

SELF-COPING MECHANISM OF SINGLE MOTHERS TO ACHIEVE FINANCIAL SECURITY IN LIFE

Siti Yuliandi Ahmad^a,
Mohamad Fazli Sabri^b,
Husniyah Abd Rahim^c
Syuhaily Osman^c

ABSTRACT

Financial security from the consumer perspective is linked to the level of savings, the ability of individuals to meet an emergency, the adequacy of financial resources in retirement and the availability of income. Stress occurs when the individual is faced with a higher demand that exceeds the individual financial resources. The stressor event such as loss of spouse, divorce, disability of spouse also might lead to the financial strains. Thus, from health and psychological aspect of self-coping mechanism, it is how the individual's effort to manage financial strains. This study focused on the self-coping mechanism of single mothers and their contingency strategies to achieve financial security. The relationship between self-coping mechanisms and financial security provide better understanding on cognitive, financial and behavior of single mothers. The significant positive relationship between self-coping mechanisms and financial security indicated that self-coping mechanisms are compensatory coping in which individuals adopt a problem-focused approach in facing stressor events. The academic research, especially consumer science researchers and non-profit organization could incorporate these elements of social support to encourage positive self-coping mechanism among single mother in order to achieve better financial security.

Keywords: self-coping mechanism, financial security, Malaysia, single mothers, female-headed households

1. Introduction

Women's education level has improved and fertility rates have declined as more and more women participate in the labour force and fulfill the growing demand in the market. Besides, an increased participation of working women would also be influenced by several factors such as economic growth, education and social norm (Verick, 2014) However, it is quite common that, married working women quit the jobs after the first child is born to become full-time housewives (Fortuijn & Ostendorf, 2004). Yet, the real challenge is when stress encounter events happened in their life. Married women face the biggest challenges from transactional events such as the demise of a spouse, divorce of abandonment by the husband as well as absence of spouse due to emigration. The life-changing events influence financial strains that might affect physical, mental, and emotional health (Choi, 2009). The higher demands in the household to make ends meet and to maintain or achieve the standard of living cause stress to women who are head households. Thus, the challenge to cope with the higher cost of living and to allocate resources to make ends meet has increased particularly if women are the sole breadwinner of the family. Women as heads of households have the responsibility to support the family's daily needs and thus might be faced with several challenges in life. The financial strains occurs in the households affect the coping strategies of single mothers.

Single women as the head of households face lots of challenges as there is absence of male support, inadequate income and savings, lack of access to education, training and lack of assets (Buvinic & Gupta, 1997; Gellman, 1999; Horrell & Krishnan, 2007; Ifad, 1999; Jalihah, 2004; Nor Aini & Selvaratnam, 2012; Ramaprasad, 2009). There has been an increase of female-headed households from 423,200 in 1970, to 444,000 in 1980, 653,500 in 1991, to 663,300 in 2000 (Ministry of Women Family and Community, 2013). Furthermore, the number of single mothers in Malaysia in 2010 increased to a total of 104,991 (80.6%) compared to 2000 (KPWKM, 2015). It was reported in the 2010 population survey that a total of 235,240 women or 1.7% of the total population was single mothers (KPWKM, 2015). Overall, this worrying trend lends weight to the crucial importance of this current study on female-headed households and the challenges they faced to achieve financial security in life.

On the other hand, financial security is often linked to the level of savings, the ability of individuals to meet an emergency, the adequacy of financial resources in retirement and the availability of income (Haines, Godley, Hawe, & Shiell, 2009; Lange, Prenzler, & Zuchandke, 2012a; Mahal, Seshu, Mane, & Lal, 2012; Suwanrada, 2009; Swami, Tovée, & Furnham, 2008). Financial security is not determined by the level of resource only, but also by the financial literacy, financial practices and the ability of female-headed households to maintain a given amount of resources towards different kinds of consumption (Corman, Noonan, & Reichman, 2012; Lusardi & Mitchell, 2007; Mahal et al., 2012). The contradicting situation of financial security is the struggle to meet the current living standard which leads to financial vulnerability (Finney & Jentsch, 2008). That is financial strains of female-headed households to fulfill the excess demand, especially with scarce financial resources.

Thus, financial strains lead to coping strategy of female-headed households. There are several self-coping mechanisms involved to cope with the financial strains. According to Alamgir, Naheed, and Luby (2010) there are several coping behaviors of extremely poor households in Bangladesh. The study examined coping strategies adopted by the families to manage the household expenditure for children admitted with pneumonia in a hospital in Bangladesh. The result showed that 76% of the families managed the expenditure by borrowing money, mortgaging or selling assets while 64% had to borrow the full cost of hospitalization and 10% borrowed from the formal sector with a monthly interest rate of five to 30%. The burden was highest for the people from the poor income strata. In addition, to repay their debts, 22% of families reported that they would work extra hours and 50% planned to reduce spending on food and education for their children. Likewise, Hamilton, Shobe, Murphy-Erby, and Christy, (2012) reported divorce or death of family members often triggered a financial emergency that caused female-headed households to adopt a certain type of coping strategies including getting more loans, tightening the budget, getting a second job and borrowing money from family. The financial burden caused difficulty to households and major coping mechanism by families' including spending household savings, borrowing money and or selling or mortgaging assets. Similarly, Avison, Aneshensel, Schieman, and Wheaton (2010) reported the self-coping mechanisms as compensatory coping in which individuals focused on problem-focused strategies during the stressor events.

Thus, this study focused on the self-coping mechanism and financial security of single mothers as the head of households. Self-coping mechanisms include strategy use by female-headed households in handling the financial strains. Coping also includes an on-going element of cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage psychological stress (Folkman, Lazarus, Schetter, DeLongis, & Gruen, 1986; Lazarus, 1993). Two methods were used, which were the problem solving coping or emotion solving coping (Caplan & Schooler, 2007). The socio-demographics of age, income, education level and marital status of the respondent affect the type of self-coping mechanism used in financial strains (Chou & Chi, 2001). The lower socio-economic status such as lower income, elderly people, and lower education lead to more emotion-focused coping during financial strains than problem-focused coping (Aranda & Lincoln, 2011; Caplan & Schooler, 2007). The research gap for this study is the coping strategy that is the self-control during financial strains also acts as a coping mechanism from the cognitive appraisal of the individuals. Additionally, the higher self-control among the elderly leads to a more positive appraisal of the financial difficulty (Chou & Chi, 2001). The type of stress encountered during the cognitive appraisal process also affects the type of coping that the individual adopts (Folkman et al., 1986). Thus, the objective of this study is to investigate the causal relationship between self-coping mechanisms and financial security among single mothers in Malaysia.

2. Literature Review

Financial security

Women play a vital role and function in the market as they have their own voice and are being heard more and thus play a very active role in various fields (IPPBM, 2012). Still, women are less confident than men about their financial futures, knowledge of retirement needs, and on-going financial situations (Hira & Loibl, 2009). Furthermore, there is a significant difference in economic well-being and financial behaviors of men and women (Murphy, 2013). Besides, women generally have lower levels of income (Department of Statistic Malaysia, 2015), wealth and in addition spend as many as five more years than men in the retirement period due to their longer life expectancies (Gottschalck, 2008)

Financial security issues have been discussed by previous researchers (Burt & Cohen, 1989; Corman, Noonan, Reichman, & Schultz, 2012; Haines et al., 2009; Hamilton et al., 2012; Howell, Kurai, Yin, & Tam, 2013; Lange, Prenzler, & Zuchandke, 2012b; Mahal et al., 2012). However, up to the date, this research was conducted, there have not been many types of research on this topic by local researchers (Faizah, 2013; Kotwal & Prabhakar, 2009; Mohd Taib & Noor Baiduri, 2011). Few studies in the Malaysian context for example from Lee (2002) only focused on social security in Malaysia, and Rohayu et al. (2000) focused on poverty among female-headed households in Malaysia. Female-headed households have become increasingly associated with poverty and higher dependency (Buvinic & Gupta, 1997). Female-headed households rely on public support financial aids and sometimes on children to cope with scarce financial resources (Mahal et al., 2012; Povich, Roberts, & Mather, 2014). Lack of financial resources and higher dependency might lead female-headed households to the poverty line.

Self-coping mechanisms

Hamilton, Shobe, Murphy-Erby, and Christy (2012) reported that the heads of household had engaged in several short and long-term strategies to help make ends meet. The strategies used, including borrowing money, and thus creating long-term financial burdens; other approaches include taking a second job and tightening their budget that offers fewer long-term difficulties. This is contrary to what has been reported by the United Nations (2001) on the type of coping strategies by single women which involve manipulative informal sector work, including pushing children into child labor, begging and worse, sex work. Despite the mushrooming of studies on antecedents of financial security (Haines et al., 2009; Lange et al., 2012b; Mahal et al., 2012; Miron-shatz, 2009; Suwanrada, 2009). The health and psychological aspect of self-coping mechanisms and financial security as the outcome have not been studied before.

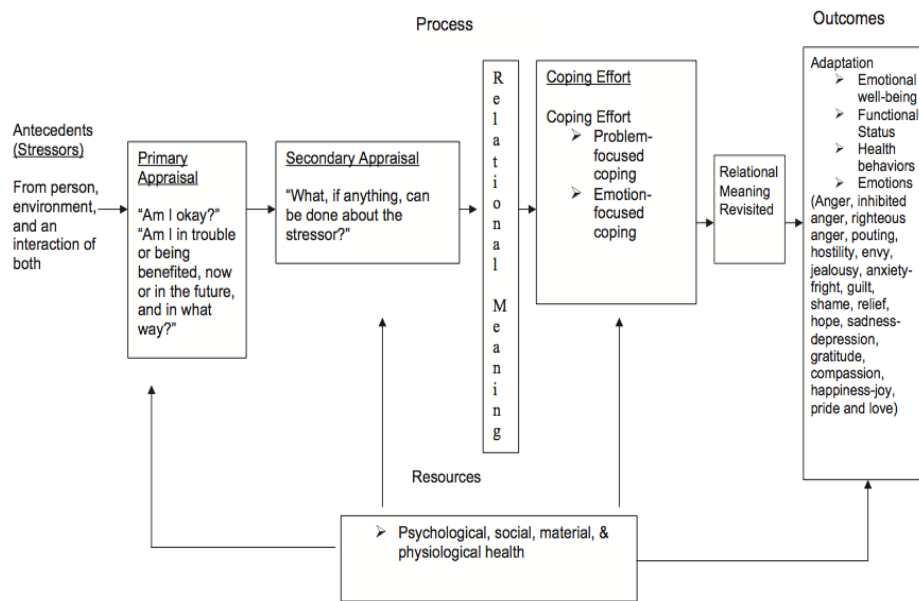


Figure 1: Transactional Model of Coping and Stress
(Source: Lazarus & Folkman (1984) derived from Ozier et al., 2007).

There are three stages involved in Cognitive of Stress and Coping Theory consisting of primary appraisal, coping process, and encounter outcome. The primary appraisal is when the stress encounters happen and affect the coping process. The coping process consists of the problem coping and the emotion coping, whereas, the final outcome is the desirable outcome that individuals perceived as a satisfactory or non-satisfactory outcome. Moreover, as proposed by Lazarus (1993) the coping process is capable of mediating the stress encounter of financial strains to achieve the desired outcome. Self-coping mechanisms include strategy use by female-headed households in handling the financial strains. Coping also includes an ongoing element of cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage psychological stress (Lazarus, 1993). Two methods were used, which were the problem solving coping or emotion solving coping (Caplan & Schooler, 2007). The socio-demographics of age, income, education level and marital status of the respondent affect the type of self-coping mechanism used in financial strains (Chou & Chi, 2001). The lower socio-economic status such as lower income, elderly people, and lower education lead to more emotion-focused coping during financial strains than problem-focused coping (Aranda & Lincoln, 2011; Caplan & Schooler, 2007). The self-control during financial strains also acts as a coping mechanism from the cognitive appraisal of the individuals. Additionally, the higher self-control among the elderly leads to the more positive appraisal of the financial difficulty (Chou & Chi, 2001). The type of stress encountered during the cognitive appraisal process also affects the type of coping that the individual adopts (Folkman et al., 1986). Up to the date, there no prior study on personal finance investigate self-coping mechanisms as one of the variable that influence financial security.

3. Method

A data from Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development from 2010 to June 2015 show that there were 235,000 single mothers in Malaysia (MWFCD, 2015a). The sample consisted of all female heads of households in Malaysia and the unit of analysis was the single mothers that met three criteria, namely (1) mother who has been divorced but still receives child support; (2) a wife who becomes head of the family to make a living, because husband is unable to work due to illness and there are dependent children; (3) women who adopt a child or have a child out of wedlock.

The method in this study was a multi-stage random sampling according to the Malaysia landscape which is divided into two main sections: Malaysia (West Malaysia) and East Malaysia (Sabah and Sarawak). First, the sample selected by the strata is divided into six zones in Malaysia, comprising the north, west, south, and east (West Malaysia); and Sabah and Sarawak (East Malaysia). In West Malaysia the northern region consists of Kedah, Penang, Perak and Perlis; central region consists of Kuala Lumpur, Selangor and Negeri Sembilan; Southern region consists of Malacca and Johor; east coast region consists of Pahang, Terengganu and Kelantan. However, East Malaysia consists of zone Sabah (Sabah and Labuan) and zone Sarawak.

At the second stage, six states in Malaysia were randomly selected which were Kuala Lumpur, Pahang, Melaka, Penang, Sabah and Sarawak. Each state from Malaysia (West and East Malaysia) was targeted to obtain 100 respondents. At the third stage, single mothers associations located in urban areas based on a list of the association in each selected state was randomly chosen. Lastly, tentatively one association was selected from the list of states in an urban area which included Kuala Lumpur, Kuantan (Pahang), Melaka, Penang, Kota Kinabalu (Sabah) and Kuching (Sarawak). Finally, 100 respondents were obtained from each of the participating association.

Data were collected using a questionnaire answered by the respondents. Self-administered is feasible when there is sensitive information in the questionnaire, namely personal financial information, as in this study (Haines et al., 2009; Hayes & Finney, 2013; Miron-shatz, 2009). Self-administered method questionnaire was also used by previous researchers such as Mahal et al. (2012b), Hayes and Finney (2013) and Romli and Selamat (2014). The self-administered questionnaire was conducted due to the nature of the instrument that required female-headed households to provide detailed information such as income, credit lines, loans and most importantly, the financial security of female-headed households.

Instruments

Financial security

Financial security is often linked to the level of savings, the ability of the individual to meet an emergency, the adequacy of financial resources in retirement and the availability of income (Haines et al., 2009; Lange et al., 2012a; Mahal et al., 2012; Suwanrada, 2009; Swami et al., 2008). Financial security is a subjective measure according to the way individuals perceive themselves to be financially, and thus the multiple-item instead of single item format in measuring financial security may lead to a more accurate measure of financial security (Garrett & James, 2013).

For that reason, financial security items were measured by adapting the instruments used by Hayes and Finney (2013) and Finney and Jentsch (2008). Permission was obtained through email from the researchers. The scale consists of 9 questions on a five-point Likert scale from 1 to 5 with 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree, regarding an individual's evaluation of current and future financial positions. The minimum and maximum values for the scale of financial security were between 8 and 40 respectively

Self-coping mechanism

The self-coping mechanism instrument was obtained from Caplan and Schooler (2007) which measures household coping of financial strains along with their categorization as problem-focused or emotion-focused coping responses. Self-coping mechanism during financial strains involved various types of strategies to achieve financial security such as individuals altering the labor market supply by working longer hours, taking on extra jobs, or delay retirements (Bodie, 2002). The instrument measures how the respondent reports of did each of a number of things when they were short of money or worried about finances. The nine items were measured on a five-point Likert scale, 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree, and the minimum value would be 9 and the maximum value would be 45.

Statistical Analysis

SEM uses the model testing method to investigate the causal outcome relationship self-coping mechanism and financial security in the study. AMOS which is the acronym for Analysis of Moments Structures is software for Structural Equation Modelling. AMOS enables the checking for the model in the study and to validate the measurement model of a latent construct using Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA). Three levels are involved in using SEM AMOS, which is to clarify the Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA), to check for the measurement model and to answer the study hypotheses by inspecting the structural model.

4. Results and Discussion

Table 1 summarises the detailed characteristics of socio-demographic and socio-economic distributions of 521 respondents. The descriptive statistics in the table include percentage, frequency distribution, mean score and standard deviation to elaborate the socio-demographic and socio-economics of the respondents.

Table 1: Socio-demographic distribution of respondents (n = 521)

Respondent's background	Frequency	Percentage
Age (years old)		
Below 30	41	7.9
31 – 39	99	19
40 – 49	140	26.9
Above 50	241	46.3
Mean	48.33	
Standard Deviation	12.91	
Ethnicity		
Malay	305	58.5
Chinese	11	2.1
Indian	104	20
Iban	16	3.1
Bidayuh	29	5.6
Melanau	4	.8
Orang Ulu	2	.4
Kadazan Dusun	17	3.3
Murut	2	.4
Bajau	14	2.7
Rungus	1	.2
Others	16	3.1
(Punjabi, Banjar, Kegajan, Sino, Sino-		

Dusun, Bugis, Javanese, Jawa)		
Religion		
Islam	358	68.7
Buddhist	4	.8
Hindu	89	17.1
Christian	65	12.5
Others (Baha'i, Punjabi)	5	1
Reasons being female head of household		
Divorce	250	48
Abandoned by husband	51	9.8
Death of Spouse	215	41.3
Disability of spouse	3	.6
Other (Violence)	2	.4
No. of dependents		
1	99	19
2 – 3	223	42.9
4 – 5	98	18.8
More than 6	101	19.4

The initial sample involved 521 respondents in this study. In Table 1, with respect to the socio-demographic factor of age, it can be seen that 46.3% are in the group aged 50 years and above while those aged 40 to 49 years make up 26.9%. In the group aged 31 to 39 years group it is 19%, and below 30 years of age, it is 7.9%. The mean age of respondents is 48 years, with a standard deviation of 12.9. More than half of the respondents are ethnically Malay (58.5%), followed by Indian (20%), Bidayuh (5.6%), Kadazan Dusun (3.3%), Iban (3.1%), Bajau (2.7%) and Chinese (2.1%) and other Bumiputra from Sabah and Sarawak (3.1%). The study's profile is consistent with the increasing number of single mothers in Malaysia especially from ethnic Malays and above the age of 50 years due to the differences in mortality rate between male and female (Evans, 2011; Faizah, 2013).

Similarly, in terms of religion, more than two-thirds of the respondents (68.7%) are Muslims, followed by Hindus (17.1%), and Christians (12.5%). In addition, there are small numbers of 1% and 0.8% from other religions (Baha'i and Punjabi) and Buddhists. Divorcees make up the highest number of female heads of households with 48%, followed by 41.3% of those whose husbands are deceased. Additionally, 9.8% of these female heads of households have been abandoned by their husbands; 6% have disabled spouses and 4% are victims of domestic violence. Additionally, 42.9% of respondents have two to three dependents in the households, and 19.4% have more than six dependents, 19% have one dependent while 18.8% have four to five dependents in their households.

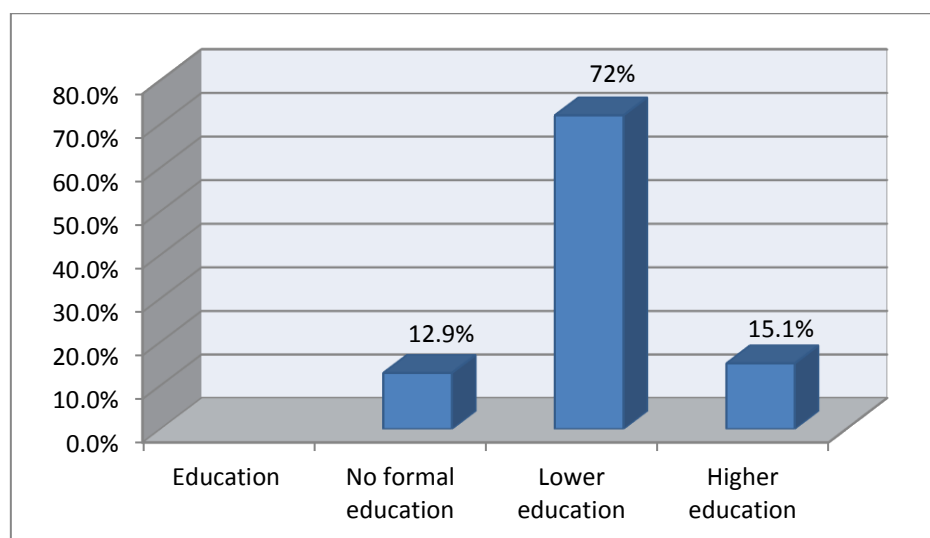


Figure 2. Education level

As can be seen, the majority of respondents (84.9%) do not have higher education. The proportion of respondents that have no formal education is 12.9%, UPSR (15%), PMR/SRP/LCE (23%) and 34% with SPM/MCE. Though do not possess higher educational qualifications, almost three-quarters of them (73.3%) are working and only 26.7% are not working.

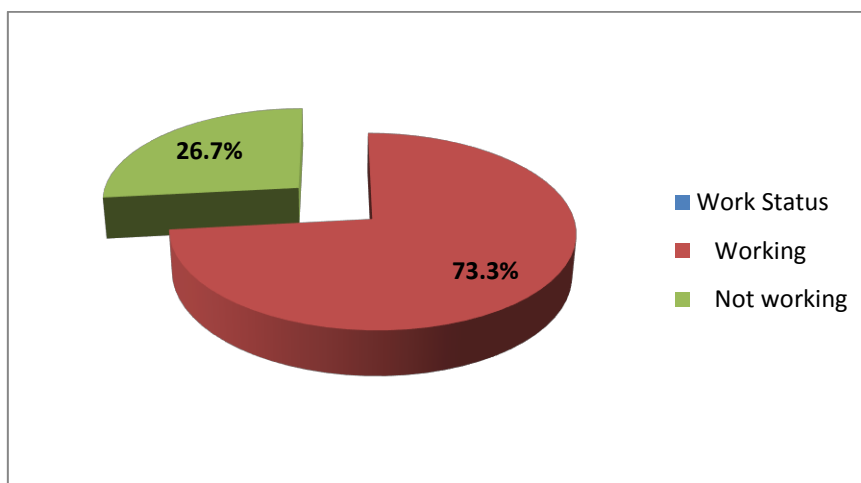


Figure 3. Work Status

Level of financial security and self-coping mechanisms

The descriptive analyses of the specific variables underlying each construct are shown in Table 2. The data were calculated according to the frequency distribution formula (Stockburger, 1996).

Table 2: Levels of each latent construct (n = 521)

Latent Constructs	Frequency	Percentage
<i>Self-coping mechanisms</i>		
Low	183	35.1
Moderate	177	34
High	161	30.9
<i>Financial security</i>		
Low	182	34.9
Moderate	193	37
High	146	28

The total score of self-coping mechanisms as illustrated in Table 2 with the scores divided into three categories of low (1 – 14), moderate (15 – 18) and high (above 19). The findings in Table 2 indicate that a little more than a third (35.1%) of respondents have a low level of self-coping mechanisms, followed by 34% with moderate level of self-coping mechanisms and 30.9% have a high level of self-coping mechanisms. The coping is the way female-headed household's reaction during stressful situations of financial strains. The self-coping mechanisms are the strategies adopted of female-headed households to cope with financial strains in order to achieve financial security. It is the contingency actions that take place after stressful events such as the death of spouse, divorce or abandonment by the husband.

One of the coping mechanisms is the attempt to try and earn more money by working, taking on a second job, or providing services such as childcare (nanny). According to Verick (2014), female participation in the workforce in developing countries as a coping mechanism is in reaction to shocks. Similarly, Alamgir et al., (2010) reported coping strategies include borrowing money, mortgaging or selling assets. That mean with proper self-coping mechanisms during financial strains may provide a cushion for female-headed households to cope with financial difficulty and stability in financial situation.

Meanwhile, for financial security construct, the total scores presented in Table 2 of financial security are divided into three categories of low (1 – 17), moderate (18 – 24) and high (above 25). It shows that 37% of respondents have a moderate level of financial security. This is followed by the lower group of 34.9% and only 28% have the high level of financial security. Financial security levels vary according to the type of household and the countries they are living (Hayes & Finney, 2013). The no prior study related with financial security in Malaysia context up to this study was conducted. The subjective evaluation of financial security is how female-headed households perceive their current and future financial situation.

The major criteria of financial security are the level of savings, the ability of female-headed households to meet the emergency, the adequacy of funds during retirement and the availability of income. It is the actual financial situation of female-headed households which subjectively identify the level of each criterion according to the financial ratios.

Structural equation modelling

The initial measurement model in Figure 4 has unsuccessfully fulfilled the requirement of Goodness of Fitness Indices as in CFA: RMSEA = .112, CFI = 0.826, NFI = 0.805, TLI = 0.800 and $\chi^2/df = 7.507$. The solution to improving the model fit involves checking on the modification indices output to check for the high modification indices between latent, deletion of items with factor loading lower than 0.50 and excluding items with standardized values higher than 2.58 (Byrne, 2010; Zainudin, 2014). Hence, the modification of measurement model performs the deletion of items considering the criteria

discussed above with items in financial security and self-coping mechanism constructs. Figure 5 shows the overall structural model confirmed in the study. According to Hair et al. (2010), three or five items were commonly used in one latent construct to represent the concept. According to Pedhazur (1997) it is better to use a relatively small number of "good items" that could represent the latent constructs, rather than using a large number of poor items

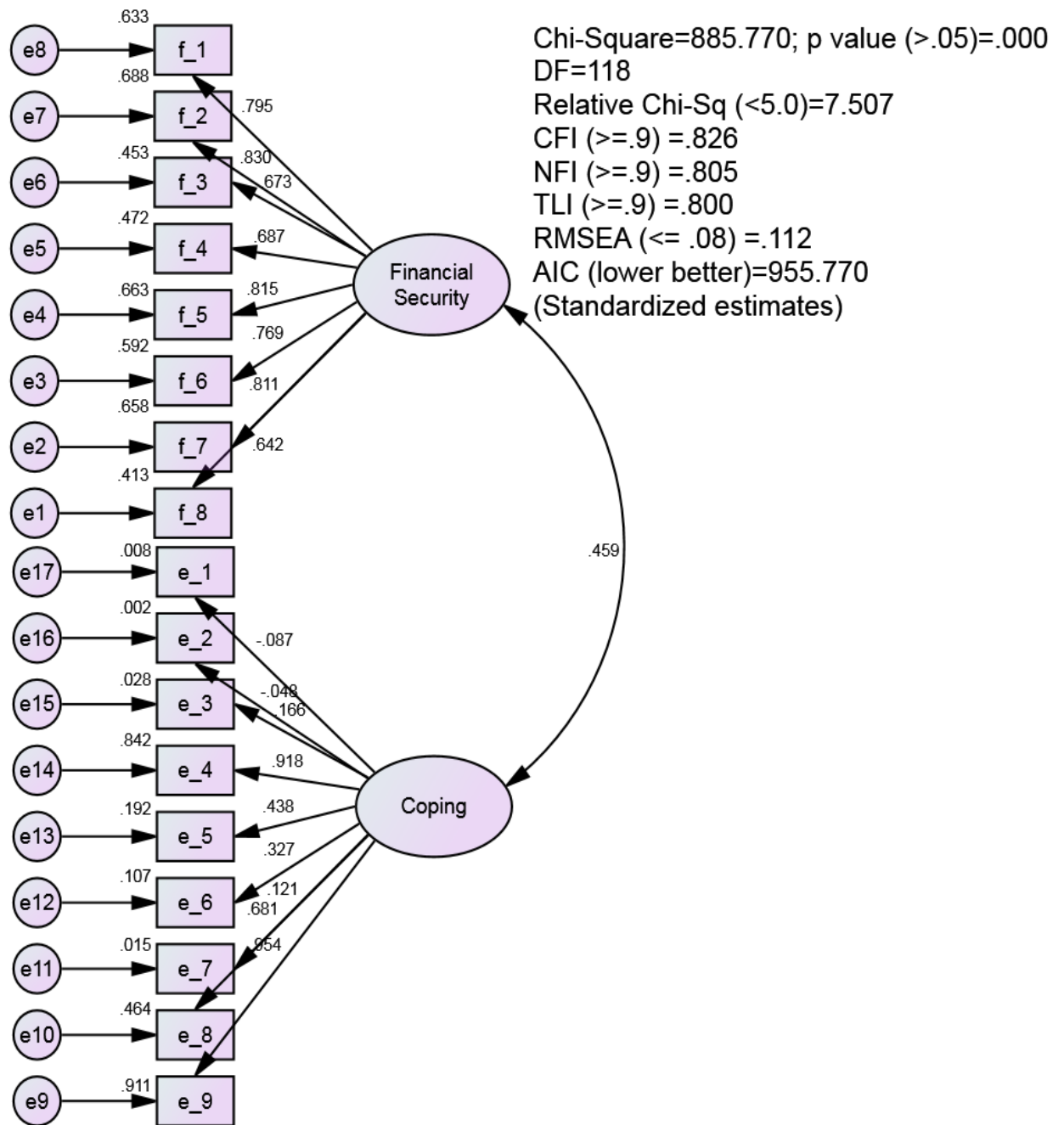


Figure 4. Measurement model

Chi-Square=99.689; p value (>.05)=.000
 DF=26
 Relative Chi-Sq (<5.0)=3.834
 CFI (>=.9) =.974
 NFI (>=.9) =.965
 TLI (>=.9) =.964
 RMSEA (<= .08) =.074
 AIC (lower better)=137.689
 (Standardized estimates)

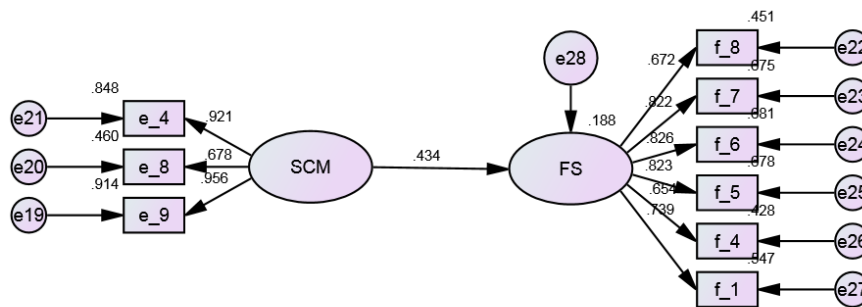


Figure 5. Structural model

Discussions

H1. Self-coping mechanism is a significant variable with financial security of single mothers. According to Figure 4 and 5, the results reveal a positive significant relationship of self-coping mechanisms with financial security ($\beta = 0.434$, C.R. = 8.837, $p=0.000$). The results indicate the probability of getting a critical ratio as large as 4.621 in absolute value are 0.000. At the same time, in any one unit standardized deviation increase in self-coping mechanisms, the financial security will increase by 0.434. Hence, the hypothesis H1 is supported. However, the variance explained is small 0.188 and there are others factors that might contribute to financial security such as social support, financial literacy, and financial practices.

The significant positive relationship between self-coping mechanisms and financial security is in agreement with Avison et al. (2010) who indicated that self-coping mechanisms are compensatory coping in which individuals adopt a problem-focused approach in facing stressor events. According to Folkman et al. (1986), the specific person and situation variable together shape the coping efforts. During financial strains, the female-headed households obtain the necessary self-coping mechanisms in order to achieve financial security in life. The female-headed households in the current study relied on self-coping mechanisms such as accepting the situation, reducing expenses and increasing income. This is in line with the coping strategy by families out of pocket in the study by Alamgir, Naheed and Luby (2010) as part of coping strategy during financial strains, which is to work extra hours, reduce expenses and stop children's tuition. Similarly, individual coping strategies adopted include various activities in order to increase income, control credit and get information about government programmes and banking services that tally with their current financial situation (Buckland, 2010).

The self-coping mechanisms evaluate individual and environmental transactions with a specific focus on the adaptation processes that may worsen or remedy the effect of financial strains (Aranda & Lincoln, 2011). The way self-coping mechanisms influence the financial security in such a way that during financial strains female-headed households cope with scarcity of financial resources by using coping strategies such as (1) trying to increase income by taking a second job, working longer hours, trying to get a raise in salary or (2) reducing expenses by planning ahead in purchasing, buying items during sales, comparing prices for best bargains and using the items wisely to reduce frequent purchasing. Hence, the self-coping mechanisms demonstrate a positive relationship with financial security in the study.

5. Conclusion

The rising cost of living affects mostly the vulnerable groups especially among female-headed households with a number of dependents, with multiple responsibilities in household, children, and work. The scarce financial resources and high commitments to sustain current living standard make it vital to examine the financial security of female-headed households. The integration of financial, cognitive and behavior provide necessary information of financial situation of single mothers.

The results indicated the female-headed households in the study exhibited low (34.9%) to moderate (37%) level of financial security and only 28% have high financial security. The results are not surprising as financial security was one of the concerns in the study by Miron-shatz (2009) with single mothers who were mostly concerned with children's education, making ends meet, and retirement. Meanwhile, a study by Hayes and Finney (2013) revealed the top three concerns for financial security in all of the households in the European countries were the cost of living, level of income from work and level of savings. This is in line with the profile of female-headed households in the current study that consisted of respondents above 50 years of age, with lower education and lower income. Despite the efforts of female-headed households to do informal work such as being a nanny at home, selling kerepek, nasi lemak, and being a farmer (in Sabah and Sarawak), these activities do not guarantee a higher return. Similarly, as reported by Povich, Roberts, and Mather (2014) the female-headed households receive lower income and lower wages with no fringe benefits such as sick leave and health care.

Self-coping mechanisms are used more in situations that are favoured as changeable (Folkman et al., 1986). Financial strains are perceived as situations that can be changed in time. The desirable satisfactory outcome in the study is when the female-headed households achieve financial security. The unsatisfactory outcome is when the female-headed households fail to achieve financial security. Additionally, with a number of dependents and being the sole breadwinner in the family leads the female-headed households to perform the coping strategy such as accepting a thing as they are, to work extra hours or else tighten the budget. The uncertainty in income and unlimited needs and wants influence female-headed households' financial practices and self-coping mechanisms that drive the decision making (cognitive) and behavior of female-headed households. The contingency action of self-coping mechanisms such as working an extra hour, taking the second job or reducing expenses are the characteristics the female-headed households choose. In addition, a study by Neill and Xiao (2012) stated that financial strains caused individuals to change and make positive financial practices, using self-coping mechanisms as the strategy during financial strains.

Perhaps, due to the limited financial resources and lack of financial knowledge among female-headed households, the self-coping mechanisms may be the best way to achieve financial security. The contingency actions were taken by female-headed households during financial strains although not having the high level of financial literacy make it vital for female-headed households to do something to survive. Through the coping process, female-headed households identify the adaptive ways of coping effort (Ozier et al., 2007).

Limitations

This study is in the social sciences domain and thus faced with a number of limitations. One of the limitation in this study is the respondents in the social sciences are humans and human subjects represent fallible instrumentation. However, data derived from the human instruments are analysed continuously and are relied upon for countless numbers of claims and decisions on an on-going basis, so this limitation is relatively common. Target respondents in the study are the female heads of households. Although respondents are physically visible, their status are invisible in society. This is because the single mother with a number of dependents is not easily identified and accessed in the anonymity of the social domain. Thus, identification of the status of female-headed households is only through documentation at the National Registration Department or application for financial and welfare assistance with the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development. There is no visible label to determine single mothers in society and thus the only way to recognise the single mothers or female-headed households in this study is through the single mother associations registered under the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development.

Implications

Moreover, previous studies focused on poverty among female-headed households (Buvinic & Gupta, 1997; Nor Aini & Selvaratnam, 2012) but disregarded their financial and psychological perspectives. The self-coping mechanisms provide a psychological perspective in understanding consumer personal finance. Besides, the current economic volatility with increasing cost of living affects the coping process among female-headed households. The social support received by female-headed households during the stressor situations of financial strains plays a role in helping to adapt to the stressor events. It is apparent the same exact events bring different circumstances to different individuals. Life changing events such as divorce, loss of spouse or abandonment by husband might cause different consequences to different individuals. The coping mechanism that female-headed households choose to face difficulties in life and the likelihood of social support could provide a platform for policymakers, women welfare services agencies, professionals, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and government organizations in developing specific target programmes to enhance the life of female-headed households. The social support programmes for female-headed households that assist in developing financial self-coping mechanisms may create better outcomes for female-headed households. Each single mother association in Malaysia should provide better social support such as group counselling or weekly or monthly activity to encourage single mothers to use their own capabilities to get out from poverty by implementing problem-coping focused strategy.

On the other hand, the welfare system should not only focus on targeting female-headed households in the short term but also develop human capital in the long term (Nor Aini & Selvaratnam, 2012) by helping female-headed households to get

education, training and at the same time suitable jobs to maintain the standard of living and escape poverty. Up till now, the female-headed households depend solely on the support, assistance and welfare programmes provided by the government only and this results in female-headed households continuing to remain poor (Gellman, 1999; Rohayu et al., 2010). The distribution of financial assistance from the welfare system to female-headed households needs to be improved in terms of the screening process, duration of help, and by using a set of standard indicators (Buvinic & Gupta, 1997). It is likely when women become the heads of households, the burden of the family is increased and the welfare intervention system is needed to help female-headed households to get out from poverty.

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Siti Yuliandi Ahmad^a,
^a*Kulliyah of Languages and Management,*
International Islamic University Malaysia

Mohamad Fazli Sabri^b,
^{b,c}*Department of Resource Management and Consumer Studies,*
Faculty of Human Ecology, Universiti Putra Malaysia

Husniyah Abd Rahim^c
^{b,c}*Department of Resource Management and Consumer Studies,*
Faculty of Human Ecology, Universiti Putra Malaysia

Syuhaily Osman^c
^{b,c}*Department of Resource Management and Consumer Studies,*
Faculty of Human Ecology, Universiti Putra Malaysia