

# Predictors and Efficacy of Coping Strategies among working parents

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The study surveyed 371 Filipino working parents in Metro Manila to determine the predictors and efficacy of their coping strategies. Educational attainment, age, gender, duality of income, and work level predicted the utilization of various coping strategies. Workers with low income and work levels, those in single-income families, and those who utilized passive coping strategies jobs reported most strain.

## INTRODUCTION

Majority of individuals' lives revolve around work and family—both of which are potent sources of strain. Research has shown that working parents report more stress and higher levels of conflict between work and personal life than single or married workers with no children (Galinsky, Bond, & Friedman, 1996). On an individual level, stressors in the form of life events, chronic strains and daily hassles have negative consequences on a person's physical, and mental health (Thoits, 1995). Given the detrimental effects of stress, this study focused on how working parents cope with the combined stressors from both work and family life. Specifically, it examined the predictors and efficacy of coping strategies utilized by working parents.

The term 'stress' has been used quite loosely thus far primarily because there are many meanings attached to it. The term has been used to describe an environmental stimulus applied to a person, a person's response, or the interaction between the two events (Behr, 1996). In this study, 'stress' shall be taken to mean the interaction

between the environmental force applied to a person and the person's response to it. The term 'stressor' refers to the environmental condition or event that require an individual to readjust his/her usual behavior pattern (Thoits, 1995). The term 'strains' refers to the physical, psychological and behavioral outcomes of stressors experienced (Beehr, 1996). Coping, on the other hand, describes "any response to external life strains that serves to prevent, avoid or control emotional distress" (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978).

### **Coping Strategies**

Coping strategies consist of attempts to manage internal and external demands that are created by stressful transactions (Folkman, 1984). A number of taxonomies of coping strategies have evolved from the plethora of research throughout the years. Problem-focused coping are actions aimed at altering the stressful situation. Cognitive strategies such as 'reframing' seek to change the meaning of stressful situations (Greenhaus & Parasuraman, 1986; Latack, 1986). Escape or passive strategies, on the other hand, involve avoiding the situation and trying not to get concerned about it (Koeske, Kirk, & Koeske, 1993). The social support coping dimension has also emerged as an important concept in coping research primarily because of the role social support may play in moderating the stress experience. Thus, social support appears to be both a moderating variable and an explicit coping choice (Latack, 1986).

Among these coping strategies, problem solving has been the most commonly reported coping effort (Schwartz & Stone, 1993). However, the dearth of literature from cultures other than the West makes it difficult to ascertain the universality of coping behaviors. There is reason to believe that the Filipino culture may elicit particular coping patterns. For example, it is expected that seeking spiritual and social support will be common coping styles in this predominantly Catholic country. A national survey of parents by Porio, Lynch, and Hollnsteiner (1978) found that "trust in God" ranks first among six-child rearing values. Social support is likewise expected to play a large role in coping because of the importance Filipinos place on family and kin. A recurring theme in Philippine personality research is the high value of group belonging and lack of emphasis in individualism and self-reliance (Church, 1987).

Other studies on coping have focused on the functionality of the various coping behaviors. For example, reframing was found to be an effective coping strategy, particularly for women (Anderson & Leslie, 1991). A study of managers showed that control strategies enabled the worker's ability to deal with difficulty and challenging work situations (Koeske et al., 1993). On the other hand, individuals who relied on avoidance strategies showed significantly poorer outcomes (Bowman & Stern, 1995) and enhanced stress symptoms (Nakano, 1991).

### **Predictors of coping strategies and strain**

Whereas the previous sections have described the various components of stress, in reality, the experience of stress varies from person to person. For example, women, specifically those with few alternative job opportunities, considerable economic pressures and family responsibilities that conflict with work responsibilities have reported more strain than men (Schmitt, Colligan, & Fitzgerald, 1980). Schwartz & Stone (1993) found that women also used social support, distraction and relaxation more than men.

Age was found to be negatively correlated to work-family conflict and stress (Judge, Boudreau, & Bretz, 1994). Bednar, Marshall, and Bahouth (1995) found that younger managers reported greater strain from their work and family responsibilities compared to older managers. Older subjects also reported more use of distraction, social support, direct action (Schwartz & Stone, 1993) and reframing than younger subjects (Olson et al., 1983).

Aquino (1991) found that educational level was significantly and positively related to job stress. However, highly educated individuals also preferred the use of problem-solving strategies (Billings & Moos, 1984). In terms of income, Gore and Mangione (1983) found that individuals with higher family income reported significantly lower levels of depression. Similarly, Aquino (1991) also found a negative relationship between income level and stress among Filipino workers.

Among family-related variables, marital status and number of household incomes have been significantly correlated with coping and strain. Gore and Mangione (1983) found that solo parents were most vulnerable to stress. There have been conflicting results on stress level

of single vs. dual-income families. Greenhaus and Parasuraman (1986) found that in two career families, expanded work and family responsibilities increase time conflicts and that pressures from one domain exacerbated pressures in other domains. Anderson and Leslie (1991) also found that both men and women in dual-career families reported a low reliance on passive acceptance of a problem. However, traditional single-earners made use of passive acceptance less frequently than dual-income males.

In terms of type of work, low-level managers reported more stress associated with promotion opportunities, discrimination and performance evaluation than high-level managers (Bednar et al, 1995). Occupational stress was also negatively correlated with employee rank and positively correlated with job satisfaction (Guppy & Rick 1996; Leong et al.,1996). However, Aquino (1991) had contrary findings among Filipino workers. Her study found that more physiological stress symptoms were reported by workers holding high level jobs.

Given the dearth of local studies and some times conflicting results between Western studies and those conducted in the Philippine setting, the goals of this study were twofold. Firstly, it examined the demographic, work and family predictors coping strategies employed by working parents. Secondly, it examined the efficacy of these coping strategies on the well-being of working parents.

## **METHODS**

### **Sample**

A total of 371 Filipino working parents in Metro Manila served as respondents to this household survey. Households were chosen on the basis of purposive sampling of communities intended to obtain a representative number of respondents stratified across income levels and location. The mean age of respondents was 43 years old and the average number of children was 3. Majority (58%) of the respondents were women, married (87%), and had college degrees (57%). Sixty-nine percent (69%) of the respondents belonged to two-income families. Majority of the respondents were self-employed (37%) and worked an average of 44 hours per week. Thirty eight percent (38%)

of respondents reported annual income levels of P250T and above, 25% had annual incomes between P70–249T and 36% had incomes below P70T.

## **Procedures**

A questionnaire to elicit coping strategies and strain was initially developed in English. The instrument was then translated into Filipino, pre-tested and refined. Respondents were given a choice of answering either the English or Filipino version of the survey.

For sampling purposes, Metro Manila cities were roughly assigned into North, South, East and West and sites were chosen to represent each locale and income class. Sites selected were: Bel-air, Forbes Park, Dasmarinas Village, Valle Verde, Corinthian Garden, Greenhills, Ayala Heights & La Vista (high income); Merville, Better Living, Proj. 6, Proj. 8, Teacher's Village, Ermita, Malate, San Antonio Village, Poblacion (middle income) and Tondo, Quiapo, Sta. Ana, Payatas, Pag-asa, U.P. Pook Dagohoy & Palaris, Bagong Ilog, Guadalupe, Pembo (low income).

Interviewers were assigned to the above mentioned locations, given quotas and selection guidelines. Guidelines stipulated that respondents must be at least 3 houses away from each other and respondents must not be related to each other up to the third degree of consanguinity.

## **Measures**

*Predictor variables.* Age was measured on a continuous scale whereas highest educational attainment was an ordinal variable ranging from 1 (less than high school), 2 (high-school graduate), 3 (vocational/less than college), 4 (college graduate) and 5 (post-graduate). Gender was a binary variable (1=male, 2=female) and annual family income was clustered into three levels of low (69 T and below), middle (70-249T) and high income (250 and above) based on data from 1996 National Statistics Office. Marital status was coded '1' for single/solo parents, '2' for married. Dual income families were coded '2' and single-income families were coded '1'. Respondents were asked to provide information on work, work hours and work schedule. Work level was coded in order of responsibility with '1' for manual work, '2' for rank and file/clerical, '3' for professional/technical, '4' for supervisory/managerial, and '5' for self-employed.

*Stressors.* A list of work and family stressors was provided and respondents were asked to check which among the identified stressors they, their spouse, children or important family members experienced in the last six months. The stressors were grouped according to: work stressors (starting a new job, changed jobs, problems with boss, problems with peers, promotion, increased work demands, increased time spend outside home because of work etc.) and family stressors (difficulties with regards to love and marriage, child bearing and rearing, family relations, family health, residence, crime, etc ).

*Strain.* Respondents were asked to indicate which of the stress symptoms provided in a checklist they experienced within the past six months. Three types of symptoms were measured: physiological (headaches, fatigue, stomach ache, fever, fracture, and increased blood pressure), psychological (sleeplessness, inability to concentrate, increased sleep, forgetfulness, worrying, indecisiveness, depression, lack of interest, and feelings of helplessness), and behavioral symptoms (crying spells, fits of anger, aggressive behavior, absenteeism, increased smoking, increased alcohol intake, accidents, and poor work performance). Scores were summed to obtain a score for total strain ( $\alpha=.81$ ).

*Coping Strategies.* A scale was constructed based on the F-COPES Scale (Olson et al., 1983). The resulting scale measured five coping strategies: problem-focused, reframing, seeking spiritual support, seeking social support, and passive coping. Items utilized Likert-type scales where respondents indicated the extent to which they engage in a particular strategy whenever faced with a stressful situation (4—all of the time, 3—most of the time, 2—some of the time, 1—not at all). Internal consistency estimates ranged from .65 to .75. These results were consistent with other scales in coping research the average reliability coefficient of which was .71 (Latack and Havlovic, 1992).

## RESULTS

### Descriptive results

Means, standard deviations and zero-order correlations among the study variables are presented in Table 1. Reframing emerged as the most utilized coping strategy among the sample of working parents.

The next most frequently utilized coping strategies were problem-focused and seeking spiritual support. The least frequently reported coping strategy was seeking social support. The different coping strategies were all significantly correlated with each other with problem-focused coping and reframing having the highest correlation ( $r=.67$ ). Seeking spiritual support was likewise both moderately correlated to reframing ( $r=.47$ ) and problem-focused coping ( $r=.41$ ). Passive coping was the only coping strategy significantly correlated with strain.

### **Results of Regression Analysis**

Hierarchical regression analysis was conducted twice. Initially, the predictor variables were entered into the analysis with each of the coping strategy as the criterion variable (Table 2). This was followed by a second analysis with strain as the criterion and coping strategies as predictor variables (Table 3).

*Predictors of Coping Strategies.* As seen in Table 2, the full set of variables accounted for 13% in the variance of problem-focused coping ( $F=(7,371)=7.47, p<.01$ ). Among the variables, dual-income family ( $\beta=.16$ ), education ( $\beta=.19$ ), and level of work responsibility ( $\beta=.13$ ), predicted problem-focused coping. That is, problem-focused coping was utilized by solo parents, individuals with higher educational attainment, those who belonged to dual-income families, and those holding jobs with high level of responsibility.

The full set of variables accounted for nine percent (9%) of the variance in reframing ( $F=(7,371)=4.61, p<.01$ ). Individuals who used reframing as a coping strategy were better educated ( $\beta=.15$ ), from dual-income families ( $\beta=.13$ ), and had higher work levels ( $\beta=.12$ ).

Eight percent (8%) of the variance in passive coping was accounted for by the study variables ( $F=(7,371)=4.51, p<.01$ ). This variance was mainly explained by gender ( $\beta=.12$ ), educational attainment ( $\beta=-.15$ ), and income level ( $\beta=-.15$ ). Results showed that females, individuals from low educational attainment and income were most inclined to passive coping behavior.

Six percent (6%) of the variance in seeking social support behavior was predicted by work-related variables and type of stressors ( $F=(7,371)=3.05, p<.01$ ). Only level of work responsibility ( $\beta=.16$ )

Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations and Correlations of Variables (listwise deletion) n=355

	Mean	S.D.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
1) Age	42.44	10.69	1.00													
2) Gender	1.59	.49	-.08	1.00												
3) Education	3.76	1.02	.09	.06	1.00											
4) Income	2.02	.86	.18*	.01	.56*	1.00										
5) Marital Status	1.93	.26	.13*	-.01	.04	.08	1.00									
6) Dual-Income	1.78	.41	-.07	.16*	.24*	.22*	.27*	1.00								
7) Work level	3.73	1.30	.10	.08	.13*	.28*	-.01	.13*	1.00							
8) Family Stressors	5.05	4.42	-.11*	-.05	-.15*	-.06	-.19*	-.17*	-.04	1.00						
9) Work Stressors	3.98	3.26	-.15*	-.03	.02	.08	-.12*	-.01	.07	.62*	1.00					
10) Problem focused	2.80	.59	.04	.04	.28*	.24*	-.06	.18*	.20*	-.03	.07	1.00				
11) Reframing	3.06	.61	-.01	.13*	.19*	.13*	-.00	.19*	.16*	-.09	.03	.67*	1.00			
12) Passive	2.29	.61	-.06	.11*	-.23*	-.22*	.03	-.02	-.05	.04	-.01	.16*	.37*	1.00		
13) Social Support	1.98	.47	-.04	.07	.07	.12*	.07	.14*	.19*	.09	.14*	.33*	.27*	.14*	1.00	
14) Spiritual Support	1.98	.47	.19*	.12*	.17*	.25	.06	.07	.13*	-.03	.05	.41*	.47*	.27*	.28	1.00
15) Strain	4.99	4.24	.37*	-.26*	.20*	-.03	.07	.23*	.10	.37*	.30*	-.03	.07	.23*	.10	-.01

Note: Gender was coded 1 for male, 2 for female, Marital Status was coded 1 for single, 2 for married; Dual-income was coded 1 for single-income family, 2 for dual-income family, Work level was coded 1 for manual, 2 for rank and file, 3 for professional/technical, 4 supervisory/managerial, 5 for self-employed.



Table 2. Predictors of Coping Strategy (Beta coefficients)

	Problem-focused				Reframing				Passive				Social Support				Spiritual Support			
	B	SE B	$\beta$	T	B	SE B	$\beta$	T	B	SE B	$\beta$	T	B	SE B	$\beta$	T	B	SE B	$\beta$	T
Age	.00	.00	.03	.54	.00	.00	-.01	-.13	.00	.00	-.01	-.24	-.00	.00	-.07	-1.23	.01	.00	.15	2.99*
Gender	.01	.06	.01	.13	.12	.07	.10	1.82	.15	.06	.12	2.32*	.03	.05	.04	.68	.14	.06	.12	2.21*
Education	.11	.04	.19	3.03*	.09	.04	.15	2.37*	-.09	.04	-.15	-2.46*	-.00	.03	-.00	-.05	.02	.04	.04	.60
Income	.05	.04	.08	1.19	-.01	.05	-.01	-.21	-.10	.05	-.15	-2.23*	.04	.04	.07	1.06	.12	.04	.17	2.71*
Marital Status	-.25	.12	-.11	-2.08*	-.10	.13	-.04	-.77	.09	.13	.04	.77	.10	.10	.05	.98	.07	.12	.03	.54
Dual-Income	.19	.08	.16	2.40*	.20	.08	.13	2.35*	.02	.08	.01	.25	.08	.07	.07	1.30	.00	.08	.00	.05
Work level	.06	.02	.13	2.67*	.06	.03	.12	2.26*	.00	.02	.00	.04	.06	.02	.16	2.98*	.03	.02	.06	1.12
R <sup>2</sup>	.13				.09				.08				.06				.10			

Note: Gender was coded 1 for male, 2 for female, Marital Status was coded 1 for single, 2 for married; Dual-income was coded 1 for single-income family, 2 for dual-income family, Work level was coded 1 for manual, 2 for rank and file, 3 for professional/technical, 4 supervisory/managerial, 5 for self-employed.

\*p < .05

Table 3. Predictors of Strain

	B	SE B	$\beta$	T	DR <sup>2</sup>
Step 1: Stressors					.14
Family Stressors	.20	.06	.21	3.46*	
Work Stressors	.19	.08	.15	2.48*	
Step 2: Demographic Variables					.10
Age	-.03	.02	-.08	1.60	
Gender	-.02	.41	-.00	-.06	
Education	-.43	.25	-.10	-1.74	
Income	-.54	.30	-.14	-1.84	
Status	-.65	.81	-.04	-.81	
Dual-Income	-1.56	.53	-.16	-2.92*	
Work level	.37	.16	.11	2.30*	
Step 3: Coping Strategies					.04
Problem-focused	-.67	.48	-.09	-1.40	
Reframing	.92	.49	.13	1.89	
Passive	.98	.38	.14	2.59*	
Social Support	.55	.46	.06	1.19	
Spiritual Support	-.16	.41	-.02	-.38	
Total R <sup>2</sup>					.28

Note: Gender was coded 1 for male, 2 for female, Marital Status was coded 1 for single, 2 for married; Dual-income was coded 1 for single-income family, 2 for dual-income family, Work level was coded 1 for manual, 2 for rank and file, 3 for professional/technical, 4 supervisory/managerial, 5 for self-employed.

significantly accounted for any variance in seeking social support. That is, individuals with high-level work used social support more than those in low-level jobs.

Three factors predicted ten percent (10%) of the variance in seeking spiritual support: gender, income, and age ( $F=(7,371)=5.67$ ,  $p<.01$ ). Females ( $\beta=.12$ ), older individuals ( $\beta=.15$ ), and those with higher income ( $\beta=.17$ ) relied on spiritual support more than males, younger individuals, and those with lower income.

*Predictors of Strain.* Hierarchical multiple regression analysis was conducted with strain as the criterion variable. In the first step, work and family stressors were entered into the equation. In the second step, the demographic variables (gender, education, income, marital status, dual-income and work level) were entered. Finally, all five coping strategies were entered into the equation. The assumption of such analysis was that stressors are assumed to be the primary cause of stress. However, aside from stressors, literature has also revealed

various demographic variables that predict strain. The final step sought to determine the amount of contribution coping strategies had on strain over and above that which is predicted by the various stressors and demographic variables.

As seen in Table 3, twenty eight percent (28%) of the variance in strains was accounted for by the variables measured ( $F = (14,371)=9.57, p<.01$ ). Not surprisingly, stressors from both work and family accounted for the largest variance in strain. Family ( $\beta=.21$ ) and work stressors ( $\beta=.13$ ) combined predicted 14% of the variance in strain. Three demographic variables uniquely predicted 10% of the variance in strain: income ( $\beta=-.14$ ), level of work ( $\beta=.11$ ), and dual-income family ( $\beta=-.16$ ). The results revealed that individuals with low income, those in single-income families, and low level jobs experienced most strain. Coping strategies accounted for an additional 4% of the strain in working parents over and above that which was predicted by stressors and demographic variables. Specifically, individuals who utilized passive coping strategies ( $\beta=.14$ ) reported most strain.

## DISCUSSION

The reliance of working parents on reframing as a strategy appears to reinforce research that notes the Filipino's propensity to adopt an 'optimistic fatalism' (Constantino, 1966). This strategy was utilized especially by individuals in dual-income families. Anderson and Leslie (1991) explained that given multiple roles, reframing becomes helpful when dual-income couples realize the normalcy of the stress they are experiencing. Such realization provides a greater sense of control and decreases the amount of personal blame and guilt. The propensity to seek spiritual support among Filipino working parents is understandable considering the large role religion plays in the predominantly Catholic country. Use of spiritual coping was significantly associated with age. This is consistent with other studies that have found an increased reliance on faith with age (Chatters, Levin & Taylor, 1997).

That seeking social support was the least used coping strategy in the study sample is somewhat surprising if one considers the Filipino value for close emotional ties and extended families who provide emotional and economic support (Jocano, 1969). The results are not

so surprising, however, if one were to consider another aspect of the Filipino psyche—specifically, the value of “hiya” (the closest popular English equivalent is “shame”). Jocano (1969) explained, “Hiya is put into practice when what is infringed upon pertains to the personal dignity or honor of the individual, the status of an individual, internal cohesion of family as a unit, and the reputation of the entire kin group relative to the outside world. This is seen, for example, by camouflaging one’s economic difficulties or dysfunctional behaviors of a family member because that would be a reflection of the family’s standing in the community.” In fact, the specific item means in the category of social support showed that the spouse was the major source of social support and other sources were barely utilized. This supports Church’s (1987) observation that “Filipinos, at least in comparison with Americans on average—appear to place greater emphasis on suppression and control of unpleasant emotions and to be more selective about whom they express private emotions with”(p.279). This may explain the reluctance to seek social support or at least keep their problems within the nuclear family.

This study also sought to determine the demographic, family and work variables that influence the experience of stress among Filipino working parents. Individuals with higher educational attainment experience less family stressors validating previous findings that education serves as a buffer of stress (Gore & Mangione, 1983). Education also predicts use of control coping strategies consistent with previous findings that highly educated parents tend to use problem solving more than the less educated (Billings & Moos, 1984). Low-income workers report most strain. In addition, women and individuals with low income are most passive when faced with stressful situations. Such results are similar to that of other research (Billing & Moos, 1981; Pearlin & Schooler, 1978). Pearlin and Schooler (1978) suggested that the groups that are most exposed to hardship are also least equipped to deal with it. However, the finding that individuals with higher incomes seek spiritual support more than individuals with lower incomes appear contrary to the common belief that religion compensates or substitutes for material deprivation (Chatter et al., 1992). However, the results do reinforce findings of Beeghly, Van Velsor, and Brock (1981) that income is positively related to religious

activities reflecting a higher level of social integration for those with means.

Individuals belonging to dual-income families and those with higher job levels use problem solving more than individuals in low-level jobs and single-income families. This may be because individuals with high level work and dual-income families have more access to resources that facilitates problem solving. Another explanation is that there is more collaboration and co-ownership of responsibilities in dual-career couples hence, each partner may reinforce the other's attempt to resolve a problem constructively (Barnett & Rivers, 1996). In addition, the finding that respondents in low-level jobs report more work stressors than those in high-level jobs is consistent with previous findings that occupational stress is negatively correlated with employee rank (Leong et al., 1996). Level of work responsibility also predict the propensity to seek social support. Specifically, self-employed and managerial and supervisory employees appear to utilize this coping strategy most. Perhaps, these individuals have more social networking skills and opportunities than other individuals. Finally, the results reinforces findings that workers who predominantly used passive coping strategies show significantly poorer outcomes (Koeske et al., 1993; Bowman & Stern, 1995)2.

### **Limitations of Study and Implications for Future Research.**

The study was limited to working parents in Metro Manila. Thus, the results need to be validated by expanding both the size and location to allow for generalizability of results. In addition, the income profile of respondents was not consistent with the national profile, implying the need to review the manner in which income was operationalized. However, it is also possible that the income distribution of residents in Metro Manila is different from the rest of the country.

Another weakness of the study was its inability to capture the process by which coping strategies are decided upon. Longitudinal studies may provide more information on appraisal process, duration and chronicity of stressors and coping behaviors. Another approach can be to concentrate on individuals undergoing a specific stressor to better capture the relationship between coping behaviors and situation.

Multicollinearity may have been a problem in the ability of coping strategies to predict strain. The strong correlation, for example, between reframing and problem-focused coping indicate that these may not be independent constructs. More work needs to be done in ascertaining a better typology of coping styles.

*Human Resource Implications.* The results also point to areas where the Filipino working parent may be supported. Given the ineffectiveness of avoidance coping, there is a need to provide working parents with better tools in coping with stress. Developmental programs that cater to the needs of these particular groups may be a good place to start. Problem-focused stress management, problem solving, negotiation training, assertiveness training, time management, and relaxation training are but some of the program that are apparently most needed especially by working parents. The above-mentioned interventions may be most critical for individuals in low-level and managerial/supervisory jobs who experience most stress as well as those with low educational attainment who are most passive in dealing with stress. It is also disconcerting to note that Pearlin and Schooler's (1978) observation that women and low income individuals cope less effectively is still true for Filipino families 20 years later making it imperative to support and empower these under-privileged sectors.

## CONCLUSION

This study examined the predictors and efficacy of coping strategies of working parents. Educational attainment, age, gender, duality of income, and work level predicted the utilization of various coping strategies. Workers with low income levels, low work levels, those in single-income families and those who utilized passive coping strategies jobs reported most strain. However, the resulting hierarchical models were not robust indicating that the relationship among these variables is more complex and more investigation is required to establish stronger predictors of coping and strain.

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