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**PREFERENCE FOR COPING STRATEGIES AMONG FEMALE INMATES DURING INCARCERATION IN MALAYSIAN PRISON**

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Article Info	ABSTRACT
<p><b>Article history:</b> Received: 17 Sept 2024 Revised: 1 Oct 2024 Accepted: 25 Oct 2024 Published: 1 Nov 2024</p>	<p>Previous research suggests that by not applying positive coping skills, inmates are more likely to be involved in serious misconduct and violence than other inmates. As a consequence, some studies suggest counseling as one of the effective ways to enhance their psychological well-being. However, research into the coping strategies practiced by the prison inmates in Malaysia is scarce, and the available findings might differ from those of the studies conducted in other parts of the world. This study explored the preference for coping strategies among inmates during incarceration in one of the prisons located in Malaysia's Southern Region. One hundred twenty-three female inmates (N = 123) have participated in the survey. Data were collected using the Coping Strategies Inventory (COPE-I). The results were analyzed using descriptive statistics. The findings of this study revealed that the five most frequent types of coping strategies practiced by the female inmates were putting a trust in God, finding comfort in religion, seeking God's help, learning from past experiences, and praying more than usual. The study's findings provide crucial information for improving the psychological well-being of inmates and also contribute to the positive growth of the correctional counseling field in Malaysia.</p>
<p><b>Keywords:</b> Coping Strategies Inmates Incarceration Prison</p> <p></p>	

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## INTRODUCTION

The problems faced by inmates are likely caused by exposure to stressful situations in prison. Among the problems they encounter that are regarded as stressful are limited living space, strained relationship with prison staff and other prisoners, institutional rigidity, limited contact with the outside world, and deteriorating health (Kulenovic & Busko, 2006). To deal with the stress of being incarcerated, inmates need to employ positive coping strategies, such as those proposed by the social-psychological theory (Zamble & Porporino, 2013). Inmates who do not employ effective coping strategies are more likely to be involved in serious misconduct and violence than other inmates who do. In this case, they may need psychological support, such as counseling help, as they could be experiencing psychological poverty (Mohan & Sorooshian, 2012), a mental and emotional condition manifested in behavioural and emotional problems and lack of insight resulting from prolonged incarceration. This psychological poverty, therefore, could be best treated with appropriate counseling help and therapy. The present research, thus, sought to provide some insight into the preferences of coping strategies practiced by the inmates during incarceration in prison.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

This section includes the review of the past literature related to the preferences for coping strategies among inmates.

## COPING STRATEGIES AMONG INMATES

According to Weiten et al (2011), coping strategies is the attempts made to “master, reduce or tolerate the demands created by stress”. Coping is set into two main categories, “problem-focused coping” and “emotion-focused coping” (Folkman & Lazarus, 1985). However, there not many behavioral coping strategies available as it because of the strict prison environment. This is because the strategy used for problem focused coping requires for the inmates to undo the regretted action and solve the cause of stress however in their case it is impossible to undo their crime and solve their problem. The coping theory also confronts the purpose for one’s general emotional state on the end result of coping (Carver, Scheier, & Weintraub, 1989; Soderstrom, Castellano, & Figaro, 2001). Hence, coping strategies that focus on emotion works much more effectively and advantages on their psychological well-being (Van Harreveld et al., 2007).

Moreover, it is seen that when personal space or privacy is denied to male inmates especially they are agitated and causes them to be stressed. The stress forces the male inmate to channel their aggression physically and verbally as a way of coping. However, it is observed that anger in responding to coping with stress used by male and female inmates’ decreases with age, thus resulting with an increase in suppressing or controlling their anger (Silverman and Vega 1990). This style of coping is then used to show their dominance to other inmates (Clements, 1979).

While for female inmates, Giallombardo (1966), Fox (1970), and Owen (1998) found that female inmates got use to prison by establishing relationships with other women called pseudo families which functioned as their own construction of an impersonal nature of being in prison. This is also supported by Jones (1988) which has discovered that female inmates usually organize into primary relationships or bonds that are quite strong in order to cope with their stress along the lines of romantic relationships, friendships, and groups which substitute a family structure. Apart of it, according to Fox (1970) female inmates often used negatives ways of coping such as emotional outburst. Usually the inmates experiences high stress and depression within the first or early weeks or month of their commitment to prison. When it comes to coping, prisoners that coped well at the beginning of their imprisonment usually coped well throughout their entire time in prison (Zamble and Porporina, 1988). Thus, it is not surprising that prisoners who are easily provoked into anger, depression, and anxiety are more likely to get involved in negative behavior like acting violently and or serious prison misconduct.

## METHODOLOGY

The research was a quantitative study focusing on the coping strategies preferred by inmates during their time in prison. To meet the study's objectives, a descriptive research design was employed. One specific descriptive

method used in this research was the survey approach (Jackson, 2009). Survey methods are frequently employed in social research to gather standardized information from large groups, hence enabling researchers to make generalizations about a population (Creswell, 2014). In relation to that, questionnaires were distributed to a selected sample that represented the population within the specified prison institution to collect data. The data obtained from the questionnaires were analyzed using quantitative techniques.

### Sample

In this study, the researcher employed a purposive sampling technique to select 123 respondents, representing the study's population. The respondents came from various racial/ ethnic backgrounds, had different levels of education, and varied in the length of their incarceration. The ability to collect a larger sample size was constrained by the prison's security regulations, limiting access to more respondents (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016).

### Instrument

Preferences for coping strategies was measured using COPE Inventory which has been developed by Carver, Scheier & Weintraub (1989). This COPE Inventory was very comprehensive as it covers various dimensions of coping strategies. COPE Inventory consists of 56 items which includes eight subscales of coping strategies which are seeking emotional and instrumental social support; turning to religion; use of humour; active coping activities; denial; mental and behavioural disengagement; acceptance; and focus on and venting of emotions.

In this section, the 4-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 = don't do this at all, 2 = do this a little bit, 3 = sometimes and 4 = often will be used as an option for the respondents to choose. For the scoring procedure, the result would be based on the higher and the lower score for each subscales. The higher score indicates that inmates are practising that particular of coping strategies a lot as compared to the lower score.

### Data Analysis

Descriptive analysis techniques, such as mean, frequency, percentage, and standard deviation, were applied to examine the data collected, focusing on the preferences for coping strategies.

## RESEARCH FINDING

Table 1 below presents the preferences for coping strategies practiced by the female inmates in prison. There were 56 items in this COPE Inventory. Nonetheless, descriptive results of 15 items are presented in this section to highlight some interesting findings.

Table 1  
Means and Standard Deviation of Preferences for Coping Strategies

No.	Items	Responses				Overall Coping Strategy Index	
		Don't do this at all (%)	Do this a little bit (%)	Sometimes (%)	Often (%)	Mean	SD
						2.86	.31
7.	I put my trust in God.	4 (3.3)	4 (3.3)	14 (11.4)	101 (82.1)	3.72	.68
45.	I try to find comfort in religion.	-	9 (7.3)	29 (23.6)	85 (69.1)	3.61	.62

17.	I seek God's help.	3 (2.4)	6 (4.9)	27 (22.0)	87 (70.7)	3.60	.69
55.	I learn something from the experience.	5 (4.1)	9 (7.3)	30 (24.4)	79 (64.2)	3.48	.80
56.	I pray more than usual.	3 (2.4)	11 (8.9)	38 (30.9)	71 (57.7)	3.43	.75
15.	I day dream about things other than this.	15 (12.2)	28 (22.8)	36 (29.3)	44 (35.8)	2.88	1.03
43.	I feel a lot of emotional distress and I find myself expressing those feelings a lot.	11 (8.9)	30 (24.4)	45 (36.6)	37 (30.1)	2.87	.94
30.	I try to come up with a strategy about what to do.	9 (7.3)	29 (23.6)	60 (48.8)	25 (20.3)	2.82	.83
5.	I concentrate my efforts on doing something about it.	15 (12.2)	28 (22.8)	44 (35.8)	36 (29.3)	2.82	.99
24.	I take additional action to try to get rid of the problem.	19 (15.4)	21 (17.1)	49 (39.8)	34 (27.6)	2.79	1.01
33.	I kid around about it.	30 (24.4)	39 (31.7)	36 (29.3)	18 (14.6)	2.34	2.34
51.	I put aside other activities in order to concentrate on this.	24 (19.5)	47 (38.2)	40 (32.5)	12 (9.8)	2.32	.90
29.	I sleep more than usual.	32 (26.0)	39 (31.7)	33 (26.8)	19 (15.4)	2.31	1.02
23.	I just give up trying to reach my goal.	43 (35.0)	21 (17.1)	39 (31.7)	20 (16.3)	2.29	1.11
48.	I reduce the amount of effort I'm putting into solving the problem.	28 (22.8)	44 (35.8)	41 (33.3)	10 (8.1)	2.26	.90

The female inmates reported multihued coping strategies. Their overall coping ability was moderately high ( $M = 2.86$ ,  $SD = .31$ ), the five most frequent types of coping strategies practiced by the female inmates were 'I put my trust in God' ( $M = 3.72$ ,  $SD = .68$ ), 'I try to find comfort in religion' ( $M = 3.61$ ,  $SD = .62$ ), 'I seek God's help' ( $M = 3.60$ ,  $SD = .69$ ), 'I learn something from the experience' ( $M = 3.48$ ,  $SD = .80$ ) and 'I pray more than usual' ( $M = 3.43$ ,  $SD = .75$ ). Apart from that, they also revealed that they practice other coping strategies in moderate. Some of the examples are; 'I day dream about things other than this' ( $M = 2.88$ ,  $SD = 1.03$ ), 'I feel a lot of emotional distress and I find myself expressing those feelings a lot' ( $M = 2.87$ ,  $SD = .94$ ), 'I try to come up with a strategy about what to do' ( $M = 2.82$ ,  $SD = .83$ ), 'I concentrate my efforts on doing something about it' ( $M = 2.82$ ,  $SD = .99$ ) and I take additional action to try to get rid of the problem ( $M = 2.79$ ,  $SD = 1.01$ ). Nonetheless, the types of coping strategies which least be practiced by inmates were 'kidding around about it' ( $M = 2.34$ ,  $SD = 2.34$ ), 'putting aside other activities in order to concentrate on this' ( $M = 2.32$ ,  $SD = .90$ ), 'sleeping more than usual' ( $M = 2.31$ ,  $SD = 1.02$ ), 'giving up trying to reach their goal' ( $M = 2.29$ ,  $SD = 1.11$ ) and 'reducing the amount of effort they are putting into solving the problem' ( $M = 2.26$ ,  $SD = .90$ ).

## DISCUSSION

Focusing on religion is the most coping strategy develop by majority of the inmates in prison. It seems that the inmates believe religion as one of the coping strategies to face with prison's strains. Picken (2012) indicates focusing on religion as one of the constructive coping strategies thus the finding of this research imply that most of the inmates are practising active ways to lessen the effects of stress in their life. Further, most of the inmates usually chose religion as means to cope with the feeling of separation from loved ones and adjustment with prison environment (Rhea, 2001). Correspondingly, results in several studies has provide the evidence that focusing on religion help to; reduce stress, enhance the wellbeing, improve health condition and promote prosocial behaviour among the inmates (Ellison, Boardman, Williams, & Jackson, 2001; Kerley, Matthews & Blanchard, 2005; Thomas & Zaitzow, 2006).

Other than that, surveyed inmates also revealed that one of their coping strategies despite focusing on religion is learning something from the experience. This finding is not stand alone as it has been supported from two studies where those inmates who manage to learn something from their experience or within incarceration were experienced less feeling of regret (Gilovich & Medvec, 1995; Harreveld, Van Der Pligt, Classen & Van Dijk, 2007). Likewise, Harreveld et al., (2007) revealed that inmates were endured less negative feelings by applying positive coping strategies, for instance able to do reflection upon their conviction and re-evaluate any maladaptive solution before decision-making process take place. In agreement with this statement, Nagy, Woods and Carlson (1997) discover that female inmates who feel less depression and anxiety were those who practice positive coping strategies in prison.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

In summary, the present study revealed interesting outcomes which could benefit those people in charge in dealing with inmates. Finding discover that the five most frequent types of coping strategies practiced by inmates are 'I put my trust in God', 'I try to find comfort in religion', 'I seek God's help', 'I learn something from the experience and 'I pray more than usual'. From the finding, it can be concluded that turning to religion is the most practicable coping strategies by inmates in handling stress. All in all, it is hoped that this study has helped to enrich the existing literature thus contributing to the field of correctional counseling in Malaysia.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors of this publication declare there is no conflict of interest.

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