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Coping Mechanism for Fathers' Well-being

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic affecting Malaysia and the world presents various challenges, pressures and negative impacts on various groups, including among fathers. Some fathers have lost their source of income, face pressures of working from home, managing their children and losing loved ones. This has affected their mental health and led to the erosion of the family institution in Malaysia. In addition, issues such as divorce, domestic violence and child abuse are at worrying levels. Therefore, this study sought to identify the level of stress among fathers during the COVID-19 pandemic, their main coping strategies, and the relationship between stress and coping strategies. This quantitative study employs a survey design involving 120 fathers in a district in Negeri Sembilan. Descriptive and inferential data analysis was carried out using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 26. This study found that the stress level among the participant was at a moderate level. Meanwhile, the emotional coping strategy (mean 29.3) represents an option used by them in adapting to problems faced during the pandemic. A significant negative relationship was found between stress coping strategies in the father group [($p=0.001 < 0.05$).]. It is hoped that this study will aid fathers in choosing a coping strategy to face the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic as well as provide guidance for relevant authorities in formulating plans aimed at promoting the wellbeing of families in Malaysia.

Keywords: Pressure, Stress, Family Wellbeing, Fatherhood, Coping Strategies

Introduction

Of late, Malaysian society has been increasingly afflicted by emotional, psychological, and cognitive imbalances resulting in mental disorders due mainly due to existing personal conflicts and polemics currently faced including the ongoing COVID-19 epidemic. This is because in late 2019, there was an outbreak of pneumonia of unknown origin in Wuhan, Hubei Province, China (Li et al., 2020), and the outbreak was labelled the 2019-novel Coronavirus disease (COVID-19). Following that, the World Health Organization (WHO) designated COVID-19 as an international pandemic during the initial spread of the infection. With the emergence of COVID-19 vaccination, the rate of people infected with COVID-19 started to reduce and now all the countries throughout the world have turned to an endemic phase. The spread of the COVID-19 infection has impacted all aspects of life. Globally, until 25 October 2022, there have been 625,248,843 confirmed cases of COVID-19, including

6,562,281 deaths worldwide (WHO 2022). In fact, the transition to a new normal life also precipitated various psychological effects on humans.

Studies on wellbeing are mainly based on scientific research because it involves aspects of human psychological happiness (Coffey, 2021). Researchers are of the view that efforts to increase individual happiness are the main goals in the field of positive psychology (Seligman et al., 2005). In that regard, developments in the field of positive psychology and happiness have had significant implications on aspects of human life. Among the important research findings in this area is that the basis of human happiness has little relevance to material wealth. Data-wise, the 2021 World Happiness Index report ranks Malaysia in 81st position among 149 countries based on the level of happiness of their lives as scored by the respondents. Malaysia's ranking declined more than 40 places over the previous year (35th). Meanwhile, the Malaysian Psychological Well-Being Index up to October 2021 showed an overall score of 6.5, meaning that it is at a moderate level but indicating a declining trend over the past. This score covers positive emotions, negative emotions, life satisfaction, social wellbeing, psychological functioning and employee involvement. This decline in wellbeing among the Malaysian population also represents an indicator of the mental health aspect affected by the pandemic. Specifically, statistics released by the National Population and Family Development Board (NPFDB) show that 63 percent of men or heads of families suffer from depression. The same study also found that 20.4 percent of men have difficulty in managing their anger.

In addition, individuals undergoing isolation due to the COVID-19 outbreak also exhibit negative emotional symptoms such as fear, anxiety, worry and depression (Wang et al., 2020). This is because most epidemics induce stress and eventually involve issues related to human mental health (American Psychological Association, 2013). The implication is that every individual or family member is at risk of being exposed to stress that will result in mental issues. Even if aspects of mental health are affected, a person's way of thinking, emotions and behaviour will result in a condition called maladaptation. Such individuals will have difficulty thinking and making simple decisions. They will also be highly sensitive due to emotional control and regulation management issues. Further, such psychological disorder symptoms will affect their daily behaviour such as disregarding their health and personal care, experiencing sleep disorders and poor eating habits.

In general, fathers have not been spared the stress caused by the drastic emergence of the new norms. Apart from family economic issues, unemployment and earning a living, and managing household affairs, i.e., children and spouse also present challenges. The sense of isolation imposed by the Movement Control Order (MCO) worsened the situation due to the disruption in social relations which impacted support systems. Tak (2002) states that social support systems act as a self-resilience factor in addressing stress within families. In addition, a study on the effects of stress and social support among single fathers found that they face pressures in undertaking their responsibilities in managing the family. Among the main factors contributing to stress are emotional disturbances, household management issues and work commitments (Saharudin & Alavi, 2019). Further, the level of stress experienced by fathers can lead to an increased risk of domestic violence and child abuse during the pandemic period, while the lack of communication and external social support due to the MCO worsened the situation (Brown et al., 2020; Campbell, 2020). Thus, this study focuses on

aspects of fathers' well-being through the level of stress experienced by them and the coping strategies employed to face the challenges of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic in order to achieve personal wellbeing. This study also aims to identify the relationship between stress and the coping strategies of fathers.

Literature Review

The COVID-19 pandemic that spread to almost all corners of the world not only affects the physical lives of those infected by the virus but has also impacted the smallest institution in the community, that is the family. Meanwhile, the most affected individual in the family would certainly be the head of the family. According to Ismail (2021) this is due to the pressures experienced by this parental group which has caused them to experience feelings of depression with some being unable to manage their anger. In Islam, the responsibility of providing for the family namely the wife and children rests with the husband/father. This responsibility includes meeting their eating, drinking, and clothing expenses, providing accommodation, and attending to all the other necessities of married life (Saad, 1993). This shows that men, especially fathers, have a major responsibility within the family. This burden of responsibility has become heavier since the pandemic especially among low-income families.

Stress Within the Family during the COVID-19 Pandemic

The concept of stress is always representing the negative vibes and emotions wherever stress is, it's counted amongst few compulsory experiences that everyone must have in her/his life through the anticipation of cognitive, biological, physiological, behavioural changes for the human being directly or indirectly in the surrounding environment (Cronin, et al., 2015). Studies show that parents experience high levels of stress, anxiety, depression and other negative emotions due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Ziqin et al., 2021). This not only affects and creates distress among the parents themselves, but also affects the emotions of children, especially during the MCO. Crnic & Ross (2017) found that high levels of stress, depression, and anxiety tend to compromise the efficacy of parents in managing the problems faced. In addition, it affects the quantity and quality of parent-child interactions as well as children's self-adjustment in the face of stress (Ramchandani & Psychogiou, 2009). The mental health issues of fathers are also associated with unhealthy parent-child interactions and difficulty in regulating emotions in children (Giallo et al., 2020). A study by the National Population and Family Development Board (NPFDB) noted that the main factors underlying parental emotional stress relate to their children's education (21.3%), followed by limited involvement in outdoor activities or forced confinement (16.4%) and uncertainty over the duration of the MCO (12.2%).

As is known, society is accustomed to the belief that mothers should manage the household and tend to the children while fathers will work longer to increase family incomes. However, in recent years, the amount of child-care time spent by fathers has increased though it is still less when compared to that of mothers (Bianchi et al., 2012; Livingston & Parker, 2019). This shows that fathers involved in child-caring place more emphasis on family than on their careers. Studies show that a 20% increase in the involvement of fathers in childcare is associated with a 65% increase in the likelihood of fathers who worked before the pandemic taking unpaid leave during the first month of the pandemic period (Richard et al., 2020). Being unable to work and at the same time experiencing a decline in incomes may be

one of the contributory stress factors among fathers. Also, the feelings among partners that there is an unfair division of work in the household can generate pressures which will affect the quality of their relationship (Bhui et al., 2016).

In addition, the MCO also makes parents the main reference point for children, especially those aged 6 to 13 years since at this phase children still depend on their parents (Morelli et al., 2020). Because of this, fathers need to understand their responsibilities and capabilities in sustaining and educating family members. This responsibility could add to the pressures on the lives of fathers as they need to be strong and display self-confidence to their family despite themselves experiencing anxiety and pressures in the face of COVID-19.

Meanwhile, young fathers face pressures in providing food, baby needs and health insurance for the family (Recto et al., 2020). According to a study conducted in the Hispanic community, young fathers are faced with losing their jobs forcing them to take the initiative to work as salesmen, food deliverers, or in sanitation services that may expose them to COVID-19 infections (Calo et al., 2020; Centers for Disease Control & Prevention, 2020; Kockhar & Barroso, 2020). Lack of work experience and low education levels add to their difficulties in securing suitable work to sustain the daily needs of their families.

Those fathers forced to change jobs also experience difficulty in adapting to the new job situation. As is well known, most workers faced layoffs due to the economic downturn since the pandemic hit. Most of the dismissed workers had to find new employment even if it was not in their preferred field in order to support their families. A young man in a study by Morelli et al (2020) stated that he faced problems in adapting to his new job working in a grocery store whereas his previous field was related to mechanics and the use of machines and carpentry tools. It can be clearly seen that the significant difference between the two job types causes stress to the individual concerned. Nonetheless, this is unavoidable especially for fathers because that is the only option available as a source of income to support the family.

Methods of Controlling Stress among Fathers

Studies show that being confined to the home can increase the sense of loneliness and the stress of social isolation of a person (Groarke et al., 2021). This shows that social involvement is important to reduce stress and depression among fathers. In this modern age, various means are available to engage with others despite the lack of face-to-face interactions. Social media is widely used nowadays by both young and old. Therefore, advanced technology such as smartphones should be used by fathers to deal with stress and to socialize with friends. In addition, a sound relationship among family members is also needed to receive support and avoid any stress that may occur in view of the fact that more time is available to spend with the family.

According to Ziqin et al (2021); Andrew et al (2020); Guyot and Sawhill (2020), most working parents experience work pressure and have to simultaneously manage household affairs during lockdowns. This is because no specific times are allocated between work and family time. As a result, most parents conceal or control their facial expressions to avoid having their children see the existing negative sentiments. However, this has a deleterious effect because such negative feelings can increase as they are repressed and not brought into

the open. Therefore, instead of harbouring such negative feelings, parents are encouraged to discuss the pandemic and hold discussions to share feelings among their family members (Ziqin et al., 2021). Sharing feelings that are experienced can ameliorate the pressures faced by family members including the head of the household.

Transactional Theory of Stress and Coping (TTSC)

In general, coping strategies can be divided into two different contexts, whether they trigger individuals to approach problems or regulate emotional reactions arising from challenges faced (Andersson & Willebrand, 2003). These two contexts of coping strategies are widely debated in the theory of previous studies by various scholars using various different terms. Among the theories that are often used in discussing coping strategies is the conceptual and theoretical framework presented by (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). In explaining stress as a dynamic process, Lazarus further developed a conceptual framework called 'transactional theory of stress and coping-TTSC' (Lazarus, 1966; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). This theory is very relevant in discussing coping strategies for fathers in facing stress because it is widely discussed in the context of conflict and household stress based on previous studies (Grandey & Cropanzano, 1999; Hoobler et al., 2010; Marika et al., 2011).

In this TTSC theory, Lazarus has explained that coping strategies are triggered by the primary appraisal done by individuals experiencing stress. This primary assessment requires the individual to assess whether the stressor is considered threatening, challenging or irrelevant. Meanwhile, secondary appraisal involves an individual's assessment of available resources or coping strategies to overcome all the threats faced. Both of these assessments lead to the implementation of coping strategies. In this aspect of coping strategies, Lazarus and Folkman (1984) have classified coping strategies into two aspects, namely problem-focused strategies and emotion-focused strategies.

Problem Focused Coping

Problem-focused strategies are defined as strategies that involve behavior where they include strategies such as seeking help and taking direct action against challenging situations. This problem-focused strategy is focused on studying problems, planning, producing alternative solutions, making judgments about alternative solutions in terms of merits and benefits, choosing and implementing those alternatives. Thus, this problem-focused strategy is seen to be effective in managing changeable stress such as conflict in relationships, especially family relationships or reducing the negative effects of stress on individual health and well-being (Aryee et al., 1999; Carver et al., 1989; Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004; Penley et al., 2002).

Emotion focused coping strategies

Emotion-focused strategies are cognitive processes that consist of positive thinking and emotional expression aimed at adapting to stressful situations. It is a strategy that can reduce stress. It is also used when there are no changes that can be made to the stress that occurs and is often used in stressful situations where people cannot change the prevailing environmental conditions. Emotion-focused strategies include selective attention where individuals deliberately focus on certain aspects that are related or not related to their problems, positive comparisons and behavior to avoid or reduce stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). This emotion-focused strategy is seen to increase the level of individual comfort in

dealing with stress compared to its function in reducing stress (DeGraff & Schaffer, 2008), and it is proven to be less effective in reducing stress when compared to problem-focused strategies (Penley et al., 2002).

A further explanation regarding the coping strategy concept found by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) can be seen in figure 1 as stated below.

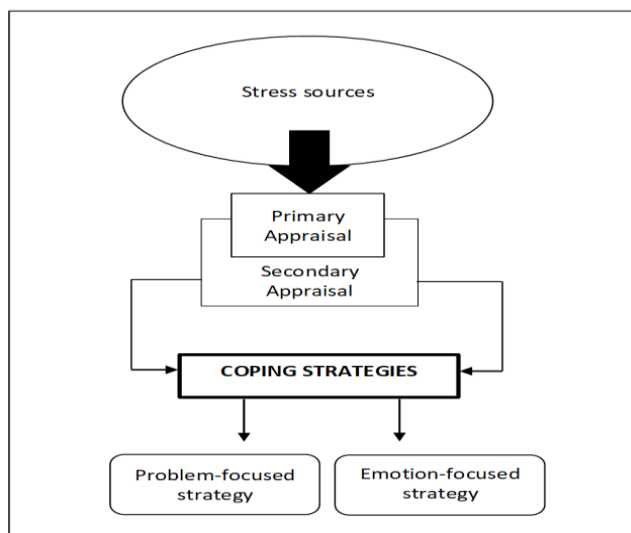


Figure 1: The Concept of Coping Strategies by Lazarus and Folkman (1984)

Methodology

This quantitative study aimed at empirically and systematically identifying stress-related issues among fathers using a survey research design. According to Creswell (2005), the survey research design is a procedure in quantitative research where the researcher conducts a survey of a sample or the entire population. The data obtained from this random sample was then analyzed and presented with descriptive statistics and significance tests. The results of the subsequent statistical tests can provide conclusions about the characteristics of the population studied. The population for this study included sample selection among individuals with families, namely fathers. Fathers were chosen as subjects in this study as research on their level of stress and coping strategies is still lacking and limited (Tumello et al., 2021). The study location is in the Nilai subdistrict of Negeri Sembilan.

This study employed the simple random sampling method with the sample size based on Cohen's table 1998. It involved 120 randomly selected fathers. The instrument used for data collection and analysis was a set of questionnaires that had 3 parts. Part A measured stress using the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) instrument, while part B consisted of a questionnaire measuring wellbeing adapted from the Personal Wellbeing Index instrument that is based on the Comprehensive Quality of Life Scale (ComQoL) questionnaire developed by (Cummins, 1997). Based on the modifications made, a Personal Wellbeing Index (PWI) questionnaire was developed and combined with the Subjective Happiness scale created by (Lyubomirsky and Lepper, 1999). Meanwhile, the emotional well-being component was measured based on a scale of positive and negative emotional experiences (Scale of Positive and Negative Experience-SPANE) formulated by Ed Diener and Robert Biswas-Diener. This scale comprises 12 items, each with six positive and negative elements known as SPANE-P

and SPANE-N, respectively. Part C aims to obtain the background and demographic information of respondents.

Findings and Discussion

Demographic Profile

Table 1 shows the demographic profile of the 120 respondents involved in this study. The majority of them or 111 were Malays (92.5 percent) followed by Indians (3 respondents or 2.5 percent) and other races at 6 respondents (5 percent). In terms of education level, most had first degrees (39 respondents or 32.5 percent) while 27 or 22.5 percent had certificates/diplomas, 24 or 20 percent each had SPM certificates and master's degrees, and 6 or 5 percent had PhDs. In terms of employment, the majority of respondents, at 96, were government officials (80 percent), compared to 12 each working with private agencies and self-employed (10 percent). Most respondents or 99 lived in cities (82.5 percent) while 21 or 17.5 percent lived in rural areas. The average respondent's income was between RM1001 to RM3000 and RM3001 to RM5000 with a frequency of 39 respondents or 32.5 percent each. A total of 24 respondents or 20 percent had incomes between RM5001 to RM7000, 9 or 7.5 percent had incomes between RM7001 to RM9000, 6 or 5 percent earned between RM9001 to 15000, and 3 or 2.5 percent had incomes below RM1000.

Table 1
Demographic Profile of Respondents

Item	Number	Percentage
Ethnicity		
Malay	111	92.5
Indian	3	2.5
Others	6	5.0
Education Level		
SPM	24	20.0
Certificate/Diploma	27	22.5
First Degree	39	32.5
Masters	24	20.0
PhD	6	5.0
Employment		
Self-employed	12	10.0
Public sector	96	80.0
Private sector	12	10.0
Area of Residence		
Urban	99	82.5
Rural	21	17.5
Income Levels		
<RM 1000	3	2.5
RM 1001-RM 3000	39	32.5
RM 3001-RM 5000	39	32.5
RM 5001-RM 7000	24	20.0
RM 7001-RM 9000	9	7.5
RM 9001-RM 15 000	6	5.0

Stress Levels among Fathers

Table 2 on the results of the study of the stress scores among fathers shows that the highest score at 93 respondents or 77.5 percent was at the moderate level followed by 18 respondents (15 percent) having low stress levels while 9 respondents (7.5 percent) scored high levels of stress. The overall mean of the scores was 17.5 with a standard deviation of 5.7. Therefore, these findings have addressed the objective of the study in identifying the level of stress among fathers during the COVID-19 pandemic, that is, it is generally at a moderate level.

Table 2

Stress Levels among Fathers

Stress Level	Frequency	Percentage	Min	SD
Low	18	15		
Moderate	93	77.5	17.5	5.7
High	9	7.5		

n= 120

In principle, the COVID-19 pandemic influences a person's mental, emotional and physical ability to change normal habits to accommodate extraordinary conditions (Ismail, 2021). Stress can be overcome and mitigated through practicing effective coping strategies. Further, conditions during a pandemic can worsen the situation resulting in psychological effects on all members of the family. During the MCO, the involvement of fathers in childcare to help working mothers revealed a significant relationship with the application of various coping strategies. In fact, the involvement of fathers enhanced the level of systematic childcare throughout the pandemic (Maulida, 2021).

A study by Rashid (2020) showed that the COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted the country's political, economic, social, health, and education systems and intensified pressure among individuals. Meanwhile, Coyne et al (2020) note that the increased stress experienced by parents is due to the "conflict in the roles, responsibilities, and expectations" (i.e., as mothers, fathers, spouses, employees, employers, caregivers, teachers) which is exacerbated by the epidemic due to uncertainty over the future. In fact, they also have to work from home (WFH), manage their children's schooling system from home (PDPR) and attend to other daily affairs.

The Coping Strategies of Fathers

Table 3 shows the types of coping strategies adopted by fathers in facing the COVID-19 pandemic. The three types of coping strategies involve focusing on emotions, problems, and avoidance. The findings of this study show that the emotion-focused coping strategy was most frequently employed by fathers in handling stress (mean value of 29.3) followed by problem-focused (mean of 24.5) and the avoidant-focused (mean of 15.9) coping strategies. Accordingly, the emotional coping strategy was the option used by fathers in adapting themselves to face issues during the pandemic.

Table 3

Coping Strategies Employed by Fathers in Managing Stress during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Form of Action Strategy	M (Mean)
Coping - Emotions	29.3
Coping - Problem	24.5
Coping - Avoidant	15.9

n=120

Coping strategy refers to the active efforts made in overcoming an issue or problem that is faced. The findings of this study show that the coping strategy of choice employed by fathers is one that is emotion-focused. Generally, an emotion-focused coping strategy refers to an individual's approach in avoiding stress through cognitive evaluations and in having a positive outlook between the self and the environment (Yaacob, 2012). Basically, there are four types of coping strategies under this emotion-focused coping strategy, namely social support, self-regulation, acceptance of responsibility, and positive thinking (Saadah et al., 2014). As demonstrated by Recto and Lesser (2020), social support is one of the aspects that can reduce stress among young fathers. This can be achieved by sharing what is felt with other fathers experiencing the same situation. Through such sharing they can better understand what they are going through due to undergoing the same experiences.

In the situation of the COVID-19 pandemic, the perceptions of fathers of the economic situation of their families were mostly that things had taken a turn for the worse. Meanwhile, from a psychological point of view, children also showed changes reflecting the decline in the amount of attention that they received. This is due to stress experienced during the pandemic which raised the levels of anxiety among fathers to the point of affecting their relationship with their children (Trumello et al., 2021). Therefore, it can be concluded that fathers rely heavily on various support measures, maintain self-control, fulfil their responsibilities, and think positively in overcoming the pressures faced.

The relationship between stress and the coping strategies of fathers

Table 4 shows the strong relationship between coping strategies and stress. This is reflected in the significant correlation between stress and coping strategies ($r = -.311, p < 0.05$). It also shows an inverse relationship between the two factors, namely the higher the level of the coping strategy the lower the pressures experienced by fathers, and vice versa. Therefore, the findings show that the fathers employed various coping strategies in addressing the stress faced by them.

Table 4

Relationship between Stress and the Coping Strategies of Fathers

Dimension		Stress	Coping Strategy
Stress	Pearson Correlation	1	-.311
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.001
	N	120	120
Coping Strategy	Pearson Correlation	-.311**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.001	
	N	120	120

The findings of this study match those of Bawalsah (2016) which noted a high correlation between levels of stress and the coping strategies used by parents. Meanwhile, a study by Lipowska et al (2021) states that there is a significant relationship between stress and the coping strategies experienced by fathers in forming parenting attitudes. Fathers are seen to adapt the ways of managing their children's problematic behaviour using coping strategies. The findings of Yusof et al (2016) are quite different and show a significant positive relationship between symptoms and the idea of stress factors with problem-focused coping strategies. Their findings show that the higher the symptoms and factors of stress, the lower the use of problem-focused strategies in coping with the stress; on the other hand, there is a relationship between the use of emotion-focused coping strategies. According to Gerhold (2020) among the most common non-emotional-focused coping strategies is the individual's acceptance of the situation and participation in diversionary activities.

Conclusion

The fact is, fathers are not impervious to the pressures generated by the COVID-19 pandemic. In fact, the father's role as a breadwinner was also affected during the enforcement of the MCO that lasted almost two years, forcing family members to stay at home. Home confinement worsened the situation due to the ensuing stress symptoms or what is termed cabin fever. This occurs because the enforced restrictions limit the ability of individuals to work, socialize and even relax. In addition, many jobs were affected leading to much unemployment and its negative impact on family incomes and the cost of living. The lack of work, family commitments and challenges of working from home also contributed to the stress faced. In dealing with the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, fathers who are the source of a family's strength must manage and employ suitable coping strategies to ensure that the wellbeing of their families is not compromised. Various coping strategies can be practiced by them regardless of whether they focus on problems or emotions. The findings of this study can be a reference and guide for the relevant agencies in organizing policies and strategies to aid fathers in managing stress when faced with the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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