



# Perceived workplace discrimination, coping and psychological distress among unskilled Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia



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## ABSTRACT

Migrant workers face many migration-related stressors that may affect their mental health. This study examines workplace discrimination in relation to psychological distress, and the role of coping among unskilled Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia. In a sample of 119 workers (39 males and 80 females), results of a hierarchical regression analysis showed that workplace discrimination was positively related to psychological distress. Both problem-oriented coping and emotion/avoidance coping were predictive of distress. While problem-oriented coping was associated with lower distress, emotional/avoidance coping was related with higher distress levels. In addition, low emotion/avoidance coping was found to buffer the adverse effect of discrimination on distress. These results are discussed in relation to the literature on coping as well as the social-cultural context of the migrants and the host country.

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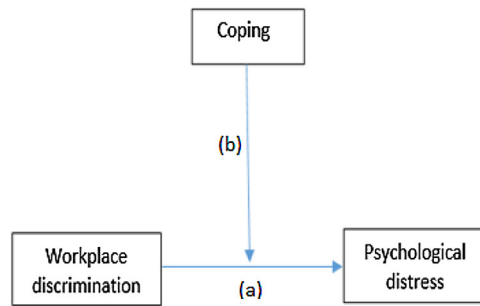
## 1. Introduction

Migrant workers are the cornerstone of economic growth and development in many nations. Migrant workers are individuals of foreign nationals who work outside their home country in skilled and unskilled jobs. A common reason for migration is to seek better economic opportunities than the country of origin (Talib et al., 2012). But as outsiders in the migrated country, migrants become members of a disadvantaged or lower status group, subjecting them to the possibility of being discriminated (Major, Mendes & Dovidio, 2013). Evidence suggests that nearly 40 percent of all migrants may experience some form of discrimination in their workplace (Girling, Liu, & Ward, 2010). Discrimination is related to worse self-perceived health (e.g., Kelaher et al., 2008), higher prevalence of chronic diseases (e.g., Gee et al., 2007) and increase in mental health problems (e.g., Hammond, Gillen & Yen 2010). Thus, the ability to cope with this discrimination and other migration-related stressors such as the sense of loss of family and home, along with social and economic problems (Bhugra, 2004), is crucial for migrants to ensure their well-being.

Malaysia has the highest number of migrant workers in Southeast Asia, making up approximately 20% of the country's workforce (Malaysia Digest, 2015). Currently, it has 2.9 million documented and about another 3 million undocumented workers (Malaysia Digest, 2015), with the majority from Indonesia (50.9%, cited in Ahmad, 2012). The Malaysian government differentiates between two categories of migrant workers—skilled professional and technical, and semi-skilled or unskilled.

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- (a) Relationship between workplace discrimination and distress (Hypothesis 1)  
 (b) Moderator effect of coping on the discrimination-distress relationship (Hypothesis 2)

**Fig. 1.** Conceptual model of stress and coping in the prediction of distress.

The former group is small, regulated and normally without much problems. The latter group, however, consists of a large pool of undocumented workers who have entered the country illegally or have turned into “illegal” workers due to a number of reasons (see Jones, 1996). Most workers in this group work in jobs categorized as the 3D (Dirty, Difficult and Dangerous). Because of their undocumented status, they are more likely to be exploited, e.g., through forced labor and trafficking, verbal and physical abuse, sexual harassment of female workers, and working long hours (Amnesty International, 2010).

The present study examines (i) the relationship between perceived workplace discrimination and psychological distress, and (ii) the role of coping in this relationship, among unskilled Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia. The present study contributes to the literature on migration and coping in two ways. First, in contrast to past studies that have examined individuals who have migrated from Asia to Western societies (e.g., Jibeen & Khalid, 2010; Noh & Kaspar, 2003; Simich et al., 2006), we studied Indonesians who have migrated to Malaysia. Whereas the former examined movement from collectivist to individualist cultures, we examined migration from cultures that are both collectivist. Second, there are differences between Indonesia and Malaysia with respect to traditions and social-political histories, but Indonesians are also similar to Malays, and they share the same Islamic faith. These similarities may, to some extent, attenuate the discrimination-distress relationship that the migrants may face in the host country because coping has been found to be dependent not only on the nature of the stressors and personal resources, but also on social-cultural contexts (Noh & Kaspar, 2003). Note that this individualist-collectivist dichotomy has been insightful in cross-cultural research and has been used as an overarching construct to explain for cultural universality and differences (Hofstede, 1980). But as outlined by Schwartz (1990), this dichotomy is useful only at the cultural level. Their counterparts at the individual psychological level are idiocentrism and allocentrism (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1990, 1993; Triandis et al., 1985), seen more as values that serve individual and collective interests, respectively. However, in the literature, individual-level variables are used to represent individualistic and collectivistic cultures, respectively (e.g., Balcetis, Dunning & Miller, 2008; Kolstad & Horpestad, 2009). As such, in this paper, we maintain the terms individualism and collectivism to refer to individual-level variables.

In the subsequent sections, we present a model that was used as the theoretical framework of the study, followed by relevant findings pertaining to the variables of interest.

### 1.1. Theoretical framework

We used Lazarus and Folkman’s transactional model of stress and coping as the framework of study (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The underlying assumption of the model is that psychological stress occurs when the demands of the situation exceed an individual’s perceived ability to cope. In other words, the model emphasizes fit between a person and environment, and effective coping relates to the quality of fit between environmental demands and the person’s available resources. Based on this model, an immigrant would experience psychological distress when his or her ability to cope (based on the person’s available personal and social resources) is insufficient to deal with or manage discrimination at the workplace. According to Lazarus and Folkman (1984), there are two major coping strategies: problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping. The former involves attempts to change the situation that causes the stress while the latter is directed at regulating emotional responses to the problem.

Utilizing this model, we examined the relationship between workplace discrimination and psychological distress, and the moderator role of coping in this discrimination-distress relationship (Fig. 1).

### 1.2. Perceived workplace discrimination and psychological distress

While a distinction can be made between perceived discrimination and overt discrimination, Pascoe and Richman (2009) in their meta-analytic review found that most studies on discrimination reported participants’ self-report on perceptions of

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