

COPING WITH INCARCERATION: EVIDENCE FROM FEMALE INMATES IN MALAYSIA

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Abstract: *Previous research suggests that ineffective coping during incarceration may increase inmates' vulnerability to maladjustment, misconduct, and psychological distress. At the same time, counseling and other psychosocial supports may help strengthen inmates' emotional adjustment and well-being. However, empirical research on coping strategies among prison inmates in Malaysia remains limited, particularly among female inmates. This study explored the preferred coping strategies practiced by female inmates during incarceration in one of the prisons located in Malaysia's southern region. A total of 123 female inmates participated in the survey. Data were collected using the COPE Inventory and analyzed using descriptive statistics. The findings revealed that the five most frequently practiced coping strategies were putting trust in God, finding comfort in religion, seeking God's help, learning from the experience, and praying more than usual. Overall, the respondents demonstrated a moderately high level of coping. These findings provide useful insights for improving the psychological well-being of inmates and contribute to the development of correctional counseling practices in Malaysia.*

Keywords: *Coping Strategies, Female Inmates, Incarceration, Religion, Correctional Counseling, Malaysia*

Introduction

Imprisonment is widely recognized as a stressful experience that requires substantial psychological adjustment. Inmates are exposed to a range of prison-related stressors, including restricted freedom, institutional rigidity, strained social relationships, separation from loved ones, reduced privacy, and uncertainty about the future. Such conditions may undermine emotional well-being and increase the need for effective coping strategies during incarceration (Picken, 2012; Zamble & Porporino, 1988).

Coping refers to the cognitive and behavioural efforts individuals use to manage demands that are perceived as stressful or overwhelming. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) conceptualized coping as a dynamic process shaped by how individuals appraise stressful situations and the resources available to manage them. Similarly, Carver, Scheier, and Weintraub (1989) emphasized that coping is multidimensional and may include both problem-focused and emotion-focused responses. In prison settings, however, the opportunity to engage in problem-focused coping may be constrained by the highly controlled nature of the environment. As a result, inmates may rely more heavily on emotion-focused, cognitive, interpersonal, or religious coping strategies (Carver et al., 1989; Picken, 2012).

Previous prison research suggests that inmates who fail to develop constructive coping strategies may be more likely to experience distress, adjustment problems, and misconduct during incarceration (Picken, 2012; Zamble & Porporino, 1990). By contrast, more adaptive coping may help inmates regulate their emotions, endure prison stress, and maintain a degree of psychological stability. For female inmates, coping may be especially important because incarceration often involves emotional separation from family, stigma, relational loss, and identity disruption. Research on women's imprisonment has long suggested that women often respond to prison life through relational, emotional, and meaning-making processes, including the formation of supportive bonds and other adaptive strategies (Giallombardo, 1966; Owen, 1998).

Religion may represent one particularly meaningful coping resource in prison. Studies have shown that religiosity and religious participation may be associated with better prison adjustment and lower involvement in negative prison behaviour (Kerley et al., 2005; Thomas & Zaitzow, 2006). Incarcerated individuals may turn to religion not only for comfort and hope, but also as a way of making meaning of their suffering, enduring separation, and coping with the emotional burdens of imprisonment (Thomas & Zaitzow, 2006).

Despite the relevance of coping to prison adjustment, empirical attention to coping strategies among female inmates in Malaysia remains limited. Understanding the coping preferences of this population is important because such knowledge can help inform correctional counseling, emotional support services, and prison-based rehabilitation efforts. Therefore, this study aimed to examine the preferred coping strategies practiced by female inmates during incarceration in a prison in the southern region of Malaysia.

Literature Review

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

Coping Strategies and Stress

Coping strategies refer to the efforts individuals make to master, reduce, or tolerate the demands created by stress (Weiten et al., 2011). In the stress and coping framework developed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984), coping is generally categorized into two broad forms: problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping. Problem-focused coping involves actions directed at changing or managing the source of stress, whereas emotion-focused coping involves efforts to regulate the emotional consequences of stressful experiences.

Carver et al. (1989) further expanded the understanding of coping by proposing a multidimensional framework, operationalized in the COPE Inventory. Their work highlighted that coping includes a wide range of responses, such as active coping, planning, seeking emotional support, acceptance, denial, humour, religion, and behavioural disengagement. This framework is especially useful in correctional settings, where inmates may draw on multiple coping styles simultaneously.

Coping in Prison Settings

Coping in prison must be understood within the realities of a restrictive institutional environment. Unlike individuals in community settings, inmates often have limited ability to change the structural sources of their stress. Restricted movement, rigid rules, limited privacy, and reduced personal control may constrain behavioural coping options and make emotionally oriented or cognitive coping more salient (Picken, 2012; Zamble & Porporino, 1988).

Research on prison adjustment suggests that inmates who cope more constructively tend to adapt better to prison life, whereas ineffective coping may be associated with depression, anxiety, anger, or institutional misconduct (Picken, 2012; Zamble & Porporino, 1990). Over time, coping may shape how inmates manage separation, uncertainty, loss of control, and daily frustrations in the prison environment.

Coping Among Female Inmates

The coping experiences of female inmates may differ in meaningful ways from those of male inmates. Classical and contemporary literature on women's prisons has shown that women often cope through relational patterns, emotional expression, spiritual resources, and the formation of social bonds within prison (Giallombardo, 1966; Owen, 1998). These coping patterns may reflect the gendered nature of imprisonment, particularly for women whose identities are often strongly tied to caregiving and family relationships.

Women in prison may therefore rely on coping strategies that help them manage loneliness, emotional disconnection, self-reflection, and the pain of separation from children, partners, or family members. In this regard, coping among female inmates is not only a matter of reducing stress, but also of sustaining meaning, emotional endurance, and psychological stability during incarceration.

Religious Coping in Prison

Religious coping has received considerable attention in prison research. Kerley et al. (2005) found that religiosity and religious participation were associated with lower levels of negative prison behaviour. Similarly, Thomas and Zaitzow (2006) argued that religion can serve as an important coping resource in prison by offering meaning, hope, self-regulation, and a constructive channel for emotional energy.

Religious coping may be particularly relevant in prison because it provides inmates with symbolic support even in conditions where direct control over stressful circumstances is limited. Practices such as prayer, trust in God, seeking spiritual guidance, and drawing comfort from religion may therefore function as emotionally sustaining responses to incarceration. Understanding whether such coping strategies are preferred among female inmates is important for the development of culturally and contextually relevant correctional counseling interventions.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a quantitative descriptive survey design to examine the coping strategies preferred by female inmates during incarceration. A descriptive design was appropriate because the study aimed to identify and describe the coping patterns reported by the respondents rather than to test causal relationships (Jackson, 2009; Creswell, 2014).

Sample

The study involved 123 female inmates selected through purposive sampling from a prison located in the southern region of Malaysia. The respondents came from various racial or ethnic backgrounds, educational levels, and lengths of incarceration. The ability to obtain a larger sample was constrained by institutional access and prison security requirements.

Instrument

Preferences for coping strategies were measured using the COPE Inventory, developed by Carver, Scheier, and Weintraub (1989). The COPE Inventory is a multidimensional measure designed to assess different ways individuals respond to stress. It consists of 56 items representing several coping dimensions, including seeking emotional and instrumental social support, turning to religion, humour, active coping, denial, mental and behavioural disengagement, acceptance, and focus on and venting of emotions (Carver et al., 1989).

Responses were measured using a four-point Likert scale:

- 1 = I do not do this at all
- 2 = I do this a little bit
- 3 = I do this sometimes
- 4 = I do this often

Higher scores indicate greater use of the particular coping strategy.

Data Collection Procedure

Questionnaires were distributed to the selected respondents within the prison setting with approval from the relevant prison authorities. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were informed of the purpose of the study before completing the instrument.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations, frequencies, and percentages, to identify the most and least preferred coping strategies practiced by the respondents.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the relevant institutional ethics committee and the Malaysian Prison Department prior to data collection. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all respondents. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the study.

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
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

No.	Items	Responses				Overall Coping Strategy Index	
		Don't do this at all (%)	Do this a little bit (%)	Sometimes (%)	Often (%)	Mean	SD
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

Overall Coping Level

The findings showed that the female inmates demonstrated a moderately high overall level of coping during incarceration ($M = 2.86$, $SD = .31$). This suggests that the respondents actively engaged in a range of coping strategies to manage the emotional and situational demands of prison life.

Most Preferred Coping Strategies

Among the 56 items assessed using the COPE Inventory, the highest-rated coping strategy was putting trust in God ($M = 3.72$, $SD = .68$). This was followed by trying to find comfort in religion ($M = 3.61$, $SD = .62$), seeking God's help ($M = 3.60$, $SD = .69$), learning something from the experience ($M = 3.48$, $SD = .80$), and praying more than usual ($M = 3.43$, $SD = .75$).

These findings indicate that the most preferred coping strategies practiced by the respondents were largely religious and reflective in nature. In particular, the results suggest that spirituality, faith, and personal meaning-making played an important role in how female inmates managed the experience of incarceration.

Moderately Practiced Coping Strategies

The respondents also reported moderate use of several other coping strategies, including daydreaming about other things ($M = 2.88$, $SD = 1.03$), expressing emotional distress ($M = 2.87$, $SD = .94$), trying to come up with a strategy about what to do ($M = 2.82$, $SD = .83$), concentrating efforts on doing something about the problem ($M = 2.82$, $SD = .99$), and taking additional action to get rid of the problem ($M = 2.79$, $SD = 1.01$).

These findings suggest that, in addition to religious coping, the respondents also employed emotional expression, cognitive distraction, and problem-oriented efforts at moderate levels.

Least Preferred Coping Strategies

The least practiced coping strategies 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 the goal ($M = 2.29$, $SD = 1.11$), and reducing the amount of effort put into solving the problem ($M = 2.26$, $SD = .90$).

This pattern suggests that disengagement-oriented and avoidant coping strategies were less preferred among the respondents compared to religious and reflective forms of coping.

Discussion

The present study aimed to examine the coping strategies preferred by female inmates during incarceration in a Malaysian prison. Overall, the respondents demonstrated a moderately high level of coping, suggesting that they were actively using a range of psychological and behavioural responses to manage prison-related stress. This is consistent with prison coping literature indicating that inmates do not respond passively to incarceration but instead develop different strategies to endure the emotional and situational demands of confinement (Picken, 2012; Zamble & Porporino, 1988).

One of the most significant findings of this study was the strong preference for religious coping. The five most frequently practiced coping strategies all reflected spirituality, faith, or reflective meaning-making, namely putting trust in God, finding comfort in religion, seeking God's help, learning from the experience, and praying more than usual. This finding suggests that religion may function as a major coping resource for female inmates in this setting. In a prison environment where personal freedom and control are limited, religious coping may offer emotional comfort, hope, inner stability, and a sense of meaning that cannot easily be accessed through direct behavioural control of external circumstances (Thomas & Zaitzow, 2006).

This finding is broadly consistent with previous prison research showing that religion can support adjustment and reduce maladaptive behaviour in correctional settings. Kerley et al. (2005) found that religiosity and religious participation were associated with lower levels of negative prison behaviours. Likewise, Thomas and Zaitzow (2006) argued that religion can serve as an important coping mechanism in prison because it helps channel emotional distress into more constructive forms of endurance and self-regulation. In the context of the present study, the prominence of religious coping may indicate that female inmates use faith not only as spiritual practice, but also as a way of emotionally surviving separation, uncertainty, guilt, and incarceration-related strain.

Another important finding was that learning something from the experience emerged as one of the most preferred coping strategies. This suggests that many inmates were not only enduring incarceration, but also attempting to make meaning of it. Reflective coping of this kind may help individuals reinterpret difficult circumstances, reduce feelings of hopelessness, and view incarceration as a source of personal learning or growth. Such an interpretation aligns with broader coping theory, which recognizes cognitive reframing and acceptance-based efforts as potentially adaptive responses to stressful circumstances (Carver et al., 1989; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

The respondents also reported moderate use of strategies such as expressing emotional distress, daydreaming about other things, and trying to develop strategies or take action. This suggests that the inmates did not rely on only one coping mode. Instead, they appeared to use a combination of religious, emotional, cognitive, and problem-oriented strategies. Such multiform coping is consistent with the understanding that coping is dynamic and situational, rather than fixed or singular (Carver et al., 1989).

By contrast, the least preferred strategies included giving up, reducing effort, and sleeping more than usual, all of which may reflect disengagement or passive avoidance. The relatively lower

preference for these responses may indicate that the respondents were less inclined toward withdrawal-based coping than toward strategies that provide emotional comfort, meaning, or some sense of inner activity. This is encouraging from a correctional counseling perspective, as reliance on less avoidant coping may be associated with better psychological adjustment during incarceration.

Taken together, the findings suggest that female inmates in this study preferred coping strategies that were primarily religious, reflective, and emotionally regulating rather than openly avoidant or disengaged. This pattern highlights the importance of spirituality and meaning-making in the prison adjustment of women and reinforces the relevance of culturally sensitive and psychologically informed support services in correctional settings.

Conclusion and Practical Implications

The findings of this study have several important implications for correctional counseling, psychological support services, and rehabilitation programmes for female inmates.

First, the strong preference for religious coping suggests that spirituality may be an important internal resource for female inmates. Correctional counselors and prison support services should therefore recognize that faith-based meaning systems may play a central role in emotional endurance, hope, and adaptation during incarceration. This does not mean that all interventions must be religious in nature, but rather that inmates' spiritual orientations should be acknowledged respectfully where relevant.

Second, because inmates reported high engagement in learning from the experience, counseling interventions may benefit from incorporating reflective and strengths-based approaches. Counselors may help inmates examine painful experiences, identify lessons from incarceration, and reconstruct a more hopeful and responsible sense of self. Such work may be especially useful in addressing shame, regret, and negative self-perceptions.

Third, the moderate use of emotional expression and problem-oriented coping suggests that female inmates may also benefit from counseling programmes that strengthen emotional regulation, coping flexibility, stress management, and decision-making skills. Helping inmates broaden their coping repertoire may improve adjustment during incarceration and support healthier functioning after release.

Fourth, the relatively lower reliance on disengagement strategies indicates that intervention efforts may build on existing adaptive coping tendencies rather than beginning from a purely deficit-based perspective. Counseling and rehabilitation programmes can be designed to reinforce constructive coping while reducing the risk of emotional withdrawal, helplessness, or passive resignation.

Overall, the findings suggest that effective correctional counseling for female inmates should be psychologically informed, gender-responsive, and culturally sensitive, with attention to spirituality, meaning-making, emotional expression, and personal growth.

Limitations of the Study

This study should be interpreted in light of several limitations. First, the study was conducted in one prison institution only, which limits the generalizability of the findings to female inmates in other correctional settings in Malaysia. Second, the use of a descriptive survey design means

that the study identifies coping preferences but does not explain causal relationships between coping and psychological outcomes. Third, the findings were based on self-report data, which may be influenced by response bias, emotional state, or social desirability. Future research may benefit from involving multiple prison settings, comparing different inmate groups, or using qualitative approaches to gain deeper insight into how female inmates understand and experience their coping processes.

Conclusion

This study found that female inmates in a Malaysian prison demonstrated a moderately high level of coping during incarceration. The most preferred coping strategies were putting trust in God, finding comfort in religion, seeking God's help, learning from the experience, and praying more than usual. These findings suggest that religious and reflective coping played a particularly important role in how the respondents managed the challenges of prison life.

The study contributes to the limited literature on coping among female inmates in Malaysia and highlights the relevance of spirituality, meaning-making, and adaptive psychological support in correctional settings. Greater attention to inmates' coping preferences may help strengthen correctional counseling practice and support the psychological well-being of incarcerated women.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest related to this study.

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