Factors related to psychological well-being of teachers residing in a situation of unrest in Southern Thailand

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Abstract

**Purpose:** The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between coping, sense of meaning, social support, sense of control and psychological well-being of teachers residing in a situation of unrest in Southern Thailand.

**Methods:** The subjects included 240 teachers residing in an area of unrest. Data collection was conducted through the use of the following questionnaires: the Jalowiec Coping Scale, the Meaning in Life Questionnaire, the Interpersonal Support Evaluation List, Perceived Control Questionnaire, and Psychological Well-Being Inventory.

**Results:** The mean age of the subjects was 42.12 years, 73.3% were female, whereas, 26.7% were male. The results showed that 50.83% of participants have moderate psychological well-being, whereas, 49.17% of this group had high psychological well-being. There was a significant relationship between psychological well-being and perceived social support (r = 0.61, p < 0.01), fatalistic coping strategies (r = -0.29, P < 0.01), optimistic coping strategies (r = 0.33, P < 0.01), and sense of meaning (r = 0.19, p < 0.01), represented as 36%, 3%, 5%, and 4%, respectively. Whereas, sense of control (r = 0.42, P < 0.01), confrontive coping strategies (r = 0.25, p < 0.01), and self-reliant coping strategies (r = 0.13, p < 0.05) showed a significant positive correlation with psychological well-being. In addition, evasive coping strategies (r = -0.16, p < 0.05), and emotive coping strategies (r = -0.28, p < 0.01) showed a significant negative correlation with psychological well-being.

**Conclusion:** The findings show that teachers residing in an area of unrest who had high social support, sense of meaning, and used optimistic coping strategies will have higher psychological well-being, whereas individuals using more fatalistic coping strategies will have lower levels of psychological well-being. Consequently, teachers who have good levels of social support, sense of meaning, optimistic coping strategies, and sense of control should be role models in an intervention aimed for promoting psychological health and psychological well-being of teachers residing in an area of unrest.

**Keywords:** psychological well-being; teacher; situation of unrest

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Introduction

A situation of unrest in this study is defined as a human made disaster caused by terrorism or terrorist attacks. This situation started January, 4, 2004, in deep Southern Thailand which comprises 4 provinces and 4 districts of Songkhla province. A situation of unrest is of life–threatening nature itself and unstable, or unpredictable. It is an ongoing situation of stress. It is also comprised of stressful events associated with the mental health and well-being of an individual, especially a person’s psychological well-being. The incidences in the unrest situation have been shown to be ongoing in everyday life. These events have had and still have a huge impact on the lives of the people living in this area. Since the unrest first started, it has caused individuals who reside in the community to experience a deficit in the security of their lives. It has caused a change in lifestyles, for example, it causes uncertainty in individuals’ lives, as well as various other types of stress, particularly in the decline of individuals’ mental health. The decline of mental health of individuals in an area of unrest can occur at different levels. There is the evidence that shows that individuals in an area of unrest, especially teachers residing in this area, will experience mental health problems such as post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, and depression (Prompetch & Narangart, 2009).

Much of the previous research on community disaster situations (i.e., terrorist attacks, missiles attacks) have focused on the mental health status of both short-term psychological reactions to unrest events and long-term psychological reactions, (Bleich, Gelkopf, Melamed & Solomon, 2006) as well as psychological well-being (Adams, Boscarino & Galea, 2006). Several studies have shown that there are a number of variables that explain the well-being of a person facing ongoing terror. The variables include the mental health status and psychological well-being of a victim of terrorist attacks such as coping (Butler et al., 2009), sense of meaning (Steger, Frazier & Zacchaini, 2008), sense of control (Zeidner, 2006), and social support (Adams & Boscarino, 2005). Some researchers have confirmed some variables that are associated with well-being in studies limited to populations who have faced different exposure (such as victims from war, political conflict) and those suffering from terrorist attacks. The population of these studies that have been conducted are Israeli adolescents (Braun-Lewensohn, Celestin-Westreich, Ceslestin, Verte & Ponjaert-Kristoffersen, 2009), adult Israeli residents (Bleich, Gelkopf, Melamed & Solomon, 2006), and different types of exposure such as victims, witnesses, persons who have perceived information from the media, and in different occupations such as soldiers, police, and students.
No study has identified the variables that explain psychological well-being in the context of Thailand. This is especially true in some populations such as Thai teachers who reside in an unrest situation in Southern Thailand. These teachers are one of the targets for terrorist attacks because teachers distribute various types of knowledge and transfer moral education to students in the community or society. Nowadays, most teachers have relocated from this area because they are fearful, anxious, and they do not feel safe. However, some teachers do opt to reside in this unrest area. These teachers can adjust to events and they have resilience of mind. This implies that some teachers residing in the unrest situation in Southern Thailand have psychological well-being.

Because individuals are different in adjusting to and understanding situations and also in the ways of solving problems, these differences make people more diversified in psychological well-being. Psychological well-being is part of quality of life, and mental health. Psychological well-being has been proposed as occurring when a balance between personal needs and environmental demands are attained (Higgins et al., as cited in Amiot, Blanohard & Gaudreau, 2008). Thus, the construct of this concept is capable of measuring the mental health status of individuals. In order to know what is a variable or factor that is related to psychological well-being of teachers residing in the unrest situation in Southern Thailand, the variables in previous studies should be examined.

**Purpose**

Investigating the relationship between coping, sense of meaning, social support, sense of control and psychological well-being of teachers residing in a situation of unrest in Southern Thailand.

**Conceptual Framework**

The stress and coping theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) was used in the framework of this study. This framework mentions that individuals confront a threat in life or life events. They may have psychological well-being, although they are residing in an area of unrest. Psychological well-being of teachers residing in an unrest situation in southern Thailand, is reflected in the positive outcome of psychological adaptation, positive psychological functioning which encompasses a breadth of wellness that includes positive evaluations of oneself and one’s past life, a sense of continued growth and development as a person, the belief that one’s life is purposeful and meaningful, and the possession of quality relations with others. Psychological well-being can be defined as the quality to manage effectively one’s life and surrounding world with a sense of self-determination (Ryff, 1995).
In the midst of terrorism, a number of various factors associated with psychological well-being and positive adaptation have been found through a literature review. These are sense of meaning (Steger, Frazier & Zacchaini, 2008), sense of control (Zeidner, 2006), social support (Adamas & Boscarino, 2005), and coping (Butler et al., 2009). The conceptual framework is shown in figure 1.

![Figure 1 Conceptual framework of study](image)

**Methods**

**The population**

The target population consisted of teachers who are residing in an area of unrest. These teachers are working in schools in the three provinces (Narativat, Yala, and Patanee) and four districts in Songkhla province (Chana, Saba Yoi, Na Thawi, and Hadyai).

**Sample**

The sample was established by purpose sampling from the teachers who met the inclusion criteria: 1) lived or resided in an area of unrest for at least one year, 2) direct experience in confronting a violent situation as a survivor or witness, a victim of an unrest situation as evidenced by being injured, having lost a significant person in the family or being close to the situation, and 3) do not have a history of being admitted to a psychiatric hospital. Sample size: this study recruited 240 teachers.

**Variables and measure**

Coping: coping was assessed by the 60 items of the Jalowiec Coping Scale (Jalowiec, Murphy & Powers, 1977). Sense of meaning: sense of meaning was evaluated by the 10 item Meaning in Life Questionnaire (Streger, Frazier, Oishi & Kaler, 2006). Social support: social support was assessed by the 40 items of The Interpersonal Support Evaluation List (Cohen & Hoberman, 1983). Sense of control: sense of control was assessed by the 20 items of the Perceived Control Questionnaire (Wallhagen, 1992). Psychological well-being is measured by the 42 items of the short version of Psychological Well-being (Ryff, Keyes & Hughes, 2004).
**Procedure**

Data was gathered via a self-report inventory by a researcher and 8 research assistants from the second week of June 2012 to the last week of September 2012.

**Statistical analyses**

Pearson’s correlation between coping, which is further defined as the type of coping strategies, and psychological well-being, between sense of meaning, sense of control and psychological well-being, between social support and psychological well-being were performed. This was followed by stepwise multiple regression.

**Results**

**Demographic data**

The personal information of the sample population exposed to terrorist attacks is presented as follows. Participants were 240 teachers (73.3% female), ranging in age from 21 through to 60 years old (M = 42.12, SD = 10.29), and married (63.8 %), (salaries range from 5,000 through to 80,000 baht per month. (M = 2578.54, SD = 14434.34), religious affiliation (52.1% Islamic), education levels (83.3 % bachelor degree), position (72.5% government official), length of time in government service ranging from 1 through to 40 years of service (M = 14.95, SD = 11.72), location of workplace (37.9 % Yala province), period of affecting situation ranging from 3 months through to 15 years (M = 5.78, SD = 2.77), reason for working in the area (66.2% have lived in this area for a long time), experience of an assault by a terrorist (40.4 % confronting direct experience), the kind of direct experience (36.7% were close to occurring events), having been seriously injured in that event (19.6%), number of times having experienced an assault by a terrorist ranging from 1 through to 10 times (M = 0.85, SD = 1.51).

**The relationships between coping, sense of meaning, social support, sense of control and psychological well-being.**

After using Pearson’s correlation between the key variables and psychological well-being, the results revealed that 9 variables were associated with psychological well-being, as shown in Table1.

Confrontive coping strategies, optimistic coping strategies and self-reliant coping strategies were coping strategies that correlated positively with psychological well-being (r = 0.250, p < 0.01; r = 0.329, p < 0.01; r = 0.127, p < 0.05, respectively), whereas, evasive coping strategies, fatalistic coping strategies, and emotive coping strategies correlated negatively with psychological well-being (r = -0.157, p < 0.05; r = -0.291, p < 0.01; r = -0.282, p < 0.01 respectively).

Sense of meaning, sense of control, and social support correlated positively with psychological well-being (r = 0.186, p < 0.01; r = 0.421, p < 0.01, r = 0.605, p < 0.01, respectively).
Table 1
Correlations of sense of meaning, sense of control, social support, coping and outcome variable with psychological well-being

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>r</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sense of meaning</td>
<td>0.186**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of control</td>
<td>0.421**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social support</td>
<td>0.605**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coping</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confrontive coping strategies</td>
<td>0.250**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evasive coping strategies</td>
<td>-0.157*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Optimistic coping strategies</td>
<td>0.329**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fatalistic coping strategies</td>
<td>-0.291**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotive coping strategies</td>
<td>-0.282**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Palliative coping strategies</td>
<td>0.104**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supportive coping strategies</td>
<td>0.065**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-reliant coping strategies</td>
<td>0.127*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Significant at p<0.05, ** p<0.01, ***p<0.001, ns = non significant

Regression analyses
Multiple regression was performed to assess the relative contribution of coping, sense of meaning, social support, and sense of control to meet psychological well-being. The final regression model is presented in Table 2.

Table 2
Summary of regression analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictors</th>
<th>β(SE)</th>
<th>t</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sense of meaning</td>
<td>0.101(0.188)</td>
<td>2.092*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of control</td>
<td>0.110(0.132)</td>
<td>0.834</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social support</td>
<td>0.474(0.101)</td>
<td>7.485***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coping</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confrontive coping strategies</td>
<td>0.137(0.362)</td>
<td>1.690ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evasive coping strategies</td>
<td>-0.098(0.292)</td>
<td>-1.342ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Optimistic coping strategies</td>
<td>0.191(0.404)</td>
<td>2.567*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fatalistic coping strategies</td>
<td>-0.141(0.603)</td>
<td>-2.112*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotive coping strategies</td>
<td>-0.068(0.557)</td>
<td>-1.026ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Palliative coping strategies</td>
<td>-0.108(0.601)</td>
<td>-1.644ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supportive coping strategies</td>
<td>-0.086(0.541)</td>
<td>-1.389ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-reliant coping strategies</td>
<td>-0.084(0.464)</td>
<td>1.124ns</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001 ns = non significant

From Table 2, variables that can predict psychological well-being include social support, sense of meaning, optimistic coping strategies, and fatalistic coping strategies. Social support contributed to high psychological well-being (β = 0.474, t = 7.485, P < 0.001). Sense of meaning contributed to higher levels of psychological well-being (β = 0.101, t = 2.092, P < 0.05). Optimistic coping strategies contributed to higher levels of psychological well-being (β = 0.191, t = 2.567, P < 0.05). Less fatalistic coping strategies contributed to higher levels of psychological well-being (β = -0.141, t = -2.112, P < 0.05).
Discussion

The results reveal that factors related to psychological well-being in the regression equation include social support, optimistic coping strategies, fatalistic coping strategies, and sense of meaning. All these factors account for about 49% of psychological well-being. Social support, fatalistic coping strategies, optimistic coping strategies and sense of meaning can explain psychological well-being at approximately 36%, 3%, and 5% and 4%, respectively.

Social support

Individuals who perceived more social support have better psychological well-being. One possible reason for this result is that social support stimulates individuals and provides them with a sense of caring, love, understanding, acceptance, and they have people they can consult with their troubles, conflict, suffering or distress (Adams & Boscarino, 2005). Also they have people who can encourage them and provide emotional strength. This contributes to individuals having good adjustment. The results of this study are congruent with the study by Adams and Boscarino (2005) which found that social resources and self-esteem were associated with better mental health.

Optimistic coping strategies

Individuals who use a higher level of optimistic coping strategies experience better psychological well-being after facing a crisis situation. One explanation is the function of optimistic coping strategy in an uncontrollable situation changes the state of an uncontrollable event to a controllable event. This strategy can reduce arousal and simultaneous processing of information from the environment, especially, information about events that creates negative feelings such as fear, anxiety (Miller, 1985 as cited in Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). Another explanation is that teachers may be dispositional optimistic persons who have a tendency to have a habitual inclination. The cause of the optimistic person to have a hopeful view of future events may well stem from a positive interpretation of the present (Affect & Tennen, 1996). The optimist believes that adversity can be treated successfully and this conveys a feeling of a sense of control over the situation. The result of this study corresponds with the study conducted by Zeidner& Hammer (1992) which found that dispositional optimism (future orientation thinking) correlated to less anxiety, less depression and less physical symptoms as well as better mental health. It also predicted positive effects.

Fatalistic coping strategies

Teachers who used less fatalistic coping strategies had better psychological well-being. One explanation for this is the educational level of teachers. Education is one factor that influences a person to perceive a situation as a threat or challenge and cope in different ways. Most of the teachers in this study had an education level...
at bachelor degree level (83.3 %). Education reflects intellectual function. A higher level of education helps teachers to have an intellectual level to be able to consider with reason and understand the environment or reactions from others correctly. This leads to being able to think about different ways to handle a situation, and to prevent danger that may befall them. Consequently, they can overcome difficulty and it may enhance psychological well-being. This is congruent with Butler’s et. al. (2009) who found that greater psychological well-being was associated with fewer negative worldview changes, less emotional suppression, and less denial and self-blame.

**Sense of meaning**

Teachers who have more sense of meaning had better psychological well-being. In this study, sense of meaning focused on situation meaning. The first explanation is the kind of teachers’ violent situational appraisal. Participants who challenge appraisal of events use cognition and positive interpretation as sense of meaning to deal with the problem. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) mention that challenge and threat appraisal have their own distinct patterns of coping. Challenge appraisal may occur from the experience that the individual used to confront events or/and the individual may acquire knowledge from a program. When a person interprets the event in alignment with their broader comprehension of the world and life, they find meaning (Park & Folkman, 1997). Consequently, it becomes beneficial to the individual’s life and mentality.

The evidence shows that teachers think and feel that working in an unrest area is a sacrifice for all people so they have a responsibility and are concerned about students who are poor yet still want to have the opportunity to study. These teachers are important for the children’s education so they need to live in the area. Although they live amongst dangerous events, they still resided in the area which defines their meaning in life. This study is congruent with the work of Steger, Frazier & Zacchini (2008) who found that meaning in life related to positive outcomes or positive life changes.

Other factors (such as sense of control) were only moderately related to better psychological well-being of teachers. The possible cause of feeling more sense of control over the situation is teachers may be familiar with the situation (such as cause, methods to protect oneself-use security guards during journey to school) because it has happened for several years. They learn many ways to protect their body and mind from events. Evidence shows that there is an organization for teachers in the three affected provinces. This organization helps as well as advocates for teachers in the area. These reasons make teachers feel more sense of control over the situation, and have good adjustment to events. This is congruent with Zeidner (2006) who found that sense of control over the severity of a situation or perceived control was associated with high positive affectivity and fewer post-traumatic symptoms, less physical symptoms, and less stress.
Conclusion

In summary, the findings demonstrate a positive relationship between social support, sense of meaning, optimistic coping strategies and psychological well-being, whereas, fatalistic coping strategies negatively correlated with psychological well-being. These factors can account for psychological well-being in teachers’ residing in an unrest situation. Thus, the suggestion is focused on these factors of more social support, more sense of meaning, more optimistic coping strategies; and less fatalistic coping strategies can help adaptation in stressful events such as terrorism.

Implications

Teachers residing in an unrest situation are at very high risk of developing mental health problems because they work and function in potentially stressful events. So it is more important to service them to be more mentally and physically fit, have a strong mind or integrity of mind so to prepare them for the likelihood of confronting a stressful event. Thus, the involved person should practice the following:
- self-help groups for victims or family of victims should be established in order to help each other such as giving encouragement.
- providing a support person to teach coping strategies such as optimistic coping strategies as well as sense of meaning or meaning in life. Especially, assisting the teachers to seek what is their primary motivation of their life, to find positive experiences, and learn from the experience to have the best future.

In addition, the limitations include that of methodology as this is a cross sectional study. A longitudinal study should be conducted to measure factors such as coping which is an adaptive process will be more effective.

References


