

# Parenting Stress and Family Functioning of Commuter Family in Malaysia

Zarinah Arshat<sup>1</sup>, Farah Syuhada Pai<sup>1</sup>, Zanariah Ismail<sup>1</sup> & Rozumah Baharudin<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Human Development and Family Studies, Faculty of Human Ecology, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Malaysia

Correspondence: Zarinah Arshat, Department of Human Development and Family Studies, Faculty of Human Ecology, Universiti Putra Malaysia, 43400 UPM Serdang, Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia. Tel: 603-8946-7139. E-mail: zarinah\_upm@upm.edu.my

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## Abstract

This study aims to determine relationship between parenting stress and family functioning as well as to explore the effects of gender on the aforementioned stress and functioning variables among commuter family. A total of 72 couples of commuter family were involved in this study. Result showed that higher parenting stress relate to less satisfactory family functioning. The study also revealed that there was no significance differences in perception on parenting stress and family functioning between husband and wife of commuter family. Government and non-government sectors can used the results of the study to provide programs that can help commuter families to deal and cope with the challenges. Finally, future research is needed to take in-depth look with other variable exists and replicated with different population.

**Keywords:** commuter family, parenting stress, family functioning

## 1. Introduction

Klis and Mulder (2008) stated that commuter family is one partner lives near his or her work for a specific time and far away from the family home because of commuting distance is too great to travel in daily basis. In Malaysia, the number of commuter family keep increasing due to the advent of economic and urbanization. This development of increased commuting over longer distance will have consequence on individuals, families and societies (Sandow, 2014). However the literature on the effects of commuter family lifestyle on the wellbeing of the individuals and families are very limited especially in Malaysia.

Another key point to remember that most of commute person must be physically separated for prolonged periods of time with their spouses and dependent children (Shrimpton & Storey, 2001) which may affected the paternal physical availability for spending time with their children (Vincent & Neis, 2011). In supporting previous notion, Lyonette and Clark (2009) stated that parents which spent more time for working and engaged in work-related activity such as commuting commonly has less time available to spent with their families and children. One of the key component of family functioning and the most important indicators of family wellbeing is a parental stress (Leon, Roman, Moreno, & Penarrubia, 2015). Abidin (1992) stated that parenting is always occur in stressful situation with a limited resources and determined by multiple characteristics including children, parents and family. Beside that, parent who spent long hours to work and work related activity have been shown increased risk of stress, fatigue anxiety and depression (Lyonette & Clark, 2009).

Most commuter families apply a strategy where at least one parent, usually the mother works in the home-based local scale in order to take care of the family and divided parenting responsibilities between spouses in a weekly timeframes. The commuting spouse usually will back home every week and will overtake the child-care responsibilities and the household tasks in order to share the parenting responsibilities with their spouse on their return. In the sense, the home-based spouse will become a temporary single parent when their spouse away from home (Van der Klis & Karsten, 2009). They are tied up as a single parent, juggling work and family commitments on the day when their spouse is away. They face all the problems that arise without support by their partner. This situation will increase the level of parenting stress. More over, previous study indicate that there are a positive association between parenting stress and children adjustment such as emotional, behavioral and hyperactivity problems in the children (Leon et al., 2015). However, the communication technology

improving enable commuter families keep in touch and maintain intimate relationships with their family by using telephone, internet, and email (Pupko, 2009). Hence, the commuting parents can always discuss and contribute to the parenting responsibilities with the home-based spouse. On the other hand, communication technology also will help family to function well especially among commuter family (Zarinah & Farah Syuhada, 2015).

Previous studies have shown inconsistency results regarding the gender effect on perceive parenting stress and family functioning. Deater-Deckard and Scarr (1996) found that there was no significant differences in parenting stress between mothers and fathers of dual-career American families. In contrast, study by Ma, Wong, Lau and Lai (2011) found mothers tended to have higher parenting stress than fathers. Their study involved Chinese parents with children aged 17 or below in Hong Kong. Regarding the gender effect on perceive family functioning, Ma et al. (2011) revealed that mothers and fathers had same perception in family functioning. However, an American study has shown that there was significant relationship between men and family functioning and not for women (Tiffin, Pearce, Kaplan, Fundudis & Parker, 2007).

Streisand, Kazak and Tercyak (2003) have shown that parents who reported experiencing more difficult parenting stress also reported poorer family functioning for 116 parents of children treated for cancer. In line with the study of Streisand et al. (2003), Ma et al. (2011) and Mitchell, Szczepa and Hauser-Cram (2016) also provided empirical evidence regarding negative relationship between parenting stress and family functioning. Past study (Dyson, 1997) which was conducted among parents of mentally handicapped children and parents in the control group revealed that parents of mentally handicapped children with higher parenting stress was significantly related poorer family functioning. However the interrelationship between these two variables was insignificant for parents in the control group.

Based on the literature review above, we assumed that parenting stress will be negatively associated with family functioning. This study also assumed that wives will have higher parenting stress and perceive poorer family functioning than husbands due to in this study wife is home-based spouse of commuter family who need to take care of the children.

## **2. Research Methodology**

### *2.1 Participants*

Data was taken from Developing Model of Strengths and Stressors of Dual Earner Commuter Family under Fundamental Research Grant Scheme (FRGS) funded by Ministry of Education Malaysia. This study was conducted in all states in Malaysia. The participants in this study were selected using a purposive sampling. Upon data cleaning and exploratory data analysis, a total of 104 couples of commuter family were retained. For the purpose of this study, only 72 Malay couples of commuter family were analyzed. Sample selection was based several criteria which are the couples must have at least one child between 5 and 12 years old and the husband take the commute role and live far apart for his job commitment, whereas the wife live with the children in family home-based.

### *2.2 Procedure*

A set of standardized Malay was used to gather information from the participants. The questionnaire was aimed at collecting information on parenting stress and family functioning as well as demographic information. A briefing on the objectives of the study, the limits to confidentiality and the related procedure were informed to the participants. The permission to participate in the study was also sought from the participants before administering the questionnaire. The questionnaire was self-administered. A token of appreciation was given to the participants upon completion of the questionnaire.

### *2.3 Measures*

*Parenting stress* was assessed with Parental Stress Scale (PSS) (Berry & Jones, 1995). Respondents are response to each of the 18 items in PSS on a five-point scale ranging from 1= strongly disagree to 5= strongly agree. There are ten positive and eight negative items in PSS. Positive items described the emotional benefits and personal development theme of parenthood, whereas negative items described the demands on resources and restrictions themes of parenthood. In order to compute the parental stress score, the positive items have to be reversing scored. The higher the score, the higher the measured level of parental stress. Example of the items in PSS are 'I am happy in my role as a parent', and 'Caring for my children sometimes takes more time and energy than I have to give'. For this study reliability for PSS was .82.

*Family functioning* was assessed with Malaysian Family Strengths Scale (MFSS) developed by Arshat, Baharudin, Juhari, Hasbullah, and Ishak (2012). This scale consist of 27 items to assess seven dimensions of

family strength: 1) Communication (3 items); 2) Love (5 items); 3) Support (4 items); 4) Commitment (4 items); 5) Acceptance (4 items); 6) Religiosity (4 items); 7) Relationship (3 items). The scale responses range from 1= definitely disagree to 6= definitely agree. Some of the items included were “Our family members tolerate each other.” and “Our family members talk openly each other”. The total of family strength score was obtained by adding the scores for all the items where higher score indicate higher family strength. For this study reliability for MFSS was .98.

### 2.3 Data Analysis

Data is analyzed by using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 22 which includes two statistical analyses named descriptive statistical analysis and inferential statistical analysis to illustrate the socio-demographic distributions of the respondents and explore the linear relationships among variables in this study. The independent t-test was used to determine mean differences in parenting stress and family functioning by gender.

## 3. Results

### 3.1 Descriptive Statistical Analysis

#### 3.1.1 Respondents Demographic Characteristics

The age of respondents was found to range from 23 to 57 years old ( $M= 34.15$ ,  $SD=6.86$ ) as shown in Table 1. Most of the respondents (47.2%) have been married more than 7 years ( $M= 6.87$ ,  $SD=6.85$ ). According to the distribution of respondents' education, it can be seen that all the respondents were educated with about 15 years of education ( $M= 15.51$ ,  $SD=2.36$ ). The mean total monthly income of the respondents was RM3838.09 with a standard deviation of 2825.38. This showed that respondents in the present study had monthly income higher than the national averaged individual income in Malaysia which is RM3000 (Department of Statistics, 2011). More than two-third of the respondents (71.5%) work in government sector.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the respondents

Demographic Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage
<b>Age (years)</b>		
<28	28	19.4
28-33	51	35.4
>33	65	45.1
<i>M</i>	34.15	
<i>SD</i>	6.86	
<b>Duration of Marriage</b>		
<2	20	13.9
2-7	56	38.9
>7	68	47.2
<i>M</i>	6.87	
<i>SD</i>	6.85	
<b>Occupation Sector</b>		
Work for government	103	71.5
Work for private company	23	16.0
Own business	7	4.9
Others	11	7.6
<b>Years of Education</b>		
>15	67	46.5
15-17	62	43.1
>17	15	10.4

Demographic Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage
<i>M</i>	15.51	
<i>SD</i>	2.36	
Total Monthly Income		
<RM2500.00	40	31.5
RM2500.00-RM3500.00	42	33.1
>RM3500.00	45	35.4
<i>M</i>	3838.09	
<i>SD</i>	2825.38	
*Missing value = 17		

\*Missing value=respondents not answer the question

### 3.1.2 Commuter Family Context

The results in Table 2 revealed that the respondents remain in commuter family life was on the average of 36 months which is between three years ( $M = 36.69$ ,  $SD = 34.33$ ). There were more than half of the husbands (54.2%) and wives (52.8%) illustrated that sometimes they are feeling stress with commuter condition, only a few of them revealed that they are not stress at all (husbands = 2.8%; wives = 5.8%). At the same time, a small number of husbands (15.3%) who take the commute role complained themselves stress all the time compare to the wives (8.3%) who were not commute but based at home and responsible for the child-care arrangement. The average travelling costs back to family home spent by the husbands were about RM 455.50 per month with a standard deviation of 303.77. There were an equal percentage (50.0%) of the husbands who manage to back home twice and less and more than twice a month ( $M = 2.89$ ,  $SD = 1.72$ ).

Table 2. Commuter family context (N=72)

Commuter Family Context	Frequency	Percentage
Duration of Being Commuter Family		
<11 months	16	22.9
11-36 months	28	40.0
>36 months	26	37.1
<i>M</i>	36.69	
<i>SD</i>	34.33	
*Missing value = 2		
Stress Level of Being Commuter Family		
<u>Husband</u>		
Not at all	2	2.8
Occasionally	11	15.3
Sometimes	39	54.2
Frequently	9	12.5
All the time	11	15.3
<u>Wife</u>		
Not at all	4	5.6
Occasionally	11	15.3
Sometimes	38	52.8
Frequently	13	18.1

Commuter Family Context	Frequency	Percentage
All the time	6	8.3
Costs of Travel Home Per Month		
<RM 250	16	23.2
RM 250-RM 450	27	39.1
>RM 450	26	37.7
<i>M</i>	455.50	
<i>SD</i>	303.77	
*Missing value = 3		
Number of Times Travel Home Per Month		
≤2	35	50
>2	35	50
<i>M</i>	2.89	
<i>SD</i>	1.72	
*Missing value = 2		

\*Missing value=respondents not answer the question

### 3.2 Inferential Statistical Analysis

#### 3.2.1 Relationship between Parenting Stress and Family Functioning

Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient was used to explore and determine the strengths of the relationship between parenting stress and family functioning (Table 3). The result showed parenting stress was negatively associated with overall family functioning ( $r = -.49, p < .01$ ). The finding indicated that high level of parenting stress may decrease the level of family functioning. Furthermore, the findings revealed that parenting stress also were found to be negatively correlated with all sub-dimensions of family functioning in commuter family.

Table 3. Correlation matrix of study variables

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Parenting stress	1								
2. Overall family functioning	-.49**	1							
3. Communication	-.37**	.88**	1						
4. Love	-.49**	.96**	.87**	1					
5. Support	-.44**	.95**	.84**	.92**	1				
6. Commitment	-.49**	.93**	.81**	.86**	.86**	1			
7. Acceptance	-.43**	.94**	.82**	.87**	.90**	.89**	1		
8. Religiosity	-.43**	.82**	.58**	.73**	.73**	.70**	.71**	1	
9. Relationship	-.49**	.91**	.73**	.82**	.82**	.82**	.84**	.76**	1

Note: \*\* $p < .01$

#### 3.2.2 Differences in Parenting Stress and Family Functioning between Husband and Wife of Commuter Family

Independent sample t-test analysis was utilized to compare the mean scores of two different groups of people (husband and wife) in perception of parenting stress and family functioning. Of all the variables investigated, the

findings shown that there were no significant differences between husband and wife in perception of parenting stress and family functioning (Table 4). In other words husband and wife of commuter family had same level perception of parenting stress and family functioning. The same results also were found for all sub-dimensions of family functioning between husband and wife of commuter family.

Table 4. Differences in perception of parenting stress and family functioning between husband and wife of commuter family

Variables	Husband	Wife	t	p
	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>		
Parenting Stress	33.26 (7.88)	34.46 (7.46)	-.93	.35
Overall family functioning	146.19 (14.87)	144.29 (13.49)	.80	.42
Communication	15.62 (2.05)	15.81 (1.61)	.30	.72
Love	27.10 (3.02)	26.65 (2.81)	.92	.36
Support	21.67 (2.34)	21.25 (2.29)	1.08	.28
Commitment	16.08 (1.90)	15.85 (1.67)	.79	.43
Acceptance	21.44 (2.41)	21.15 (2.35)	.74	.46
Religiosity	22.36 (2.01)	22.18 (2.07)	.53	.60
Relationship	21.63 (2.41)	21.40 (2.01)	.60	.55

#### 4. Discussion

This study examined the relationship between parenting stress and family functioning among commuter family in Malaysia. The present study revealed that parenting stress were negatively associated with family functioning. In other words, higher level of parenting stress contribute to poor family functioning. The result of this study consistent with finding by Mitchell et al. (2016) that found parental stress associated with family functioning. According to Lau, Ma, Chan, and He (2012), stress can result from changes in family structure that occur when the parents commute or work in other notions and back home once a month or even longer.

Contrary to our expectations, this study found that there was no significant differences between husband and wife in perception of parenting stress and family functioning. This study is inconsistent with previous study that indicated mothers experienced higher levels of parenting stress compared to fathers (Ma et al., 2011). Fathers' provision of social parenting resources, such as direct care, responsibility, and love to children, would be expected to ease mothers' care giving burden, thereby leading to improved well-being and lower parental stress (Coley & Schindler, 2008) especially in commuter family. However the result of this study in line with the study by Ma et al. (2011) that found husbands and wife had same perception in family functioning.

The findings provide an invaluable resource that can be used in various factions including family professional, counselors, and social workers, and the government in their efforts to support and nurture the commuter families and their children. Apart from that, the findings can be used by government agencies such as the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development and non-governmental organizations that advocate for family, women and child well-being. Early intervention and prevention programs at the family level are extremely important for lessening the impact of parenting stress on family functioning. However, the multiple ecological contexts in which families live should not be ignored. Besides helping families with their parenting, other supportive interventions such as financial aid, employment opportunities, skills training in communication and subsidized day care should also go hand in hand. Potential sources of social support such as community centers, commuter family associations, religious organizations, and support groups should be established where they can provide mental support for the commuter couples. This holistic approach of helping commuter families deal and cope with multiple challenges are likely to be more effective and successful in enhancing family functioning.

Some limitations of the present study should also be noted. Firstly, since the present study were based only on 72 Malay couples with at least had one child aged 5 to 12 years old), so the generalizability of these findings are limited to the sample assessed. Therefore, this study needs to be replicated with a more heterogeneous population that include other ethnic groups, occupational status and parents with younger or older children, to determine whether the findings hold true in contexts with different cultural values, occupational variations and

opportunity. Secondly, this study only focused on two variable only ( i.e. parenting stress and family functioning). So, any future studies carried out will require a more in-depth look at other variable such as marital satisfaction, social support and coping strategy. Finally, due to the cross-sectional nature of data retrieved, conclusion about the direction of effects cannot be made regarding the relation between parenting stress and family functioning. It would certainly be interesting to include more time over longer period of time.

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