



# Meditation, Religion and Emotional Intelligence: A Snapshot of Recent Research from Malaysia

Presented as part of the 'Specificity of Work Philosophy and Attitudes in South East Asia' Symposium

Selina Tham Yining, Pang Sze Ja & Eugene Y.J. Tee  
Department of Psychology, HELP University, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

**10th Biennial Conference of Asian  
Association of Social Psychology  
August 21<sup>st</sup>-24<sup>th</sup>, 2013**

# Overview of Research

- **2 studies** – a **field experiment** of mediation practices, and a **mixed-methods study** of religiosity and emotional intelligence.
- **Multi-method research** conducted Malaysia – use of both quantitative and qualitative methods to enhance understanding of concepts as it applies to the Malaysian cultural context.

# Study 1 – A Field Experiment of the Effects of Isha Kriya Mediation on Worker EI and Perceived Stress

- Stress is a **perceptual process**, and chronic associated with physical illness, anxiety, depression and chronic fatigue (McCarty, Atkinson & Tomasino, 2003; Praissman, 2007)
- Recent research focuses on the individual's **ability to cope** with stress in the workplace (Wu, 2011; Riggio, 2009; Slaski & Cartwright, 2003)
- **Emotional Intelligence (EI)**: Ability to understand and manage both emotions of self and other (Salovey & Mayer, 1990; Law, Wong & Song, 2004)
  - Positive effects of EI noted across a wide spectrum of work-related outcomes – **happiness at work, higher job satisfaction and workplace adaptability**. (Chu, 2010; Nikolau & Tisaousis, 2002)

# Meditation as a way to Enhance EI and Lower Worker Stress

- Helpful in **fostering positive mental health** (Sawyer, Witt & Oh, 2010)
- **Decreases levels of perceived stress** (Chu, 2010)
- Improves emotion functioning by **enhancing EI, promoting positive emotions, empathy, tolerance, and sociability** (Sears & Kraurs, 2009; Baer, et al. 2006; Luders et al., 2009).

# Present Study

## Research Question

- Does Isha Kriya assist to **enhance emotional intelligence (EI)** and **lower perceived levels of employee stress**?

## Central Hypothesis

- Organizational employees who practice Isha Kriya will report **higher levels of EI and lower levels of perceived stress** compared with the control group **after engaging in a 21-day practice**.
- **Isha Kriya** – A non-sectarian form of meditation that is both **practical and cost-effective**. The practice requires just **12-18 minutes of practice per session** and **does not require individuals to fast before practice**. Further, it is **free** compared with other forms of meditation.



# Method and Procedures

**Design:** Single factor between-subjects ] **field experiment.**

**Independent variable:** Meditation treatment (**control and treatment**)

**Dependent variables:** **EI and perceived stress**

## Measures

Wong and Law Emotional Intelligence Scale (WLEIS; 16 items,  $\alpha = .83$ )

Perceived Stress Scale (PSS; 14 items,  $\alpha = .86$ )

## Sample

**35 employees** from a medium-sized organization in Malaysia (**c.f. n = 20 in Chu, 2010, n = 30 in Oman et al., 2008 and n = 26 in Vonareesawat et al., 2012**)

## Procedures

Employees were briefed on the meditation practice and asked to **commit to practicing Isha Kriya everyday for the next 21 days**. We used **record cards** to make sure employees committed to, and participated in the meditation daily.

# Results

	Meditation group n=13		Control group n=22	
	Pretest	Posttest	Pretest	Posttest
Emotional Intelligence	77.00 (8.48) <sup>b</sup>	<b>83.38 (8.99)<sup>ab</sup></b>	75.32 (11.15)	<b>74.50 (12.39)<sup>a</sup></b>
Perceived Stress	27.54 (5.50) <sup>c</sup>	<b>23.92(4.50)<sup>c</sup></b>	28.18 (3.13)	<b>26.32 (3.87)</b>

\*<sup>ac</sup> indicated the pairs were significantly different from each other at  $p < .05$

\*<sup>b</sup> indicated the pairs were significantly different from each other at  $p < .01$

Compared with the control group, **employees in the treatment group rated their EI higher after the three week practice period.**

The treatment group also **rated EI higher, and reported lower stress** after the three weeks of practice.

# Discussion

- Provides preliminary findings suggested that Isha Kriya may **enhance EI and reduce perceived stress among organizational employees.**
- Naturalistic setting allows results to be more strongly **generalizable to workplace settings.**
- Practice of Isha Kriya may be a **cost-effective** way of enhancing worker EI and lowering stress levels in organizations.



# Study 2 – A Mixed-Methods Study of Religiosity and EI

- **Religiosity** – “**a system of personal constructs**” that is defined by a person’s degree of centrality in positioning a religious construct in their daily lives (Huber, 2011).
- Relationship between religiosity and EI has been researched before and show a **positive relationship between them** (Paek, 2006; Chung-Chu, 2010; Elias et. al., 2008).
- LaMothe (2010) suggests further research examine the **underlying meanings** of religiosity to individuals and how this impacts their EI.

# Present Study

- Research Question: **What is the role of religiosity in emotional intelligence?**
  - The link between emotional intelligence and religiosity has not been established clearly.
  - Current study examines the associations between emotional intelligence and religiosity, and if there are links between these two constructs, and the **meanings of religiosity in informing how individuals make sense of, being emotionally intelligent.**
- Design: **Sequential exploratory mixed-methods design (Qual-quant)**

# Method and Procedures – Qualitative Study

- **Study 1: Basic Qualitative Study**

- Method: **Semi-structured interviews with 10 individuals from different religious faiths** (Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Catholics and Protestants)
- Approach: **Phenomenology**
- Analysis: **Thematic analysis**

- **Study 2: Cross-Sectional Survey**

- Survey correlating EI measure with centrality of religiosity measure.
- N = Random sample of **120 individuals from 5 major faiths**.
- Measures: Centrality of religiosity (**CRS, 15 items, Huber, 2004**); Wong & Law Emotional Intelligence Scale (**WLEIS, 16 items, Wong & Law, 2004**). Both measures **reliable at .76** and higher.
- Analysis: **Bivariate correlations**

# Integrated Results

## Qualitative Study

- Results were that **several core teachings of religion were similar with EI sub-skills.**
- Participants emphasized the influence of religion in helping them **understand and manage their own emotions.**
- Results also suggest that **religion aids in encouraging emotionally intelligent behaviours** – not vice versa.

## Quantitative Study

- Key Correlations:
  - Prayer – Self-emotion appraisal = **.19 ( $p < .05$ )**
  - Prayer – Control of own emotions = **.23 ( $p < .01$ )**
  - Religious experiences – self-emotion appraisal = **.22 ( $p < .05$ )**

# Bivariate Correlations

EQ Subskill	Religiosity				
	Cognitive Interest	Religious Ideology	Prayer	Religious Experiences	Worship
Self-emotion Appraisal	.176 (.055)	-.009 (.920)	<b>.189* (.038)</b>	<b>.223*(.014)</b>	.046 (.618)
Others' emotion Appraisal	.125 (.174)	.104 (.259)	.151 (.100)	<b>.218*(.017)</b>	.009 (.919)
Use of emotions	<b>.226* (.013)</b>	-.112 (.224)	.116 (.206)	.161 (.079)	.024 (.789)
Control of emotions	.157 (.086)	-.079 (.394)	<b>.197* (.031)</b>	<b>.232*(.011)</b>	.000 (.997)



# Discussion

- Consistency across research in religiosity and EI – **being religious does relate to individual ability to better understand and manage their own emotions** (especially through **religious experiences**).
- Adds to research examining the broader individual and social benefits of religiosity in enhancing overall well-being (**Jackson & Bergeman, 2011; Wills, 2009; Dolan, Peasegood & White, 2008**).

# Thank You!

- Questions?
- For more information, please email [teeyj@help.edu.my](mailto:teeyj@help.edu.my)