

# Psychological Distress Among Teachers In Malaysia

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## Abstract

*The present research explored psychological distress predictors including job demands, job control and social support based on underlying premises, the Job Demands-Control-Support (JDCS) and Job Demands-Control (JDC) designs. A total of 335 teachers from a district located on Malaysia's eastern coast, Kuala Terengganu, were included in the planned cross-sectional study. Indeed, the results for the regression showed that job demands, job control and social support meaningfully to predict the psychological distress among teachers. The results also suggest that to prevent psychological distress among teachers, it is vital that the responsible parties pay more attention to improving job control and social support, at the same time reducing job demands. Overall this research adds to the literature corpus by using JDC and JDSC premises in the Malaysian culture setting.*

**Keywords:** Psychological Distress; Cross-Sectional; Teachers; Malaysia

## 1 Introduction

It is teachers' duty to lead students through the provision and distribution of information and skills, where this has made them as valuable role models for future generations. Nevertheless, aside from teaching duties, teachers are now burdened on a regular basis with substantial administrative duties such as recording and running programs (Musa, Moy, & Wong, 2018; Ali, Nordin, Said, Manaf, & Musa, 2017). As stated by Mus et. al., (2018), most teachers on Peninsular Malaysia's West Coast reported having to work outside their working hours to complete all data entry and assessment due to system overload during working hours. Teachers must work after midnight due to the online evaluation requirement, which sacrifices the quality of their sleep and time spent with families. Furthermore, Kamarozaman Abd Razak (2018), the National Union of Teaching Profession (NUTP) president, discovered the contributing factors leading to depression of teachers was the growing workloads faced by teachers. Interestingly, NUTP (Ismail, 2019) also revealed that due to their tremendous effort, dedicated teachers suffer from extreme job stress due to the excessive workload. Due to physical and mental difficulties, teaching has become a demanding and stressful career (Kavita & Hassan, 2018; Desouky & Allam, 2017; Velaytham & Surat, 2019). 4.4% out of 48258 teachers reported personal issues as well as work related problems such as poor management, workloads, and lack of task and stress management skills have led to their moderate stress levels (Radhi, 2018). While Malaysia's education system has experienced rapid changes in terms of mission, vision, teaching and learning curriculum and assessment as well (Aziz & Hussin, 2017). As a result, human psychology, especially psychological distress has been affected by these changes. Consequently, teachers are susceptible to face

depression, mental illness, anxiety and stress which are serious health problems caused by psychological distress (Makhbul & Khairuddin, 2014) and increasingly affect organizational growth, including decreased work performance (Akhlaiq, Mehmood, Amjad, Malik & Hassan, 2010), absenteeism (Tahir, 2011; Wah, 2014), as well as intention to quit (Renzulli, Beattie, & Parrott, 2011). Thus the current research illustrates the teachers' projection of psychological distress by analyzing several predictors postulated by the Job Demand Control Support premise (JDCS) (Johnson & Hall, 1988) and the Job Demand Control (JDC) model (Karasek, 1979) illustrated in the context of Malaysia.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Psychological distress**

De Croon, Sluiter, Blonk, Broersen & Frings-Dresen (2004) defined psychological distress as the psychological response to displeasing circumstances and the negative effects of work stress. To illustrate the strain, stress, and distress, psychological distress as a term is used (Ridner 2004). In some other studies, psychological distress is

also a prevalent condition in the combination of depression and anxiety (Bultmann et al. 2005; Hirschfeld, 2001; Jorm, Christensen & Griffiths, 2006). Chan (2002) and Chaplana (2008) disclosed that in some studies in Nigeria, the U.K. and Hong Kong, the findings revealed that teachers encountered 38 percent of psychological stress. Meanwhile, Yu, Gu, Zhou, and Wang (2008) stressed that employees in power plants experience physical stress and psychological stress due to increased workload and support deficiency. Based on previous studies, it is obvious that the reaction to psychological emotional discomfort such as tension, depression and anxiety because of unobtrusive nature of the work surrounding. Therefore, to assess psychological distress among teachers in Terengganu, Malaysia in terms of depression, anxiety and stress, this study therefore uses depression, anxiety and stress scale as suggested by Lovibond & Lovibond (1995).

### **2.2 Job demands, job control and social support effects on psychological distress**

A research by Isahak (2013) that was conducted in Malaysia revealed that 75 public university workers experienced psychological risks at their workplace, as they show various rates of depression, stress and anxiety where these employees are more seemingly at risk of stress than depression or anxiety. Yaakub and Sidik (2014) found that when psychological demands are increased and job controls are decreased were the course due to led to work stress and anxiety among employees will occur. Stress, anxiety and depression are more incline to attack workers with strong psychological demands such as automotive workers. In another research by Edimansyah et al. (2008), findings from self-reported study in Malaysia's automotive company assembly workers indicated that high job demand and supervisory help were connected to employees' depression and stress. Nevertheless, due to the nature of work carried out by staff in the assembly, the job management was not correlated and significant with these psychological issue.

Similar results were also recorded in Asian studies involving different occupations. Studies involving nurses in Japan, Korea, and China have shown that nurses are at high risk of depression due to specific work stress rates in the nursing sector compared to other professions (Yoshizawa et al., 2014; Gao et al., 2012; Yoon & Kim, 2013). Employment management and supervisors support are two main factors which reduce nurses' depression (Saijo et al., 2016). Yu, et al. (2008) and Kitaoka-Higashiguchi et al. (2002) have stated in other studies in Japan and China, factory managers and employees are more prone to have

depression due to rising workload or labour demand and the lack of labor management and decision- making power.

Low employment management and low social assistance were also correlated with poor mental well-being in the western countries including Spain and European Union countries (Escriba-Aguir and Tenias-Burillo, 2004), while high demands and job loads, as well as low job control were correlated with medical, psychological and absenteeism issues (Kivimaki, Elovainiuo, Vahtera & Ferrie, 2003; Gimeno, Benavides, Amick III, Benach & Martinez, 2004). The research by Brough and Pears (2004) conducted in the Western countries also found high demands for employment and weak work regulation leading to poor work quality and the well-being of staff. Higher demands for jobs, weak employment security and weak assistance lead to depression and stress among the workforce (Iennaco et al. , 2010; Nieuwenhuijsen & Bruinvels 2010; Boschman, Van der Molen, Sluiter, & Frings-Dresen, 2013). In addition, Willemse, de Jonge, Smit, Depla and Pot (2012 ) found that when employees with high workloads receive high levels of social control and support, they are less happy with the job and feel more emotional and personal achievement.

Model for Job Demand-Control (JDC) by Karasek (1979) postulates work-related pressure due to excessive work demand and low task control. Johnson and Hall (1988) expanded the research to incorporate the Job Demand-Control-Support model (JDCS), which described the working conditions of the isolation pressure (iso- train). In other words, workers with high job demands, poor job control and in isolation pressure works, and poor social help have been shown to cause adverse effects of high risk for health and welfare. The prediction model in this research includes job demands, job control and social support as predictors, and psychological distress which are assessed by criterion vectors of stress, anxiety and depression. The key and additive effect on teachers' psychological distress of job demands, job control and social support are measured to test the study model. Each predictor (job demands or job control or social support) along with the joint predictor (job demands, job control + social support) are accountable for their roles in the explanations of variance in psychological distress in the regression model.

The research predicted that job demands, job control and social support were correlated with teacher's psychological distress (depression, anxiety and stress) from the above reviewed literature.

### **3 Methodology**

#### **3.1 Participants**

The research included 335 high school teachers in the eastern coast of the Peninsular of Malaysia, Kuala Terengganu district. In the preliminary process of data collection, the questionnaires were distributed to 419 teachers. However, the number was reduced to 335 (79.95% answer rate) due to the missing and incomplete data as well as non-returnable questionnaires. The minimum response rate of 30% is appropriate according to (Sekaran, 2003). There were 78 male (23.3%) and 257 female participants (76.7%), with the majority of whom were Muslim and Malay (96.4%, N = 323), who were part of the study. A large number of participants were married with children (91.6%, N=307). Participants aged between 31 and 50 years (76.4%, N=256).

#### **3.2 Research Instrument**

Back to back translation from English to Malay was used to translate the instruments (Brislin, 1970). Two well versed in English and Malay independent translators were involved during the translation process. The questions asked in the survey were divided into three major sections.

*Demographic profiling.* Within this segment, participant's demographic background include sex, age, ethnicity, marital status, monthly income and level of education.

The Job Content Questionnaire (JCQ) (Karasek, 1995, 1985) and the translated Malay version (Ibrahim, 2012; Edimansyah, Rusli, Naing and Masalisah, 2006) have been used to assess *job demands, job control and social support*. Some of the examples were "I have enough time to get the job done" (psychological demands that contain 5 items), "I have an opportunity to develop my own special abilities" (job control that contains 9 items) and "My supervisor is successful in getting people to work together" (social support that contain 8 items). The JCQ scale ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). For reverse scoring, there are five negatively response items needed. For this analysis, Cronbach's alpha values were 0.65 for psychological purposes, 0.79 for work security, and 0.84 for social support. The psychological demands scale alpha value ( $\alpha$ ) can be correlated with previous results (Li, Yang, Liu, Xu, & Cho, 2004; Cheng, Luh & Guo, 2003; Ibrahim, 2012) as well as an acceptable minimum trustworthiness index (Nunnally, 1967; Hair, Anderson, Tatham, & Black, 1995),

The 21 elements taken from Lovibond and Lovibond (1995) and Musa Fadzil and Zain (2007) had been used to measure *depression, anxiety and stress*. It is a 4 items Likert scale in the radius from 0 (means never) to 4 (means almost always), plus reliability index with high value (depression,  $\alpha = 0.86$ ; anxiety,  $\alpha = 0.88$ ; pressures,  $\alpha = 0.86$ ). Examples are, "I couldn't seem to feel good at all" for depression, "I felt my mouth was dry" for anxiety, and "I found it difficult to wind down" for stress.

### 3.3 Statistical analysis

The research used version 25 of the Statistical Science Package (SSSP) as a statistical software instrument to evaluate the data. In order to define the demographic characteristics and measurement rates for anxiety, stress and depression of teachers, percentage and frequency were used for the preliminary analysis. The control variables consisting of demographic variables (sex, age, children's number, marital status and work experience) have been used in the regression model to test the predictive model of psychological distress. Subsequently, regression model includes job demands, job control and social support as additive effect in describing variance on psychological distress of teachers.

## 4 Results

### 4.1 Psychological distress among teacher's levels

The severity levels of participants' psychological distress are explained in Table 1. A total of 43.59% (N=146) teachers have reported having severe depressive symptoms while the percentage for having extremely severe symptoms is at 25.69% (N=86). Roughly 0.57% (N=2) and 30.15% (N=101) respectively have mild or moderate symptoms. 82.39% (N=276) are classified as extremely severe and 14.93% (N=50) are in severe class, while the remaining are at mild (0.89%; N=3) and moderate (1.79%; N=6) symptoms in terms of anxiety

symptoms. 93.43% (N=313) of teachers felt stress, with 53.13% of these (N=178) in the mild to moderate category and 40.3% (N=135) being severe to extremely severe category.

**Table 1:** Depression, anxiety and stress among the participants' severity (N=335)

	Depression (%)	Anxiety (%)	Stress (%)
DASS Score			
Normal	-	-	22(6.57%)
Mild	2 (0.57%)	3 (0.89%)	46 (13.73%)
Moderate	101 (30.15%)	6 (1.79%)	132 (39.40%)
Severe	146 (43.59%)	50 (14.93%)	127 (37.91%)
Extremely severe	86 (25.69%)	276 (82.39%)	8 (2.39%)

Reliability and associations between different variables including predictors of job control, job demands and social support together with criterion variables (anxiety, depression, stress) were presented in Table 2. As the expected direction, majority variables were significant and correlated to each other.

**Table 2.** Correlation between all studied variables

	$\alpha$	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Depression	0.86	-					
2. Anxiety	0.88	0.70**	-				
3. Stress		0.86	0.78**	0.73**	-		
4. Job demands (JD)	0.65	0.22**	0.20**	0.21**	-		
5. Job control (JC)		0.79	-0.21**	-0.23**	-0.24**	-0.22**	-
6. Social support (SS)		0.84	-0.07*	-0.07*	-0.07*	-0.01	0.20**

Notes. N = 335. Significance level; \*  $p < 0.05$ ; and \*\*  $p < 0.01$ .

The findings of the analysis for regression are presented in Table 3. The significant predictors for psychological distress of teachers (depression, anxiety and stress) were job demands, job control and social support, as supported by the findings of regression analysis. In estimating depression, anxiety and stress as a whole, the total variance was 10.4%,  $F(8,326) = 10.33$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ; 11.1%  $F(8,326) = 10.41$ ,  $p < 0.001$  and 10.9%  $F(8,326) = 11.99$ ,  $p < 0.001$  respectively as explained in job demands, job control and social support in the regression model.

**Table 3.** Regression analysis in predicting psychological distress results (stress, anxiety and depression)

Variables	Depression $\beta$	Anxiety $\beta$	Stress $\beta$
<i>Control variables</i>			
Gender	0.071 (0.183)	0.093 (0.079)	0.040 (0.449)
Age	-0.039 (0.474)	-0.012 (0.834)	-0.048 (0.403)
Marital status	-0.010 (0.852)	-0.012 (0.821)	-0.005 (0.931)
No of children	-0.014 (0.801)	-0.034 (0.542)	-0.005 (0.932)
Working experience	0.086 (0.114)	-0.095 (0.105)	-0.054 (0.356)
<i>Predictor variables</i>			
Job demands	0.171 (0.002)**	0.143 (0.000)***	0.157 (0.004)**
Job control	-0.197 (0.000)***	-0.222 (0.008)**	0.234 (0.000)***
Social support	-0.110 (0.043)*	-0.109 (0.044)*	-0.122 (0.024)*
$R^2$	0.104	0.111	0.109
$\Delta R^2$	0.085***	0.085***	0.098***

Notes:  $\beta$  = standardised regression coefficient; N= 335. Significance level: \*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ ; ( ) = exact  $p$ -value.

## 5 Discussion and conclusion

The prediction of psychological distress (depression, anxiety and tension) among teachers was investigated in the current research. Psychological distress was predicted through job demands, job control and social support as shown in the results. Teachers who have excessive job demands, low job control and low social support will more likely to have high psychological distress as indicated by the results. This research supported the concept of psychological distress presents in the jobs described as high demands, lack of control and support which corroborate with previous research (Ter Doest, Maes, & Gebhardt, 2006; Bakker & Demerouti, 2007) and is aligned with JDC and JDCS models. The demands for jobs have short-term and long-term effects on the psychological burden of workers due to high depression, anxiety, and stress (Podsakoff, LePine, & LePine, 2007; Jex, 1998).

Due to job demands, teachers are highly riskier to suffer from depression, and this is in aligned with the previous study (Ferguson, Frost, & Hall, 2012; Wenzel & Battle, 2018; Hindman & Bustamante, 2019). The job demands also include the large number of students that needed to be taught, teaching assignment and administrative works that are constantly changing. In addition, teaching in a high-profile school is also a risk for increasing psychological distress for teachers, because they are facing the pressure to maintain school performance. The reduced risk of psychological distress is associated with high job control (Yaakub & Sidik, 2014). A loss of decision-making ability makes the teachers more vulnerable to mental disorders (Iennaco, et al., 2010; Yu, et al., 2008; Kitaoka-Higashiguchi, et al., 2002). Low job control are also found to contribute to mental disorder (Häusser, Mojzisch, Niesel and Schulz-Hardt, 2010).

Teachers can creatively and collaboratively solve problems while also find the strength to help ease workloads when there is a positive social support in the workplace. In Japan, Korea and China, workers also face high risk of depression due to low social assistance (Saijo, et al., 2016; Letvak, Ruhm, & McCoy, 2012). Depression among employees may be minimized by a higher social support because they have the ability to defend themselves against the adverse effects of life (Sargent & Terry, 2000; Cooper, Dewe, & O'Driscoll, 2001). As a social unit that can help to improve mental health in a meaningful way and decrease depression (Esnard & Mohammed, 2014), maximum focus is therefore critical in providing teachers with a social support. This is due to teachers need good support, encouragement and effective communication from school leaders (Yaacob, 2012; Zahlan, 2012).

There has been a few current research focusing on psychological distress emerged based on JDC and JDCS models. This study contribution therefore lies in evaluating the Western-developed models within Malaysia context, an Eastern and multicultural respondent. Moreover, the extension of the generalization of the Western model may enrich the field literature.

Limitations of the study need to be considered despite the study's contribution, including generalising the findings to all teachers in Malaysia. This is because the chosen respondents were mainly from one of the districts in Terengganu. Moreover, concern for a common methodology preference should be addressed because the study used self-reported data and also cross-sectional design (Podsakoff, Mackenzie & Podsakoff, 2012; Coles & Maxwell, 2009). Hence, Zapf, Dormann & Frese (1996) stated that a longitudinal research design would be beneficial for strengthening the results of the psychological distress prediction and further study of causal relationships. A significant understanding of the predictors psychological distress of Malaysian teachers may be achieved by undertaking more than one period of data collection.

In conclusion, this study showed how important it was to understand the combination of reduced employment requirements, improvement of job control and social support to alleviate teachers' psychological distress. Organizations, especially school administrators are suggested to protect their employees through a psychosocially positive work environment, including low job requirements, high task management and social support.

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