and negative emotional events

could create shared meaning. This is particularly relevant for the Semai indigenous peoples

who culturally viewed themselves as part of the collective, providing shared stories about

their families and how they function. Six FGDs in total were conducted in this study, with

each group compris~~ed~~ing of ~~about~~ four, two, three~~four, five~~, five and three ~~to five~~

interviewees respectively.

Researcher's Positionality

The first author is a trained qualitative non-indigenous researcher who has worked

with the Orang Asli community for the past ten years. Additionally, the author is a human

rights advocate and trainer who has worked with Jaringan Kampung Orang Asli

Semenanjung Malaysia (JKOASM), a village network of the Orang Asli in Peninsular

Malaysia with 30,000 Orang Asli members living in the states of Perak, Pahang, Selangor,

Negeri Sembilan, Malacca, Johor and Kelantan in Peninsular Malaysia. To this extent, the

first author's experience in working with the indigenous peoples provided the research team

the knowledge of the local dynamics and culture of the Orang Asli community. This was

helpful in enhancing the validity of the analysis as the first author was able to provide full

information about the life circumstances of the participants (Morrow, 2005). As such, the

data collection was conducted by the first author ~~in an unbiased manner~~ with respect and

appreciation for the Semai's local cultural beliefs and practices. Additionally, the other

authors are non-indigenous academics/researchers with the expertise in the health and

psychology research and with good knowledge of qualitative methods. All authors worked in

Malaysia when the research was conducted, had previous experience with cultural or

indigenous research and approached the data with cultural sensitivity.

Participants

Participants were initially recruited using purposive sampling, where experiences of

the most appropriate individuals who fulfil the criteria of the research question were

explored. The participants were required to be 18 years old and above, able to communicate

in the Malay language, belong to a Semai community, reside in the Perak state and currently

~~practicing~~ practice the Semai tradition and religion. As the theory began to emerge, additional

participants were recruited using theoretical sampling, a technique used to recruit participants

who can provide additional views on emerging concepts (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Strauss &

Corbin, 1998). Additionally, this technique was used to improve the sample diversity. Most

early participants recruited were senior male village elders, leaders and community members;

therefore, the recruitment strategy was adjusted to include more women and younger Semai

community members. Theoretical saturation was reached when new participants presented

similar responses which fit~~s~~ the existing codes.

The final sample consisted of 16 men and 7 women ($N = 23$) who are members of the Semai indigenous community, able to communicate in the Malay language, reside at the Perak state and are currently practiceing the Semai tradition and religion. The participants' age ranged from 26 to 72 years old ($M = 48.48$, $SD = 14.62$). They represented a wide range of positions in the village: *tok penghulu* (village leader), *tok hala'* (shamans), village elders, and community members. Additionally, the participants were recruited from six Semai villages, Kampung. Tisong, Kampung. Senta, Kampung. Sat, Kampung. Kjau, Kampung. Sandin and Kampung. Gedong which are located at the fringes between Bidor and Sungkai town in the southern region of the Perak state.

Data collection and analysis

Following Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee (MUHREC) ethics approval (Project Number: 11397), the researchers approached a representative from JKOASM, a local village network of Peninsular Malaysia indigenous peoples, who has worked closely with the Semai community in the Perak state for decades. The representative acted as the gatekeeper community liaison in contacting the potential participants and arranging the logistics of the study. Discussions were conducted with the gatekeeper community liaison to inform them about the research process and to obtain the gatekeeper's community liaison's mutual agreement to ensure the quality of the data collected. Two community leaders accompanied the researcher to the interviews, and one acted as the Semai-Malay language translator.

All FGD were conducted in the Malay language. Prior to the start of the FGD, all participants were informed about the purpose of the research both verbally and in writing in both Malay and their native Semai language. Subsequently, they were informed that their responses would remain confidential and anonymous, and that they were free to withdraw from the study at any point of time without any consequences. All participants provided

informed consent. The FGD were guided by an interview schedule (refer to Appendix A)

framed in an open-ended manner to ensure flexibility (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Subsequent

questions were developed based on the ongoing analysis and emerging data, guided by the

emerging theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The direction of later

questions, driven by the emerging theory, included a small number of probing questions to

delve into the participants' construal of the family and family processes (Corbin & Strauss,

2008; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The FGD ranged in duration from 61 to 101 minutes, were

audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. As the FGD were conducted in the Malay language,

the transcripts were translated by the researcher to English and were shared with a bilingual

expert to verify the translation. Monetary award was given to the village upon completion of

the FGD.

In grounded theory, the process of data collection and analysis are intertwined and

repetitive (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Data analysis occurred throughout the entire research

process. As it would be impossible to transcribe and code each FGD before proceeding to the

next interview due to busy interviewing periods, the process of data collection and analysis

were done concurrently. The researcher listened to the audio recording of the FGD and made

notes about important concepts that emerged. Additionally, the initial interviews showed that

the women and younger Semai community members provided unique inputs (e.g., there are

no gender or age division in the community's work). Therefore, the researcher decided to

make amendments to the recruitment strategy by including more women and younger Semai

community members in the subsequent FGDs to ensure theoretical saturation. The 'formal

analysis' took place upon completion of all FGDs and when the transcripts were translated

from Malay to English. All transcripts were read one or multiple times in order to obtain a

sense of the overall context of the data.

Open coding, in which ~~was conducted where~~ concepts were identified within the text,

was conducted. Those concepts were collapsed ~~and developed~~ into categories to represent

~~what the researchers thought would be~~ themes or important elements in a theory about the

Semai's family functioning (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Additionally,

theoretical memos were generated to explain the researchers' thoughts on what family means

to the Semai. Subsequently, axial coding was conducted where connections between detailed

codes were identified and refined to provide clearer explanations on the Semai's concept of

family and functioning (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). At the following phase of data analysis, the

researchers engaged in theory elaboration by examining the flaws in the logic and cases that

support or challenge their conclusions. This process was completed with all researchers to

ensure triangulation. To illustrate the data analysis process, initial codes such as connection

to *nyenang*, sharing similar language and coming from the same region were identified as

factors that constitute the Semai's family. Additionally, factors such as sharing of knowledge

and resources and prioritizing community's interest were identified as the ways on how the

Semai family functions. The data analysis process was conducted by the first, second and

fourth authors. After each author has completed his/her data analysis, the themes were

compared. When the interpretations differed, discussions were conducted between the

researchers until the most suitable interpretation was found to ensure that the meanings and

characteristics of the Semai family and its functioning are reflective of the participants'

description. The final model and the themes were agreed upon by all authors. Additionally,

regular meetings and analytical sessions were held throughout the entire analysis process to

ensure data credibility.

Results and discussion

The findings obtained from the data collection and analysis indicated that the Semai

community held unique interpretations of the concept of family. The Semai understood the

family to include not only those with blood relations but also their community members and individuals with shared relationship with *nyenang* (spirit ancestors in the Semai language) and cultural heritage. Their concept of family guided their family processes and the numerous ways on how they interacted and functioned. These processes helped create a conducive and harmonious environment as the basis for the resilient community. Figure 1 illustrates a representation of the emergent concepts and depicts their interrelationships in the form of a grounded theory model.

Semai Family Structure

The Semai viewed family holistically ~~where~~ in which every individual in the community with shared relationship with *nyenang* and cultural heritage is considered to be a family member. The Semai perceived their relationship with *nyenang* to be central to their lives. It acted as a key element that connects every Semai individual together. The Semai believed that they originate from the same root:

> *"The Semai Orang Asli share the same ancestors. Our ancestors gave birth to a few children and it continues until the generations after that. Therefore, we consider everyone, the Semai Orang Asli here as siblings." (Akmal, 57, male)*
>
> *"My ancestors come from the same person. After that, their children get married elsewhere. They will spread the family. It becomes bigger. The new generation will continue to spread." (Robin, 38, male)*

They were able to identify familial relationships by tracing their linkages through their family history and background. Participants shared that often, the stories of their origins were transmitted across generations through oral tradition and storytelling, which served to inform them about how their identity and generations are intertwined:

> *"When I meet another person whom I do not know, I may feel that we are not related. But when the elders come, they will ask you questions… because they may know who*

your elders are, so they will ask you, who is your mother, your father. If they are not

familiar, they will probe further… who is your grandmother? Your grandmother from

the maternal side, your grandfather from the maternal side. After you explain, the

elder will regard you as a family." (Tamrin, 72, male)

"How do we know they are family? First, the stories. Their parents will tell them, in

the past, their grandfather's children (were) married here. So, when the grandfather's

children had grandchildren or children, when we meet them, we will start asking

them, who are your parents? If we do not know they are, we will go home and ask our

elders to find out who that person is then only we know that person is our relative."

(Abu, 44, male)

In addition to their relationship with *nyenang,* family membership was based on

sharing of cultural heritage (traditional behavior and way of life), as well as the common

language spoken and connection to the land and environment:

"(What) determined them as family members are them living here for long periods of

time. They understand the way we interact (and way of life) like looking for petai or

searching for forest products. They know their whereabouts and they do the same

things we do." (Kamsiah, 40, female)

"We do not call the Temiar or Jakun (other sub-ethnic groups) uncle or tok

(grandfather) even though they are from the same ethnic group. If they (come from

the same sub-ethnic group and speaks the same language), we will refer them as

grandfather, grandmother, brother. That is what we call as family." (Raimi, 25, male)

"As long as that person is a Semai Orang Asli, we would regard them as our own

people. Even though we do not know where he/she comes from, we will call him/her

maihi. Maihi refers to our people in the Semai language." (Raju, 48, male)

Additionally, the Semai family was constructed on flexible relationship terms where they can have multiple mothers, fathers, uncles, aunties, brothers and sisters regardless of blood relations:

> *"In this village, everyone is regarded as my grandchildren. I do not treat them like outsiders. Even though if it is another person's child, I would still regard them as my grandchildren. Anyone else too because they are all our family."* (Tamrin, 72, male)
>
> *"In considering them (other community members) as family, we regard other family members as uncles, aunties, grandchildren. (…) Even though we are not brothers from the same father and mother, we would regard each other as brothers."* (Raimi, 25, male)

It is important to emphasize that the Semai's relationship with *nyenang* and cultural heritage were essential features that shaped the Semai's family identity. Contrary to generalized conceptualization of family where family was defined based on the biological relationships (Manning et al., 2014), the Semai's family was defined based on specific relationship rules and not genetic closeness. In this sense, it can be suggested that the Semai adopted the classificatory system of kinship based on abstract relationship rules and genealogical relations (Trautmann, 2001). This kinship system formed a sense of shared family identity and provided a deep sense of belonging and connectedness among other Semai people and communities. The Semai's concept of family ~~guided~~ informed their key family processes ~~and functioning~~ by determining their obligations, responsibilities and appropriate behaviors to maintain and uphold their kinship relations (see Figure 1). This has led them to value the principle of reciprocity, viewing themselves to be interwoven to one another and emphasize collectivity which is vital in ensuring effective family functioning.

[Figure 1]

Family functioning

The Semai's family processes and functioning were defined based on their concept of family. As familial connections and relationships were pivotal in the lives of the Semai, the ways they operate and function were guided by the principal of reciprocity. In this grounded theory model, the Semai's family processes were demonstrated in the following five inter-related dimensions of functioning that formed the core of how the Semai understood and felt supported by their families – sharing obligations and responsibilities, making collective decisions, prioritizing community's welfare, sharing of knowledge and resources and willingness to work with everyone.

Sharing obligations and responsibilities. The Semai acknowledged that every family member had an obligation and responsibility to one another. In this sense, responsibilities were distributed among the large family network. They would look after one another and ensure that they participated in every communal event. Additionally, they would offer their assistance and contribute wherever required:

> *"Whenever there is a problem, we will gather together. They will ensure that at least half of their household will be present there. If there isn't half, at least representatives, two to three persons from one house will come. They will join the discussion and will inform what was discussed to their family members at home."*
> *(Robin, 47, male)*
> *"We will discuss as a family whenever there are problems or matters pertaining the village. We will assist one another. Whenever there is a problem like encroachment in another village, I will go and help the other village. That means we are united. Today, if someone encroach my land, the villagers from the other village will come and help me out. It is like this." (Rubiah, 60, female)*

Social and caring responsibilities such as the upbringing of the child were also distributed among the entire family network. Child rearing was not the sole responsibility of the biological parents but the entire extended family who may step in to provide emotional support and protection:

> *"If the child's parents are not around, if we do not help, then who else will? We have to help them. On the days when I am not around, in return, they (the child's parents) will help my child the same way." (Mia, 35, female)*

> *"(Child rearing) is everyone's responsibility. In terms of food, their behavior, I will monitor them. If they do the things that they should not do, I will reprimand them." (Ramli, 62, male)*

The distribution of obligations and responsibilities among the family members were also not discriminatory in nature. Age, gender or rank did not play any role in fulfilling the obligation. The participants explained:

> *"There is no difference in the workload (for the man and woman). For us, if it is a heavy workload it is the same. Light also the same." (Julia, 20, female)*

> *"Like the paddy fields, there is no difference. Our entire family will go there. Whether it is the woman or the man. We will help each other. There is no difference." (Pairin, 25, male)*

The Semai's sharing of obligations and responsibilities socialized them to be respectfully proactive to provide practical and emotional support whenever needed. This, in a sense, created a strong sense of dependability and interdependence among members of the family, strengthening their family relationships.

   Making decisions collectively. The Semai emphasized the importance of equality and autonomy of all family members. Family members were free and open to express their ideas and opinions. Additionally, problems were recognized and communicated openly to everyone

and the views of every family members were solicited before a decision was made. Even though discussions may be difficult and time consuming, decisions will be made collectively to avoid disunity:

> *"Everyone participates in decision making. They will evaluate the different suggestions. They will ask everyone (who were present there) one by one. Is the decision good? Why do we think it is good? Why do we accept it? Everyone, will be asked to provide their opinions on the decision. If it is good, we will accept it. In the end, they will accept the decision that is made and they will go by the decision." (Tamnrin, 72, male)*

The Semai family valued the importance of negotiation and accepting differences demonstrating respect for their fellow community members. Collective decisions were made in a fair and egalitarian manner in the families:

> *"We do not make (decisions) based on ranks. We want our subordinates to make the decisions themselves. We will evaluate the suggestions (together). If we can use the idea, then we will. As the penghulu (village leader), I will bring (the decision) wherever I go." (Samsiah, 58, female)*

> *"It is not the penghulu's (mandate) to make the sole decision. We do not rely on the penghulu only. We will conduct a discussion. We want to make a collective decision with the youths, women and elders." (Ramli, 62, male)*

As the decisions were made in a collective manner, family members would feel reassured that their feedbacks were acknowledged and valued. It would also render problem solving to be more comprehensible and manageable, fostering their willingness to accept and support the decisions made:

> *"(After the discussion) the tasks will be divided. If we are having a wedding feast, we will decide who will buy the rice, the chicken or the fish and how many of us will go…*

> *How many will stay at home and wait to cut the chicken. They will do it voluntarily."*
>
> *(Ruslan, 28, male)*
>
> *"If the roads are messy, we will have a meeting with everyone. We will discuss and*
>
> *identify who is interested to clean up this part. They will inform their area of*
>
> *preference and we will (collectively) clean up the place." (Arau, 36, male)*

The Semai family's decision-making processes created a climate of mutual trust where every family member was encouraged to freely express their own emotions and opinions without being judged or shamed. This created a shared sense of comfort and security which strengthens internal solidarity and unity within the family.

Prioritizing community welfare. The Semai's decisions and actions were often made to safeguard the interest of the entire community (non-blood related family members with shared relationship with *nyenang* and cultural heritage), present and the future. They believed that their current decisions and actions would implicate their future generations. As such, the Semai felt a special sense of responsibility to ensure the survival of the community; hence, making decisions from a collectivistic viewpoint:

> *"We evaluate all suggestions given to us. Like in the future, would the decision be*
>
> *beneficial for everyone or only for two or three people. If it benefits only two to three*
>
> *people, we will not accept their suggestion." (Robin, 47, male)*
>
> *"We will ask all community members whether they agree with the suggestion. They*
>
> *will consider whether (the suggestions) it is good for everyone in the future or not. If*
>
> *everyone believes the suggestion to be beneficial for all, we will accept the*
>
> *suggestion." (Kamsiah, 40, female)*

The Semai had a sense of obligation to continue and maintain the connections within the family. At the heart of the family, one's obligation to the family and community were

regarded to be more important than material gain. This would ensure the continuity of the

Semai family, creating a sense of security and assurance among family members.

   Sharing of knowledge and resources. The Semai ~~actively~~ reported supporting family

members who were experiencing hardships by sharing their available knowledge and

resources. They were willing to share their limited resources in order to ease the burden

experienced by family members who needed it. The participants shared:

> *"(When my child is sick…) I would definitely want to visit him/her. But if there is no*
>
> *money, my siblings or relatives will help out. They will say let's rotate. Today you can*
>
> *rest because you have already visited; so, we will rotate." (Nia, 50, female)*
>
> *"Any problems, the villagers will help whenever (possible). If we need money, we will*
>
> *collect. Collect money and pass it to those in need. If there is food, we will share. We*
>
> *need to help them out if there is a problem." (Rustam, 44, male)*

Additionally, the knowledge and the stories shared assisted family members to adjust well to

difficulties. The information shared would provide them with alternative views and ideas to

approach an issue. This could help facilitate the development of creative methods to solve the

issues experienced. The participant described:

> *"When (the villagers from) Kg. Chang come here, we will share our stories and*
>
> *problems experienced. (…) We could get new ideas from their sharing. For example,*
>
> *when they return from Kuala Lumpur (capital of Malaysia) or wherever, they will*
>
> *share their experiences. We will be able to learn how it is like there. If we have time*
>
> *to spare, we will go there and experience it." (Arau, 36, male)*

The sharing of knowledge and resources was highly valued and promoted in the Semai

family. It is seen as an obligation, especially if there is someone in need. In this sense, the

sharing of one's wisdom and resources would benefit the family. The support provided would

provide courage and hope to fellow family members that the challenges experienced can be overcome collectively.

> *Willingness to work with everyone*. The Semai were willing to spend their time, chores and errands together with their family members. They valued the company of their family members and would create opportunities for any interested members to collectively participate in their daily activities. The participants described:

> *"Whenever there is a matter, we will meet up and discuss. We will call other villagers to join us. We will meet other community leaders or other people from different villages or nearby villages. We will meet at a middle ground, for example, the hall in Kg. Chang (to discuss)." (Tamnrin, 72, male)*

> *"Whenever I go to the field… I can invite other children… They can join me. Just like that. It is not hard. (…) If I go to another village, I can ask also ask the family to join me. It is not that difficult. That is how the (Semai) Orang Aslis are." (Nia, 50, female)*

The Semai's willingness to work with everyone was not restricted to those from their own village only. Extended family members from other villages would also be invited to participate in community discussions whenever possible:

> *"(Whenever we have discussions), we will have discussions with other villages. We will discuss and make our decisions together. If we want to make a report, we will make a report with the penghulu and the committee members from other villages… They will join us to make a police report."(Ruslan, 28, male)*

As a whole, the Semai's key family processes and functioning were oriented to form a conducive and supportive environment aimed to strengthen and maintain existing family relationships which is vital in ensuring effective family functioning. Guided by their concept of family, the Semai's processes and mechanisms reinforced their Semai identity and ensured cohesion and social control. These actions helped develop a shared support system which

allowed families to harness strengths and resources to survive and thrive. Families with

strong support systems and networks were able to offer a rich, protective sense of belonging

and cohesion (Black & Lobo, 2008). Additionally, the extended relationships and social

networks embedded in the Semai's conceptualization of family allowed the Semai to interact

reciprocally with one another to provide assistance, avenues, services and resources essential

for the welfare and the positive development of the community (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker,

2000).

Theoretical and Empirical Implications

The current study has demonstrated that the Semai held different worldviews of

family from the general population, suggesting that culture does indeed influence perceptions

of family. Our findings reaffirmed the importance of the Semai's cultural view of indigenous

spirituality in shaping family their beliefs and processes (Chua, Kadirvelu, Yasin, & Park,

2020). Like other indigenous communities, the value of interconnectedness was prominent in

the Semai's culture where this worldview guided them to view themselves as extensions of

their family, community and ancestors (Chua et al., 2019). Additionally, the findings

supported the need to examine specific psychological phenomenon from an emic approach

(Helfrich, 1999). The Semai's unique interpretation of family take into account the totality of

their ancestry and cultural characteristics. As indicated in the findings, the Semai's family

were determined based on their relationship with *nyenang* and cultural heritage. These factors

allowed them to identify members of their family and to build their understanding of family

in the broad sense and how it affected them.

The Semai's cultural worldviews also influence and organize their family processes

and responses to adversities. Contrary to how conventional families foster resilience by

tapping into their family belief systems (making meaning of adversity, positive outlook,

transcendence and spirituality), organization patterns (flexibility, connectedness and social

and economic resources) and communication processes (clarity, open emotional expression and collaborative problem-solving) (Walsh, 2003), the Semai would engage in the following family processes – sharing obligations and responsibilities, making collective decisions, prioritizing community's welfare, sharing of knowledge and resources and willingness to work with everyone. In this sense, the ways how the Semai family foster healing and growth out of adversities were influenced by their cultural worldview.

The current findings, however, share some commonalities with existing theories of family processes and functioning such as the McMaster Model of Family Functioning and the Process Model of Family Functioning (Miller, Ryan, Keitner, Bishop, & Epstein, 2000; Skinner, Steinhauer, & Sitarenios, 2000). Similar to both theories, our model sheds a light on the processes on how family functions effectively (Miller et al., 2000; Skinner et al., 2000). More specifically, our theory provided an overview of the factors that constitute the ways on how the Semai family functions to facilitate resilience. Our findings also suggest that the emphasis placed by existing theories of family processes and functioning varied across theories. For example, the McMaster Model of Family Functioning focused on providing appropriate environmental conditions for family members to grow (Miller et al., 2000) while the Process Model of Family Functioning focused on task accomplishments (Skinner et al., 2000). Rather than focusing on the conventional ways on viewing how family functions effectively, our findings focused revealed on how family functions to facilitate resilience. Additionally, it presented addressed the nuances of and the influences of culture and culturally transmitted values and beliefs. In this sense, the Semai placed a great emphasis on strengthening and maintaining existing and harmonious family relationships.

Several methodological strengths could be recognized in this grounded theory study. One of the major strengths of this study was the type of participants interviewed. The participants examined in this study encompassed a wide range of Semai individuals who

varied in their gender, age, experience and position in the community. The wide variety of

individuals that participated in this study had enriched the grounded theory model developed

in this study. Furthermore, to the best of our knowledge, this is the first known study to

provide a unique Semai specific theoretical conceptualization of family conceptualization and

functioning.

Limitations, Practical Implications and Conclusion

Notwithstanding the strengths of the current study, several limitations were also noted

in the current study. First, the participants interviewed in this study were predominantly from

the Perak state. Apart from the Perak state, the Semai also reside at the Pahang state

(Nicholas, 2000). As the indigenous communities are quite diverse, these results therefore

may not be applicable to the Semai communities living in the Pahang state. Future studies

should attempt to examine and test the applicability of the grounded theory with the Semai

communities in the Pahang state. Although the present grounded theory model does not allow

extensive generalizations, it would be interesting to examine if it could be applied in the other

Orang Asli sub-ethnic groups or it might only be restricted to the Semai indigenous

communities in Peninsular Malaysia. Another limitation identified was the use of English in

the coding process. As the coding was not done in the original language of the interview,

Malay, the narrative of interview may not be captured accurately (Twinn, 1997). Therefore,

the coding process for future studies could be conducted in the original language of the

interview to ensure accuracy.

Several practical implications could be deduced from the current grounded theory

model. Although our findings demonstrate the collective nature of community, initiatives

such as the preservation and promotion of traditional and cultural practices could be

conducted to strengthen the relationship between members of the community. First, the

documentation of the collective history and the intergenerational relationships of the Semai

family would be helpful in maintaining their family identity and culture. The recorded

information would act as an important educational tool to explain the Semai's complex

family conceptualization and relationships to future generations and the general public.

Additionally, regular activities at the community level such as sports events and communal

activities that include all members of the Semai community such as the elders, men, women

and the children would help bring people ~~around~~together. Given the participation of all

members of the community, such activities could facilitate sharing and cooperation across

generations (Kirmayer et al., 2009). Such efforts would be beneficial in strengthening

familial relationships which would be beneficial in enhancing resilience.

Additionally, much effort is needed to accommodate the indigenous culture in the

government education system. The current Malaysian education system adopted a one-size

fits all education system (Renganathan, 2016), which forces the Semai community to

accommodate and assimilate into the mainstream culture which prioritizes individual

achievements rather than the community. Such policies may not be helpful for the Semai

community in maintaining their unique indigenous culture and beliefs which places great

importance on familial relationships. Hence, accommodating the Semai's indigenous culture

in the government education system by recognizing and acknowledging the strengths of their

indigenous families and culture could assist them in preserving their unique culture and

traditions, and subsequently strengthen their families and community resilience.

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