

The Causal Pathways of Religion Influence on Mental Health: A Case of Taiwan Folk Religious Women

YiJung Liu, Ph.D.

Assistant professor, General Education Center, Fooyin University
Kaohsiung, Taiwan

Email: irene831hk@hotmail.com

Introduction

It has been argued that religious coping has a positive and negative relationship with psychological well-being in times of stress such as severe trauma, illness, and bereavement. Koenig et al. (2012) summarized the findings on what and how religion might influence mental health and modeled the causal pathway from Eastern religions (Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism) and Western religions (Christianity, Judaism, and Islam), respectively. Despite this, very few studies have been done to examine the impacts of Taiwan folk religion, the most popular religion in Taiwan, on believers' mental health and its causal pathways. The present study was designed to investigate the causal pathways of religion influenced psychological outcome.

Methodology

In this study, the researcher conducted individual interviews in participants' home or folk religious temple or shrine. The interview consisted of three main open-ended questions eliciting participants' descriptions of their religious coping experiences in their difficult time. Through the interview, follow-up questions were asked to explore a more in-depth detail answers. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed and kept as a record of initial expectations, values, and judgments.

Participants were recruited using a purposeful or snowball sampling methodology. Interviews were conducted with 7 Taiwan folk religious women. Their ages ranged from 30-60 and education levels ranged from high school graduate to doctoral degree level.

Major Findings

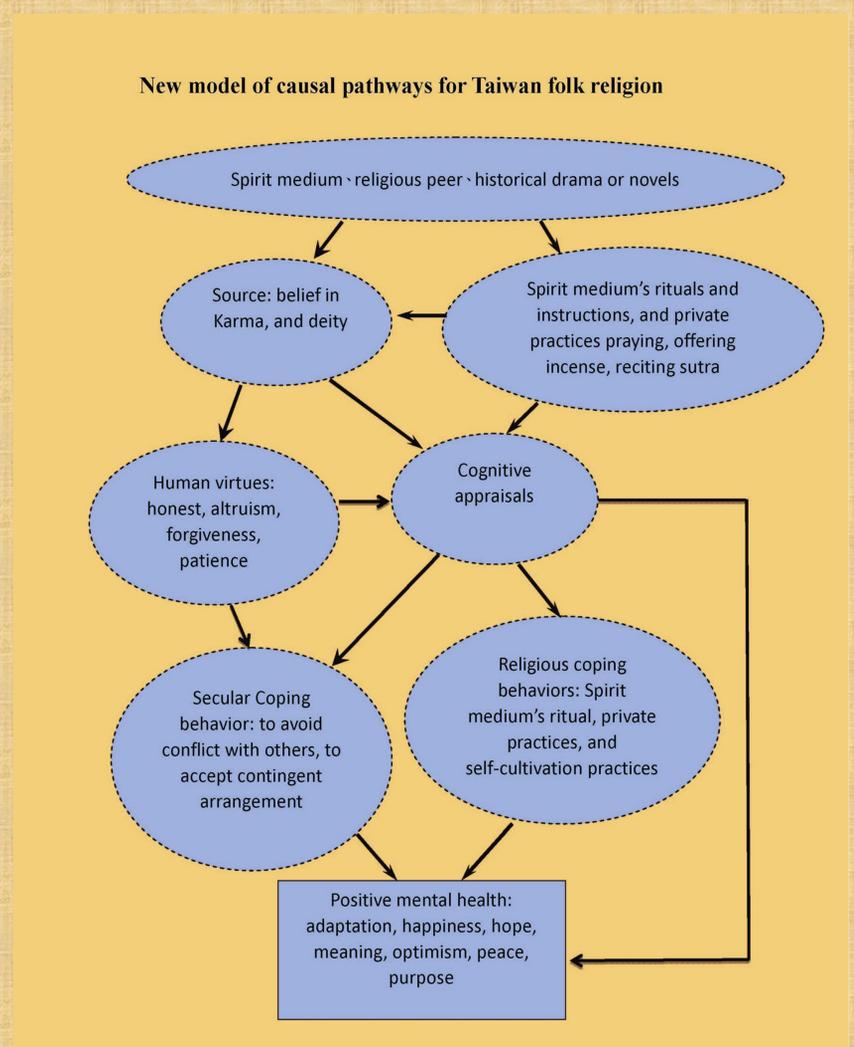
This study found that the causal pathways of Taiwan folk religion influence mental health is basically in line with the model proposed by Koenig et al. (2012). However, the main components of Taiwan folk religion in the entire religious coping process are different from Buddhist and Taoist. The components of Taiwan folk religion not only include the belief in deity, religious peer, private practice (praying and offering incense to god, and reciting sutra), and secular education (the historical novel or drama), but also the rituals and instructions of spirit medium and belief in the law of karma.

The spirit medium is a type of traditional religious specialist in Taiwan who plays a key and authoritative role in providing religious resources such as the idea of karma and retribution, illustrating the relation between karma and life difficulty, conducting the rituals for solving the difficulties caused by karma, and giving suggestions of secular or religious coping behavior in changing the bad karma to and accumulating the good karma.

The belief in karma is most popular beliefs in Chinese society. The law of karma means that all actions have consequences which will affect the life experiences of doer of action at some

future time. For example, several interviewees believed that their suffering was caused by karma. Therefore, they would not complain or blame others and would like to change themselves to be a better one and do more good than harm for their better future life.

This study also found that the entire process of religious coping included a variety of religious and non-religious elements. For example, the spirit medium may provide religious rituals for solving believers' difficulty, as well as provide social ethics or secular moral behavior to help believers dealing with their problems. This is confirmed by the opinion of Koenig et al. (2012) that should not neglect secular coping behavior or judge it has nothing to do with religion, the people take the secular coping behaviors may be influenced by religion.



Conclusions

For many years, the religious practices of spirit medium have been criticized as irrational and anti-scientific superstitions. However, this study has shown that those critiques may be created because researchers did not have a real understanding on the effects of spirit medium on the believers' mental health.

One of the major limitations of this study is to fail to investigate a number of factors such as the environment, life experience, and secular education and peer influences. More longitudinal designs are needed to accurately assess the process and causal pathways of religious coping and psychological outcomes.