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Amir's Life Story: Resilience and Other Soft Skills Development to Thrive, Despite Vulnerable Beginnings

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Abstract

This article explores the life story of Amir, a young adult from a rural village in Malaysia, who built resilience and developed soft skills to thrive in his life despite his vulnerable beginnings. Amir's strong resilience and other soft skills that assisted him to be outstanding in his academics and career may have resulted from his caring and supportive authoritative mother, countering his strict and harsh authoritarian father, with an ecological system of protective factors and developmental assets strengthened by religiosity and spirituality. However, both his parents' extremely different confrontive and coercive methods appeared to have worked together towards the development of certain soft skills, such as his entrepreneurial mindset. This fresh outlook may provide guidance to assist vulnerable children and youth from rural areas to thrive, while raising new questions for future research.

Keywords

Life Story, Narrative Inquiry, Vulnerable, Resilience, Soft Skills, Entrepreneurship, Religiosity and Spirituality, Malaysia

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This article explores the life story of Amir, a young adult from a rural village in Malaysia, who built resilience and developed soft skills to thrive in his life despite his vulnerable beginnings. Amir's strong resilience and other soft skills that assisted him to be outstanding in his academics and career may have resulted from his caring and supportive authoritative mother, countering his strict and harsh authoritarian father, with an ecological system of protective factors and developmental assets strengthened by religiosity and spirituality. However, both his parents' extremely different confrontive and coercive methods appeared to have worked together towards the development of certain soft skills, such as his entrepreneurial mindset. This fresh outlook may provide guidance to assist vulnerable children and youth from rural areas to thrive, while raising new questions for future research. Keywords: Life Story, Narrative Inquiry, Vulnerable, Resilience, Soft Skills, Entrepreneurship, Religiosity and Spirituality, Malaysia

Introduction

Globally, research has been centred around the empirical evidence that there are gaps and disparities in children and youth due to their socioeconomic status and social class, especially in hard and soft skills which play a substantial role in determining their future life achievements (Duncan, Magnuson, & Votruba-drzal, 2017; Garcia, 2015; Heckman & Kautz, 2012). These inequalities are due to vulnerable and at-risk children usually living in uncomfortable, crowded and structurally defective homes, in neighbourhoods with a high risk of violence and crime which may create physiological and emotional stress, as well as attending low quality schools (Duncan et al., 2017). Other reasons may be that parents of vulnerable families experience financial stress which may result in hostility, harshness and inconsistency which affect their children's development; they are unable to provide quality care as they spend long hours at work; and criminal activity, abuse or joblessness may be passed from parent to children in vulnerable families (Duncan, Magnuson, & Votruba-drzal, 2014).

Abdul Kadir, Rahim, Abdul Mutalib, Wan Mahmud, Chong, and Subhi (2012) highlighted that vulnerable youth in Malaysia have the potential of being involved in risky activities and drop out of school. In addition, for children and youth from risky backgrounds, there is high potential of behavioural issues such as drug and alcohol abuse, sexual activity and suicide; and the crucial mitigation would be the development of soft skills (Jegannathan, Dahlblom, & Kullgren, 2014; Tymes, Outlaw, & Hamilton, 2016).

Soft skills are traits and behaviours that are intangible, non-technical, and personality-specific, which determine an individual's strength, and are required to go hand in hand with academic skills for the best achievements (Robles, 2012). Soft skills include survival skills

such as communication, interpersonal, emotional intelligence, leadership, teamwork, negotiation, time management and stress management (Seth & Seth, 2013). The Malaysia Graduate Employability Blueprint 2012-2017 also stated that soft skills are inter and intra-personal skills that include decision-making, integrity, honesty, ethics, self-motivation, independence, critical thinking, reasoning and problem-solving skills.

Aside from addressing behavioural issues of those from risky backgrounds, soft skills have also been associated with employability in the competitive 21st century (Nickson, Warhurst, Commander, Hurrell, & Cullen, 2012; Padhi, 2014; Robles, 2012; Seth & Seth, 2013) which could potentially turn their lives and their families' lives around. However, the literature surrounding soft skills development in Malaysia appears to mainly focus on the issue of graduates not having the required soft skills to be employed (Esa, Padil, Selamat, & Idris, 2015; Musa, Mufti, Latiff, & Amin, 2012; Nikitina & Furuoka, 2012). According to Heckman (2011), although both hard and soft skills are equally important for life success, soft skills development is often neglected.

In adversity and vulnerability, positive human development is focused on the development of resilience (Forrest-Bank, Nicotera, Anthony, & Jenson, 2015; Holliday, Cimetta, Cutshaw, Yaden, & Marx, 2014; Kuldass, Hashim, & Ismail, 2015; Vimont, 2012; Zolkoski & Bullock, 2012). Ungar (2012) described resilience as when a vulnerable individual cultivates a higher coping ability and is less vulnerable to more risk exposure. Lee, Cheung, and Kwong (2012) added that resilience is the capability to adapt and cope with adversities, with positive outcomes as the result of supportive protective factors. Ungar (2013) explained that research on interactions between individuals and their social ecologies assisted researchers to understand the outcome of resilience.

Zimmerman et al. (2013) stated that the resilience theory provides a conceptual framework in positive youth development to study and explore why certain vulnerable youth grow up to be successful and thrive despite the risks faced in their childhood and adolescence, with this theory being focused on increasing protective factors rather than reducing risk exposure. Empirical evidence showed that childhood protective factors are integral for developing resilience, which include emotion-control, self-awareness and motivation, as well as family relationship and good parenting (Southwick, Bonanno, Masten, Panter-Brick, & Yehuda, 2014).

Kuldass et al. (2015) found that despite the majority of at-risk and vulnerable students in Malaysia not succeeding, there are some students from the same background who are able to succeed academically, depending on how well they adjust themselves to their environment while facing adversity. Unfortunately, the authors highlighted that there is no empirical evidence to show us how this is achieved.

To reduce the negative outcomes from the risky lives of the vulnerable, it is found that protective factors or developmental assets are important to build the required skills (Sesma, Mannes, & Scales, 2013; Zimmerman et al., 2013). Zimmerman et al. (2013) also stated that a critical development asset is the support from relationships with adults who are genuinely caring, empowering, encouraging and provide opportunities, such as parents and other caring adults including mentors from school and the community, to overcome societal risks. Similarly in a Malaysian study, Kuldass et al. (2015) found that caring relationships are development assets to build resilience when they are with important caregiving individuals in their family like parents and siblings; teachers in school, coaches and peers; as well as in the community such as friends or neighbours.

There is also empirical evidence which demonstrates that earlier intervention in soft skill development produces a cost-effective and sustainable outcome for the vulnerable (Duncan & Magnuson, 2013; Garcia, 2015; Heckman, 2011; Heckman & Kautz, 2012). Human development theories such as Bronfenbrenner's Ecology Theory, Piaget's Cognitive

Development Theory and Lev Vygotsky's Cognitive-Mediation Theory state that the most significant human development happens during infancy, childhood and adolescence (Christensen, 2010). Bronfenbrenner (1994) stated that proximal processes or enduring interaction in a child's immediate environment such as parent-child and child-child activities encourage learning and should primarily happen during childhood.

Parenting is an important aspect of positive child and youth development (Heckman & Kautz, 2012). Based on Baumrind's two-dimensional framework of warmth or responsiveness, as well as behaviour control; there are four parenting styles : (a) the authoritative parenting style which exhibits high warmth and high control; (b) the authoritarian parenting style which exhibits low warmth but high control; (c) the permissive parenting style which exhibits high warmth but low control; and (d) the neglectful parenting style which exhibits low warmth and low control (Pinquart & Kauser, 2018). Baumrind (2012) had also earlier analysed parenting styles with power assertion, in relation to authoritative and authoritarian parenting. The first power assertive parenting style is confrontive parenting by authoritative parents, which Baumrind explained is crucial for child development and wellbeing. This parenting style regulates child behaviours by being outcome-oriented, reasonable and negotiable. The other power assertive parenting style is coercive parenting by authoritarian parents, which controls the child by being domineering, arbitrary and hierarchical; which Baumrind described to be harmful.

This article documents the exploration of Amir's life story, to gain insight about how a vulnerable child developed resilience and other soft skills which may not have only assisted him to stay away from risky behaviours but also thrive in life. His life story was explored from as far back as he could remember to answer the research question of "How can a vulnerable individual develop soft skills to thrive in life, despite being exposed to risks which may hinder his development?"

Methodology

Butina (2015), Creswell (2013), and Robson and McCartan (2016) agree that exploratory research requires qualitative research strategies. Exploration of a life story gives an edge to this study, especially because there appears to be limited usage of qualitative research for studies in soft skills development for the vulnerable, a subject matter mostly studied using the quantitative research approach in Malaysia.

Documenting, analysing and writing about Amir's life story may be the most critical first steps to finding the answers to potentially make positive changes in vulnerable Malaysian children's lives in the future. To carry out this study, the narrative inquiry method was chosen, as Clandinin and Connelly (2000) described narrative inquiry to be "stories lived and told" (p. 20), with the idea of life stories within narrative inquiry being inspired by Dewey's theory of experience (1938). Connelly and Clandinin (1990) explained that narrative inquiry is the study of the way people experience the world, and their lives are described by collecting and telling their stories by the writing of experience narratives.

Data Collection

Data for this narrative inquiry study were collected via interviews, field notes and analytical memos or journal records (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). For the main data collection method of interviews, data were collected from Amir, a study participant who is distinctive to the phenomenon being studied, via two slightly over an-hour interviews which were recorded and transcribed. After explaining the research objective to Amir for him to provide formal consent, semi-structured interviews were carried out in two parts. The responsive interviewing

technique, an in-depth interviewing style was used to form a close relationship with Amir; to maintain a friendly and supportive tone throughout the interviews which created trust and respect, while controlling emotions and comments, to encourage Amir to open up (Rubin & Rubin, 2012) and share more of his life story. In the first interview, questions were not asked that could affect Amir's decision of what he chose to reveal in his storytelling. Probing questions were also used to guide Amir to expand on certain stories (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). In the second interview, Amir was encouraged to fill in the gaps which were noted from the first interview, by guiding him with questions to relate about certain life periods which were left out in the story, as well as to provide more in-depth information about interesting matters which Amir had spoken briefly about before. Amir was also asked about which experiences he felt had resulted in him succeeding in life. After these two face-to-face interviews and preliminary data analysis, Amir was emailed a few more questions to clarify certain facts on his experiences, which he promptly responded via his reply emails.

Responding to the inquiry of which two close individuals in Amir's life such as family members, teachers, friends or village community members who could also be interviewed about his life story for this study, Amir recommended interviews with his mother and sister. Aside from providing corroborating evidence to validate Amir's life story, interviewing his mother and sister as different sources of data may also be used to elaborate on the subject at hand and illuminate the research findings (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Amir was not present during these interviews with his mother and sister, so that they could speak freely about his life and provide more quality data for analysis. All four interviews were done one after the other, depending on the availability of the interviewee; and transcribed for subsequent analysis, interpretation and meaning-making.

Field notes were drawn up immediately after each interview to document observations during the interview and findings in the storytelling to highlight notable issues for analysis or follow-up, and may be both descriptive and reflective (Creswell, 2013). It was useful to reflect on Amir's reactions during the interview, towards ideas for data analysis. This reflection also provided guidance to ask additional questions, as well as to review the interview proceedings to improve the interview techniques (Braun & Clarke, 2013). For example, one reflective entry within the field notes was "He went on and on about his mother, that I had to ask for him to tell stories about his father"; which may have been an indication that Amir had much love and admiration for his mother, or on the other hand he may have felt distant from or was fearful of his father.

Analytical memos, a researcher blog of personal thoughts, observations, insights and reflections, were also maintained to document those priceless "Eureka!" moments when an interesting idea or concept occurred when you least expected it to. For this study, this data collection tool was found to be the most interesting and stimulating one to use, as it assisted with progress without boundaries and limits. As an example, one analytical memo entry on an idea that occurred sometime after the completion of the interviews was "After speaking to Amir's sister, it occurred to me that Amir had to shield his younger siblings from his father due to his sense of responsibility as the elder brother; and this may have also developed his resilience, as he felt that he did not have any choice but to do so." Therefore, analytical memos are self-discussions about the ideas on data and is a place to throw ideas about the participant, the phenomenon, as well as the analysis process; by thinking and writing which results in more thinking (Saldana, 2013). Memo-writing is the most crucial connecting step between data collection and drafting of research papers, as it facilitates the researcher to be more engaged with data, develop ideas and improve subsequent data collection processes (Charmaz, 2014).

The interview transcripts, analytical memos and field notes were maintained in the research journal file to act as an audit trail of all the research activities for this present study when required.

Data Analysis

All three data types for this study of interview transcripts, field notes and analytical memos were coded progressively during the study (Saldana, 2013), using the thematic coding analysis method (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Robson & McCartan, 2016). Coding commenced with pre-determined codes, and themes from literature review and identified theories (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Robson & McCartan, 2016). The pre-determined codes used included “soft skills” and “underprivileged life”; while the literature and theory-driven codes included “relationships,” “experiences,” “protective factors,” and “development period.” Each of the codes identified were expanded as data analysis progressed; for example, “soft skills” was expanded to “resilience,” “entrepreneurship,” “leadership,” “independence,” “confidence,” “communication,” and “positive mindset.” The data were analysed further with the identification of inductive codes which included “warmth,” “training,” “discipline,” “spirituality,” and “religiosity.” Themes and patterns were then identified across the codes in relation to the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2013); while exploration and interpretation of patterns were done which gave rise to meaning of the results (Robson & McCartan, 2016).

As this study is totally exploratory to achieve the research objective, additional literature review was carried out during and after the data analysis and interpretation stage to assist in examining the potentially important emergent themes on hand such as “parenting styles” and “entrepreneurship skills training,” as they were not predicted earlier on in the study. A hypothesis may only emerge as a result of data analysis, where the outcomes may be used to support the study even if they only emerged as a result of inductive logic from data meaning interpretation, within the context of the phenomena studied (Robson & McCartan, 2016).

Contrary or unexpected findings to counter researcher bias were consciously not disregarded and were included within the overall result discussion (Robson & McCartan, 2016). For example, Amir’s father’s harsh parenting style was found in previous literature to produce negative results in child development. However, codes from literature review should not be solely relied on, as insights that may not be in the literature may be missed in the data analysis (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Therefore, the finding that Amir’s father’s harsh parenting styles may have contributed to Amir’s resilience and other soft skills in certain instances, was included in the conclusion discussion.

Trustworthiness and Rigour

In qualitative research which involves a human being as the data collection tool, the issues of bias and rigour are always present (Robson & McCartan, 2016). At least two validation strategies are recommended to be used in any qualitative study to ensure trustworthiness and rigour, while countering bias (Creswell, 2013). In this study, the three validation strategies of maintaining an audit trail, performing triangulation and carrying out member checking were used. The audit trail is present with the maintenance of a research journal, a physical file that keeps all data collection and analysis documents to understand show how data were collected and managed in a transparent manner so that the whole study process may be traced with evidence (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Triangulation which is using more than one data source was performed by interviewing two others aside from Amir to provide substantiating evidence, as well as member checking where the research result summary was provided to Amir to seek his comments and feedback before the final paper was written (Creswell, 2013; Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Robson & McCartan, 2016).

Results

Overview of Amir's Life Story

Behind his soft-spoken demeanour, Amir is an individual who has accomplished so much in his life. Although Amir is only in his early thirties, he is already the department head of a leading organisation in the heavy equipment business that sells a comprehensive range of products and services across the Asia Pacific region. Aside from financially assisting his parents, Amir is also currently funding his youngest sister to obtain a medical degree. However, his earlier years were far from being comfortable. Amir hails from a working class family in a village in Setiu, a small town in Terengganu, one of the 13 states of Malaysia. Both his parents were primary school teachers, and his mother shared that at the start of both their teaching careers, their monthly salary was only RM360 (about USD90) each. His family was not financially comfortable, and Amir was the eldest of five children in the family.

Amir's village community was a risky one for children, as it was rife with a phenomenon in Malaysia called "Mat Rempit" or wayward youths who participated in reckless and hazardous illegal motorcycle racing. According to Hidzir, Arbain, Sabariah, Ismail, and Ismail (2015), this illegal racing phenomenon in Malaysia is getting more prevalent every day. The authors explained that "Mat Rempit" are usually young teenagers or adults who come from family of low socioeconomic backgrounds and participate in this dangerous activity to entertain themselves, as well as exhibit some form of courage and power. They perform hazardous stunts while riding their motorcycles, which endangers their own and other road users' lives. Amir gave an example of how the village children were drawn to this dangerous activity, using the story of his first personal encounter with this risky activity when he was just a child starting primary school.

... I think I was about 7 or 8. And that's the only time when my younger brother and I could go out (for Quran reading classes). After finishing our class, we were required to immediately go home and we were not allowed to loiter around. This is because my father was aware of the danger of hazardous racing in the village among the young children. In fact, they offered us the opportunity. A few secondary students prepositioned us and offered us 10 sen if we raced against each other. This is how people start their interest in illegal racing.

When Amir was 14, his father decided to resign from his teaching job after taking a year off from work. For at least two years, Amir's family of seven was living off the salary of only one breadwinner, his mother; while his father searched for construction contracts as his new source of income. Although the family faced financial challenges during these years, Amir commented that his father appeared to be less angry and mellowed down after he stopped teaching, and Amir saw this in his less harsh treatment of his younger sisters. Amir explained that it may have been stressful for his father to work as a teacher, especially since he was also the discipline teacher of the school.

When my dad was a discipline teacher, he was always angry.... Along the way, he mellowed down. It appeared to me that he changed, it's just difficult for me to explain why. After he stopped being a teacher, I felt that he was less stressed, and that may be the reason why he mellowed down.

From Amir's storytelling of his childhood, he gave the impression that his father was the disciplinarian, with his mother being his pillar of support. His mother however, described how

both she and her husband were the disciplinarians at home. She related that she was the parent who spent most of her time with the children as they grew up, as her husband was always away. Amir related that he knew how to read from the age of four and explained how both his parents had a hand in this early achievement in his life.

I think from the age of four, because when I was in kindergarten, I could already read the newspapers. My dad liked to buy the *Utusan* (a local newspaper), and he would cut out an article and asked me to read for him. And my mom would see to it that I could do that.... Both my mom and dad would take turns. For my dad, it would normally be in the evenings during his free time, and he would make me work on exercise books and learn how to spell. I could definitely read the newspapers at four...

Amir was an outstandingly high academic achiever, while being active in school activities and competitions, despite the economic and environmental challenges he faced in his earlier life. He was offered a prestigious scholarship for a tertiary education overseas in a very competitive landscape, and he was the first in his village to have an opportunity to study overseas. He is currently part of the senior management team of a multi-national company specialising in heavy equipment, experiencing a fast track up the career ladder due to his achievements in facilitating his company to secure a higher market share, an important long term national partner and new regional customers.

The Emerging Themes from Amir's Life Story

Amir's life appears to have been moulded by his strict and harsh authoritarian father, as well as his warm and supportive authoritative mother. With the strong ecological system built around him mostly by his mother, he developed resilience and learnt to cope with his life risks as well as his father's parenting while developing soft skills such as entrepreneurship skills. As part of his coping mechanism, he retaliated against his father by taking certain actions which he considered as going against his father's wishes, despite him having a high level of compliance. Amir also justified all that had happened so that he could accept his father's strict rules which he thought were unfair at the time. One other protective factor in his ecological system which helped him build resilience to cope with risk and adversity is religiosity and spirituality.

Authoritarian Father

Amir chose to start his storytelling by speaking about his experiences with his father. This is despite both him and his mother stating that his father did not spend much time with him, except when he was about 10 years old and his father started to bring him fishing about three times a week in the evenings after work and school. However, Amir related that not much conversation took place during the fishing trips. Amir also related that he had experienced physical punishments at least once a month in his childhood and early adolescence, which at times he felt was unjust as he did not do anything to deserve the beating. He provided an example, "There was this time when my father was sleeping. He was suddenly woken up by my brother and sister who were fighting and arguing about something. But the one who received the physical punishment was me.... It was unfair." His sister confirmed in her storytelling about Amir being physically punished by their father every now and then.

Under his father's rules, Amir was not allowed to go out under any circumstances except to attend Quran (the Muslim holy book) reading classes after which he was expected to

return home immediately and not do other things, including fraternising with the village youngsters or go swimming in the nearby river. His mother confirmed that Amir was not allowed to go out and socialise with the other village children and youth, as she was afraid that he may be negatively influenced by his friends.

If his friends wanted to visit, that was alright. But he wasn't allowed to go out of the house, so that he would not be influenced by his friends. His friends would visit when they wanted his help to tutor them in studies, or study together, or do homework together; that was alright. But we (both Amir's parents) did not allow him out of the house compound. He was only allowed to go out to the *Tok Guru's* (old teacher's) house for Quran reading lessons.... And to go to school.

However, Amir related that he was allowed to go out occasionally for prayers at the mosque and marketplace, accompanied by a grown-up who was usually a family member, like his grandfather or uncle. In addition, all that Amir could do at home was bound by rules; like getting up from and going to sleep early, saying prayers on time, reading the Quran during certain periods of time at home, and studying. These were confirmed by both his mother and sister in their interviews.

When Amir started boarding school when he was 13 years old, his father told him that if he did not secure the top academic placing in his class, both his father and mother would not visit him monthly and give him his monthly allowance of RM20.

So my dad said if I don't get number one, he would not come and see me. And he actually did that. Even when I was number two in class, he would not visit me. And when he does not visit me, my mom would not visit me as well. This taught me that there was nothing more important than achieving number one, and I had to study really hard. And I achieved this result (of number one) most of the time.

Amir was afraid of his father and would always be obedient. He related this about his life during his high school years when he was staying at the boarding school.

I could not go for outings. Even though my father did not come, I could not go out. I had asked for permission, but was rejected. So I stayed in the boarding school.... But when I reflected on it, my father would not have known even if I had gone out. I was somehow too obedient, and during those five years in boarding school I never went out as I did not have his permission... I only went for outings with my parents when they visited.

Amir added that his mother comforted him after the punishment ordeals. However, although Amir's mother did not mention about any physical punishment, she did admit that Amir was afraid of his father. His mother even commented that it may have been beneficial for her children to be afraid of one parent during their upbringing.

They (the children) were scared of their father because he had a loud voice.... if they had any questions, they would ask me, not their father. It's alright. Ask Mama first... there is good in that. At least they were afraid of one parent. One lenient parent, and one fierce parent.

Amir's sister also repeatedly related in her storytelling that their father was very strict, and that she was afraid of him and could only talk to her mother about anything in her life. She explained how Amir had advised her to respect her father, and not to be afraid of him.

He is probably closer to my mom than my dad because, you know, my dad was very strict and very fierce. I remember him telling me... not to be scared of my dad, but just to respect him as a father.

Authoritative Mother

Amir described his mother as the one who maintained happiness and calmness in the home, irrespective of whatever challenges that came his and his family members' way. He explained that his mother was patient and she always remained calm no matter what happened.

... I compared myself to the other kids, and realised that I was not getting what I wanted and needed. I was not happy, but I couldn't rebel, express myself or fight back. I knew that if I went out on my own, I would be physically punished. So, I would have to keep all my wants and needs to myself. I could have become stressful and become someone bad, it could go both ways. But we are lucky as all five (siblings) went the right way (in their lives). And I think that it may be that my mom was the key. Whenever I was unhappy, she would cook, she would talk, she would watch tv with you.... those kinds of things. Maybe, for us, those were the happy times. And usually we remember the happy times, and tend to forget the unhappy ones.

Amir also described his mother to be looking after his interests, as he felt that she trusted his actions. He related how his mother had, on more than one occasion, helped him so that he could go out fishing on his own. She would give him permission to go out when his father was not home, and she would also advise Amir to be back before a certain time when she knew his father would be home. He expressed that his mother trusted him not to do something wrong during these excursions. Amir felt responsible towards her, as he felt strongly that she sacrificed a lot for Amir and his family.

....my mother changed her religion, left her entire family and moved here. So she has no one, especially when my dad is not around.... She sacrificed a lot for the family..... she woke up early every day at 5 am to prepare meals for everyone, sometimes including lunch, and having to leave for work by 7 am... She has no one. If let's say my dad had decided to leave her, she would be on her own. So that's why I need to be there for her.

And because of his mother's warmth and support, Amir appeared to appreciate what she requested for him to do and get involved in, which could have contributed to his soft skills development. He related how she consistently encouraged him to be active in school extracurricular activities, and how he became active in various activities such as public speaking, story-telling competitions and sports.

... she was thinking all the time about me collecting points, the more certificates I received, the better it would be for me. That was the entire idea, but she did not explain the importance to me at the time. For scholarship applications I attached certificates of my achievements such as in Physics and Mathematics

Olympiads, participation in the cadet club, those kinds of things.... But of course it was my mother who encouraged me and made sure I participated in them.

Amir's mother appeared to believe in her husband's rules in the interest of her children's safety. She went on to explain that the only difference is that one parent practiced the hard approach with the other the soft approach, referring to her husband and herself respectively. Aside from instilling the discipline at home, she also expressed the importance of training Amir to prepare him for the future.

When they are young, we have to teach them. Okay so at a certain time they have to get up from sleep, at a certain time they have to eat, at a certain time they have to do school work, and they have to sleep by a certain time at night. This means that we train and train them. That's the way.... We ask him to sweep the leaves which fall from the trees outside. He has to help with house chores.... when he was in primary school, in year three or year four, I forget, I asked him to wash his own school shoes and socks every weekend.... I trained him because when he goes into boarding school during his high school years, he would have to do these chores himself.

Amir's mother also highlighted that she focused on training Amir as he was the eldest among her five children and would have to be responsible for them in future. She also trained him so that his younger brother and sisters would look up to him as a role model. She proudly related that if they had to write an essay in school about their role model, they would always write about their big brother Amir.

Amir is the eldest child, so I trained him to be an example. So much so that his younger siblings look up to him as their role model.... For instance, when they were in school and had to write an essay about their role model, they would write about Amir being their role model.

She also saw the connection between his academic excellence and leadership skills, and pointed out that Amir was provided the opportunity in kindergarten and primary school to sharpen his leadership skills when his teachers asked him to teach his friends during class, mainly as he was academically outstanding.

Unknowingly agreeing with what his mother said, Amir advised that he knew about the responsibility she was putting on his shoulders to care for his siblings. He also explained that his mother was grooming him to be ready for that responsibility, as he was the oldest of his five siblings.

Entrepreneurship Skills

Amir related that his mother encouraged him to sell food at school to make money and instilling in him the habit of saving. She would buy chocolates and sweets in bulk and instructed Amir to sell them at the primary school at a certain price. She then encouraged him to save whatever money he received from the sale. His mother provided the first capital fund and henceforth, Amir used his savings to purchase what he thought his schoolmates would like to buy from him, and then sell them at a profit.

...sometimes this market would sell chocolate, sweets in bulk. So my mom would buy them and ask me to sell them in primary school. I sold three for ten cents. When I started selling, I kept the money. My mom gave me a money box... and I saved the money in there....and then I would look around, and I would buy (to resell) what others liked (to consume) with that saved money. My mom bought (the food to resell) only that first time.

His mother explained that she encouraged his entrepreneurial mindset from as early as primary school because she wanted him to know that nothing comes easy in life, and that he could only gain opportunities by going through hardships first. She did point out that she did not know why she chose this exercise to train Amir as she was an English teacher, but she was proud that she started to train him from very young. She also attributes the early training she gave to Amir as a contributing factor for his success in his career today, due to his business-mindedness.

During the time when he was small, we had a hard life. My starting salary was only 395 (Malaysian Ringgit)... so it was very difficult during that time.... I trained Amir to face hardships.... I took the pains to do this.... and I trained him to sell... like an entrepreneur. So he had to find his own money. I would buy food like *kerepek* (sweet potato chips) or nuts, and I would pack them into smaller packets for him to sell in school.... He could keep the profits. He is smart, I trained him from small. This may be why he is business-minded...

Amir's sister confirmed that their mother instilled the entrepreneurship skills in Amir from young. From her perspective, due to their family's socioeconomic background, their mother prepared packed food for them to bring to school while her elder brothers and sister also had to sell chips and fruits in school to earn money.

...because of our situation at the time, we brought packed food to school...I remember that my brothers and sister, they used to sell *kerepek* at school.... sell fruits.... in order for them to earn money... our pocket money wasn't that much....

Amir explained that as his father limited his pocket money to RM20 a month, as well as did not visit him monthly nor give him this pocket money if he did not secure a top academic placing in his class, it had resulted in him sharpening his entrepreneurial skills.

He taught me the value of money. As I only received RM20 monthly for food during recess time and in between main meals, I had to plan my finances. I would eat "Apollo" (a type of sweet bun) every day. I would buy them in bulk and bring one or two to school daily. And because of this, I started to develop my entrepreneurial skills. I sold burgers.... I collaborated with the school guard to bring them into school, to sell them. I also coordinated the production and sale of the school uniform for my "form". And that's how I made extra money.

As Amir was already exposed to entrepreneurship skills from when he was in primary school, he knew how to survive in challenging situations when facing financial obstacles. This appears to have also substantially contributed to his resilience.

Amir's Retaliation

Amir related that he felt stressed as he was not allowed to do many things which he felt a young boy should be allowed to and wanted to run away from home as a sign of retaliation. When he was in Primary 5 or eleven years old, he had planned to run away from home by packing his things to go to his uncle's house. He had also planned to sustain himself by selling the fish he would catch. However, he only managed to pack his bag but did not muster enough courage to execute the rest of his plan.

However, Amir did do something when he was older and in secondary school to show his father that he was retaliating against him. Amir described that he does not usually express his feelings to anyone, and even more so to his father when he was young. However, he decided to write a letter to his father one day that may have stopped the physical punishments for good, which could have been a turning point in Amir's life.

...when I entered secondary school, my father stopped physically punishing me. But then there was one time when I went back home (from boarding school), and I received a beating because of something my brother did.... I forget what he did, but it triggered me to write a letter at that time.... I wrote a letter to my father of about two or three pages.... I wrote to ask why was my little brother more important than me, and pampered? I asked why did my father love him more than me. Then I asked why was I physically punished from before until now..... and then I put the letter under his computer keyboard... I then went back to boarding school... and the next day he came to see me, and cried. He explained that he did not love his children differently, and everything he did was for the greater good. And I think I never received any physical punishment after that. I am unsure whether that incident mellowed my father down....

Earlier on, Amir had related about incidences when he was obedient to his father, even when he did not have to be. However, in certain exceptional cases, he pointed out that he was disobedient to his father just to show that he was retaliating against his strict rules. Even though this rebelliousness was not shown to his father directly as he did not want confrontation, he felt satisfied that he had retaliated against his father after receiving a physical punishment albeit without his father's knowledge. He would rebel by going out to fish alone or loiter around for a while after his Quran reading class had finished, when his father was not at home. He was careful to ensure that his father did not know about these acts of retaliation, by securing his mother's support to cover for him.

Amir's Justification

Amir admitted that he had retaliated against his authoritarian father because he was unhappy and felt pressured. However, while reflecting on his actions as he matured in life, he began to justify why his father was hard on him and accepted those experiences as being positive developments in his life. On the situations when he was physically punished due to his brother and sisters' misbehaviour, he feels that he understands now, as the eldest brother, he should be responsible for his siblings' behaviour. He admitted that he did not understand this at the time, as he did not like to be punished. Amir also advised that he now understands why his father instilled discipline from when he was young and did not allow him to go out of his house compound, although he was unhappy with the strict rule at the time. One of the reasons could also be due to the main road near his house where many people had died of road accidents

in his village. He may have been involved in an accident if it was not for his father's strict rule. Amir feels that he would not be the person he is today if not because of these experiences.

.... to be honest, there was a period when I rebelled a lot. This is because even when I was in Form 5 (17 years old), I still could not go out from the house gate to spend time on my own. I thought that my father was not right in not allowing me to befriend others. I also felt that the fact that I was not provided with money was also not fair. However, when I look back now, I understand that I would not be where I am today if my father did not do those things. If I had mingled with the others, I may not have thought about my future. I may not have been as entrepreneurial if I had many friends in primary school. And when I went to secondary school, this instigated me to socialise with others. That's what I notice about myself. Of course, I was unhappy at the time but I understand that he was right in his treatment, considering the environment we lived in at the time.

Amir's positive reflections on the negative occurrences in his life was seen flowing into his overall outlook on life. An example would be on the matter that he had to redo one year of school to enable him to sit for the UPSR (*Ujian Pencapaian Sekolah Rendah*), or the national Primary 6 examinations. This was because he entered Primary 1 a year earlier due to his academic excellence and his parents did not know that he could sit for the UPSR examinations even though he was a year younger than others. He hypothesised that it was a blessing in disguise, as he believes that if he did not take his UPSR examinations a year later, he may not have been awarded the prestigious overseas scholarship he received to excel in the double degree. that has facilitated his accomplished career today.

Religiosity and Spirituality

Amir was brought up in a religious family where saying prayers on time and reading Quran, the Muslim holy book, was of utmost importance. He was consistently reminded about his daily spiritual obligations. In addition, as his three sisters were not allowed to go out to attend Quran reading classes due to safety issues, it became his responsibility as the eldest brother to teach them how to read the holy book. He demonstrated how much he read the holy book by telling the story of how he finished the book four times even before he went to secondary school. He is proud that his sisters also finished reading the holy book numerous times, after he had taught them to read the book.

Amir's upbringing resulted in him having a high level of religiosity and spirituality, which is an important protective factor to build resilience (Krauss et al., 2014). He told an interesting story that demonstrates how this protective factor was embedded within his ecological system.

... in fact, the secondary school students dared me and my brother. They said if you race against each other, you will get 10 sen. This is how youngsters get started in illegal racing. In fact, I gave in once. I received 40 sen and I went home with the money and thought long and hard about what happened. Was the money I received halal or not? I decided that it wasn't halal and I put the money in a chocolate bottle and planted it. I remember this. A few years later, my dad did some renovation work, and the contractor somehow dug up and found the bottle. When I opened it, I found that the 40 sen was still there.

The story above revealed that Amir had once given in to the lure of illegal racing in his village and earned some money for it. However, he felt that his religiosity and spirituality protective factors shielded him from being lured into the dangerous habit fully, as he felt that the act of illegal racing is a sin. In the Muslim religion, it is considered a sin to earn and spend income from non-halal sources.

Amir also related that at times, he felt rebellious and did what his father did not allow him to do, which was to go out of the house alone apart from attending Quran reading classes. However, even though he could have done otherwise, he felt that he had to make things right by obtaining his mother's permission and blessing so that his actions would not be considered a sin in the eyes of Allah. He explained, "I tell mom where I go, so that means that at the end of the day I still asked for permission. It is just that my father did not know. But my mom's blessing is very important."

Amir's mother had also expressed pride when she described Amir as being religious, highlighting that he practices what he had been taught from young in his daily life. She believes that Amir's religiosity and spirituality may be one of the reasons why he is now thriving in life.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study on the life story of Amir, an individual from a vulnerable background, to explore his experiences as a child and adolescent in the environment he grew up in, and his relationships with important adults in his life, may assist in analysing how and when the development of his soft skills took place. This study was undertaken to narrow the gap, especially in Malaysian research, on a subject matter that is mostly studied using the quantitative cross-sectional research method rather than the present study's qualitative narrative inquiry research method, with a life story being explored.

In summary, Amir's soft skills seemed to have commenced developing even before he entered school. His academic resilience started to be developed when he learnt how to read from the age of four. His soft skills such as leadership and communication skills were also fostered when he was given the opportunity to teach his friends to read in kindergarten. Establishing soft skills as early as possible in life is crucial for long-lasting effects in an individual's life, especially a vulnerable one (Garcia, 2015; Heckman & Kautz, 2012). His resilience and other soft skills were consistently developed and nurtured throughout his childhood and adolescence with protective factors implemented mostly by his mother. These protective factors were strengthened with learning experiences continually provided to him with opportunities from his parents (Heckman & Kautz, 2012), teachers (Vassallo, Edwards, & Forrest, 2016) and siblings (Yucel, 2014).

Amir's parents played a substantial part in moulding and developing his soft skills, making him the outstanding individual he is today, but in different ways and using different methods. There is empirical evidence that a vulnerable child with good parenting would have a higher level of soft skills than another with low-quality parenting (Heckman, 2011). To mitigate risky behaviour of vulnerable children, Malaysian research had described parenting as a crucial protective factor (Abdul Kadir, Rahim, Mustapha, Abdul Mutalib, Kee, & Mohamed, 2012; Krauss et al., 2014).

Amir's father was the authoritarian parent who was not engaging, implemented strict rules and meted out physical punishments on occasions when he felt that Amir was not carrying out his responsibilities as the elder brother. Amir's father physically punished him when his siblings fought, even though Amir was not involved in the squabble. Baumrind (2012) described that the power-assertive authoritarian parent using coercive methods, such as being controlling, arbitrary, hierarchical and disengaged, would have a detrimental effect on child development. Amir somewhat confirmed this hypothesis when he described that he was

stressed with his father's harsh treatment, and at times had been rebellious and disobedient, although without his father's knowledge. Amir had related that he did not understand why he was not allowed to go out of the house, or why his father physically punished him when his siblings were naughty. However, a similar study on an underprivileged, disabled individual found that strict rules and physical punishments implemented by a coercive mother did not appear to be traumatic on the individual, but instead were observed to be protective factors (Zainal-Abidin, Awang-Hashim, & Nordin, 2018). The difference in the study findings was that the individual's coercive mother had also provided him with the protective factors of warmth and support, which was unlike Amir's coercive father who was disengaged with Amir.

Amir's mother, on the other hand was the authoritative parent who believed in and upheld Amir's father's rules such as not allowing Amir out of the house alone, but compromised with him at times with negotiation and trust while implementing her own rules with Amir to train and develop him to be prepared for his own future and to be the backbone of the family. Baumrind (2012) explained that a power-assertive authoritative parent who is confrontive such as being reasonable, open for negotiation, result-oriented and regulates behaviour, provides the best condition for child development.

Amir's mother's authoritative parenting style, which included the protective factors of warmth and support, appeared to assist Amir to develop resilience and other soft skills such as entrepreneurial skills. Resilience and other soft skills are developed by increasing protective factors such as the care, support and opportunity provided by important adults like parents in an individual's life (Zimmerman et al., 2013). This is in line with Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory which states that human development takes place with proximal processes or enduring interaction and engagement in the immediate environment such as between parent and child, taking place especially in the early life stage and consistently throughout the life course (Bronfenbrenner, 1994).

Amir's mother had commenced with fostering Amir's entrepreneurship skills from when he was in primary school, as part of his training to groom him to be ready for future life as well as to be the backbone of the family. This training originated from the home, even though Amir's primary school was the place where the experiential learning first started. Subsequently, his secondary school provided certain experiential learning platforms for him to exercise his entrepreneurial mindset and improve on his entrepreneurship skills. Rosendahl, Sloof, and Praag (2014) found that entrepreneurship development programmes are usually carried out in secondary school or in higher learning institutions, focusing on adolescents and youth. However, the authors argue that these programmes would result in better outcome if entrepreneurial skills and knowledge are cultivated earlier in life, like what had happened for Amir.

Even though he had a high level of compliance, Amir rebelled against his father although mostly without his father's knowledge by going out of the house when his father was out, to cope with his stress caused by his father's parenting style. However, there was one important exception when Amir wrote his father a heartfelt letter voicing out his dissatisfaction about his father's treatment and punishments towards him, which may have caused a turning point in Amir's life when his father stopped physically punishing him. Amir's resilience and other soft skills developed also appear to have resulted in him having a positive outlook on life, because he now justifies his father's authoritarian parenting style. Although he clarified that he was at the time unhappy with his father's strict rules and physical punishments, he explained that he now understands why his father did what he had to do. Amir also attributes his life to his father, as he reasoned that his father's strict rules had prevented him from participating in the dangerous activity of illegal motorcycle racing that may have killed him (Hidzir et al., 2015).

Amir's strict authoritarian father's coercive ways appear to have a negative impact on Amir's development as a child and adolescent, that had caused Amir to retaliate against his father as a coping mechanism because he felt sad and stressful. However, an unexpected observation is that his father's strict rules such as requiring Amir to attend Quran reading classes and then teaching his sisters, who were not allowed to go out for these classes, to read the Quran; may have developed Amir's protective factor of religiosity and spirituality and built his resilience. This may be so because Amir's warm and supportive mother, the engaging authoritative parent, believed in these rules and ensured that these rules were complied with. In addition, Amir's father's harsh punishment of not visiting him at boarding school and not giving Amir pocket money if he did not secure top academic placing in class, had forced Amir to develop his entrepreneurship skills further to sustain himself due to necessity. In these cases, both power-assertive parents, one authoritarian and the other authoritative, appeared to have worked together to develop Amir's soft skills which contributed towards him thriving in life. Similarly, Zainal-Abidin et al. (2018) found that an underprivileged, disabled individual's resilience and soft skills were mainly assisted to be developed by his mother who appeared to be both the power-assertive coercive and confrontive parent, and who had also provided him with the protective factors of warmth and support as well as religiosity and spirituality.

In various other research, the authoritarian and authoritative parenting styles had been separately studied for impact on child and youth development (Baumrind, 2012; Piko & Balazs, 2012; Uji, Sakamoto, & Adachi, 2014). These studies had demonstrated that authoritarian parenting produces negative impact, and authoritative parenting produces positive impact, separately. However, from this study's findings of both parenting styles working together to provide protective factors and successfully influencing soft skill development of an individual, these opposite parenting styles may in future be studied together on how they contribute to and affect each other for various outcomes of child and adolescent development.

The results from this study provide guidance to interested stakeholders on implementing protective factors for and providing opportunities to vulnerable children from a very young age to build their resilience and other soft skills such as entrepreneurship skills for them to thrive in life. Schools, charity foundations and non-profit organisations may engage with parents to spread the awareness on the importance of: (a) commencing child development from very young, especially in low income families; and (b) implementing protective factors in homes, especially of warmth and support, training and discipline, as well as religiosity and spirituality; to increase the probability of children from vulnerable backgrounds, such as Amir, to be able to grow up resilient and develop soft skills to thrive in their future lives.

The findings also give rise to new questions on how both coercive and confrontive parents may work together towards the vulnerable child's development in Malaysia, and these questions may be answered with more research.

“In the end, we'll all become stories” – Margaret Atwood.

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