



**Faculty of Cognitive Sciences and Human Development**

**A STUDY ON FEAR OF COVID-19 AMONG DIFFERENT  
GENDER IN MALAYSIA AND ITS IMPACT ON PSYCHOLOGICAL  
DISTRESS**

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Final Year Project Report

Masters

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28 JUNE 2022

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**A STUDY ON FEAR OF COVID-19 AMONG DIFFERENT GENDER IN MALAYSIA  
AND ITS IMPACT ON PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS**

VOON MEI FONG

This project is submitted  
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for a  
Bachelor of Psychology with Honours

Faculty of Cognitive Sciences and Human Development  
UNIVERSITI MALAYSIA SARAWAK  
(2022)

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Date:

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# Table of Contents

List of Tables .....	i
List of Figures.....	ii
Abstract.....	iii
Abstrak.....	iv
<b>1 Introduction.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>1.1 Introduction .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>1.2 Background of the study.....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>1.3 Problem Statement.....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>1.4 Research Objective.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>1.5 Research Question.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>1.6 Research Hypothesis .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>1.7 Conceptual Framework of Research .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>1.8 Significance of Study .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>1.9 Definition of Terms .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>1.10 Chapter Summary .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>2 Literature Review .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>2.1 Introduction .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>2.2 Research Context.....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>2.2.1 Fear of COVID-19.....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>2.2.2 Gender.....</b>	<b>8</b>

2.2.3	Psychological Distress .....	8
2.2.4	What is the impact of psychological distress? .....	9
2.3	Related Theories .....	9
2.3.1	James-Lange Theory (Fear).....	9
2.3.2	Cannon Bard Theory (Fear) .....	10
2.3.3	Schachter Singer Theory (Fear) .....	10
2.3.4	Leonard Pearlin’s Theory of Psychological Distress .....	11
2.4	Previous Research Done .....	12
2.4.1	Female exhibits higher level of fear compare to male .....	12
2.4.2	Psychological Distress .....	13
2.5	Chapter Summary .....	14
3	Methodology .....	15
3.1	Introduction .....	15
3.2	Research Design.....	15
3.3	Population, Sample and Sampling Technique.....	16
3.4	Pilot Study .....	16
3.5	Ethics of The Study .....	16
3.6	Instrument.....	17
3.7	Data Collection Procedure.....	18
3.8	Data Analysis Procedure .....	19
3.8.1	Descriptive Data Analysis.....	19



3.8.2	<b>Inferential Data Analysis</b> .....	19
3.9	<b>Chapter Summary</b> .....	20
4	<b>Findings and Discussion</b> .....	21
4.1	<b>Introduction</b> .....	21
4.2	<b>Descriptive Analysis (Demographic Data)</b> .....	21
4.2.1	<b>Gender</b> .....	22
4.2.2	<b>Age</b> .....	23
4.2.3	<b>Race</b> .....	24
4.3	<b>Inferential Statistics (Testing Hypothesis)</b> .....	25
4.3.1	<b>Gender difference and the level of COVID-19 Fear</b> .....	25
4.3.2	<b>Level of COVID-19 fear and psychological distress</b> .....	27
4.4	<b>Chapter Summary</b> .....	30
5	<b>Limitation, Implication, Recommendation and Conclusion</b> .....	31
5.1	<b>Introduction</b> .....	31
5.2	<b>Implication of Study</b> .....	31
5.3	<b>Limitation of Study</b> .....	31
5.4	<b>Recommendations</b> .....	32
5.5	<b>Conclusion</b> .....	33
6	<b>References</b> .....	34
7	<b>Appendices</b> .....	38

## List of Tables

Table 4.2.1.1 Descriptive Statistics of Respondent's Gender .....	22
Table 4.2.2.1 Descriptive Statistic of Respondent's Age .....	23
Table 4.2.3.1 Descriptive Statistic of Respondent's Race.....	24
Table 4.3.1.1 Results of Independent Sample T- test Analysis between Gender and the level of COVID-19 Fear .....	25
Table 4.3.2.1 Result of Pearson Correlation test between level of COVID-19 fear and psychological distress .....	28

## List of Figures

Figure 2.2.1.1 Conceptual Framework of Research .....	4
Figure 2.3.1.1 James Lange Theory .....	9
Figure 2.3.2.1 Cannon Bard Theory .....	10
Figure 2.3.3.1 Schachter Singer Theory .....	10
Figure 2.3.4.1 Leonard Pearlin's Theory of Psychological Distress .....	11
Figure 4.2.1.1 Pie Chart of Respondent's Gender .....	22
Figure 4.2.2.1 Simple Bar Chart of Respondent's Age .....	23
Figure 4.2.3.1 Simple Bar Chart of Respondent's Race.....	24
Figure 4.3.2.1 Scatterplot for level of COVID-19 fear and psychological distress.....	28

## **Abstract**

The main objective of this research is to investigate the significant gender difference on the level of COVID-19 fear and the significance relationship between fear of COVID-19 and psychological distress. A total of 270 samples population consisting of 135 males and 135 females were included in the research study. All the participants are Malaysians who stayed in Malaysia during the COVID-19 pandemic and over the age of 18. The research design was quantitative research where data were obtained from the google form.

This study used the fear of COVID-19 scale (FCV-19S) to measure participants' fear toward COVID-19 and the Kessler psychological distress scale (K10) was used to measure psychological distress of an individual. Independent-samples T-test and Pearson correlation were used to test the research hypothesis. According to the findings, it shows there is no significant gender difference on the level of COVID-19 fear whereas according to the Pearson correlation result, it shows there is a significance relationship between the fear of COVID-19 and psychological distress. The research finding can help to increase Malaysian's awareness regarding the COVID-19 fear and thus, it also can help to enhance their mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Key words: COVID-19 fear, Psychological distress

## **Abstrak**

Objektif utama penyelidikan ini adalah untuk menyiasat perbezaan jantina yang ketara pada tahap ketakutan COVID-19 dan hubungan signifikan antara ketakutan COVID-19 dan tekanan psikologi. Sebanyak 270 sampel populasi yang terdiri daripada 135 lelaki dan 135 perempuan telah dimasukkan dalam kajian penyelidikan. Kesemua peserta adalah warganegara Malaysia yang tinggal di Malaysia semasa pandemik COVID-19 dan berumur lebih dari 18 tahun. Reka bentuk penyelidikan adalah penyelidikan kuantitatif di mana data diperoleh daripada borang google.

Kajian ini menggunakan “*Fear of COVID-19 scale (FCV-19S)*” untuk mengukur ketakutan peserta terhadap COVID- 19 dan “*Kessler psychological distress scale (K10)*” digunakan untuk mengukur tekanan psikologi seseorang individu. Ujian T sampel bebas dan ujian korelasi Pearson digunakan untuk menguji hipotesis kajian. Mengikut penemuan, ia menunjukkan tidak terdapat perbezaan jantina yang signifikan pada tahap ketakutan COVID-19 manakala mengikut keputusan korelasi Pearson, ia menunjukkan terdapat hubungan signifikan antara ketakutan COVID-19 dan tekanan psikologi. Ini boleh membantu meningkatkan kesedaran rakyat Malaysia mengenai ketakutan COVID-19 dan dengan itu, ia juga dapat membantu meningkatkan tahap kesihatan mental mereka semasa pandemik COVID-19.

Kata kunci: ketakutan COVID-19, tekanan psikologi

# **1 Introduction**

This chapter laid out the broad framework of the research project. The research background, problem statement, purpose of the study, objective of the study, research questions, research hypothesis, conceptual framework, importance of research, limits of this study and operational definition are all included.

## **1.1 Introduction**

Currently, our world is facing a serious pandemic which is the emergence of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID 19). This disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus and this is an infectious disease which can spread via air borne (World Health Organization, n.d.). For example, when an affected individual cough, sneezes, speaks, or breathes, the virus can be transmitted in microscopic liquid particles from their mouth or nose.

In addition, we come to understand that the outbreak was first discovered in Wuhan China back in December of 2019. On 25 January 2020, Malaysia detected the first case of COVID 19 (Elengoe, 2020). Following that, there was a rise in COVID 19 cases in Malaysia, Malaysia government had taken all the necessary action such as enforcing citizen to wear mask in the public area, practice social distancing, restrictions on gathering and movement control order (MCO) to reduce the spreading of the COVID 19 disease (Ahmed Suparno Bahar Moni et al., 2021).

During the movement control order (MCO), there are many issues that had arisen such as financial issue, mental health issue, domestic violence and so on. Some of these geographical distancing practices, as well as the ambiguity of returning to normality, have a direct and indirect influence on community members' social lives and mental health. Individuals around the world have reported increased worriedness, stress, fear and emotional distress of provisional measures such as MCOs or lockdowns, physical distance, and quarantine.

## **1.2 Background of the study**

COVID 19 is a modern day worldwide pandemic with boundless treat to the human race physically and mentally (Jamal Hisham Hashim et al., 2021). With the pandemic still ongoing, we can observe the presence of stress, worriedness, restlessness, denial, rage and other depressive symptoms in the human race. We shall not deny the fact that, the presence of fear among us is slowly eating us from the inside and its now one of the most common psychological reactions. The fear in us can exhibits a positive or negative reaction to our mental and physical state. If we were to view positively, we shall agree that fear of the virus can heighten our risk perception and trigger defensive action to emerge thus protecting our safety (Fritscher, 2020).

Every individual must deal with their emotion rationally to avoid the undesired bad consequent for their mental health. Fear, according to new findings, stimulates social presence in the anticipation of seeking affection, approval, and social media interactions, as well as buying behaviour for personal protection equipment. Besides, fear can have disastrous consequences. For example, individuals experiencing monstrous amounts of fear may be unable to think critically and reasonably when dealing to COVID-19. In addition, long term irrational fear can lead to psychological distress.

Within our country, the pandemic outbreak has certainly created more problems than ever before, with cases topped over 20,000 just recently. Dead tolls and infection rate have been consistently worrying. Many are affected including university students, adult and elder citizen. Fears and distress are beginning to topple masses and shouldn't be ignored in Malaysia.

## **1.3 Problem Statement**

Several studies have been conducted to study the relationship of fear level of COVID- 19 and the impact of psychological distress. Based on the existing research, the researchers had found out female has higher level of COVID- 19 fear as compare to male (Sánchez-Teruel,

2021). High score of fear had showed direct or indirect effect on our psychological distress. Besides, the existing research had limited information about gender differences' scores in "Fear of COVID-19" scale in Malaysia. This shows lack of research on the relationship between fear of COVID-19 among binary gender and psychological distress in Malaysia.

The fundamental goal of this study is to compare the level of fear due to COVID-19 among different gender. Whereas the secondary goal is to see if variations in gender and the level of fear level might be used to predict the scores of psychological distresses. Lastly, this research identifies demographic segments that are more likely to have poor mental health outcomes, allowing policymakers to better direct resource allocation and construct psychosocial treatments for those at-risk and vulnerable populations.

#### **1.4 Research Objective**

- i. To study the significant gender difference on the level of COVID- 19 fear.
- ii. To study the relationship between fear of COVID 19 and psychological distress.

#### **1.5 Research Question**

- i. Is there any significant gender difference on the level of COVID- 19 fear?
- ii. Is there any significant relationship between fear of COVID-19 and psychological distress?

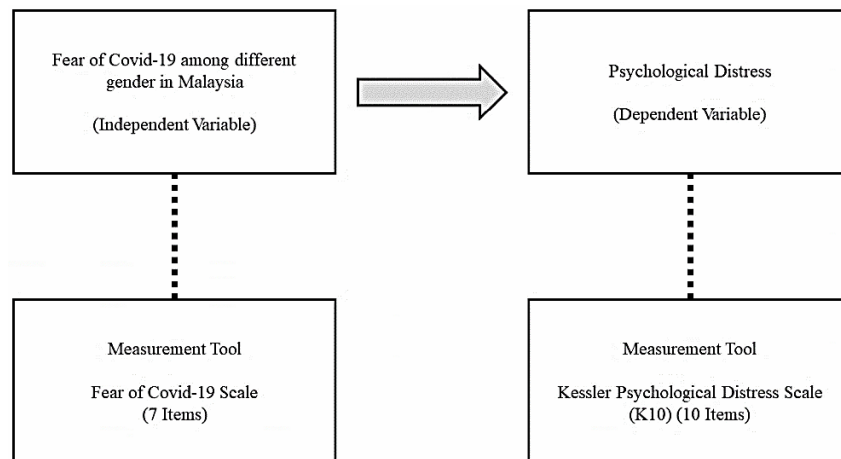
#### **1.6 Research Hypothesis**

H1: There is a significant gender difference on the level of COVID- 19 fear.

H2: There is a significant relationship between fear of COVID- 19 and psychological distress.



## 1.7 Conceptual Framework of Research



*Figure 2.2.1.1 Conceptual Framework of Research*

The aim of this research is to study the relationship between fear of COVID-19 among different gender in Malaysia and its impact on psychological distress. In addition, this research also aims to figure which gender group have a higher score of fears toward COVID-19 pandemic and psychological distress. The figure 2.2.1.1 shows the conceptual framework of this research. In this research, fear of COVID-19 among different gender in Malaysia is the independent variable whereas impact of psychological distress is the dependent variable in this research.

## 1.8 Significance of Study

The importance of this research is to understand which gender group experiences higher score of psychological distress due to the pandemic and to perform in depth study on fear of COVID-19 among different gender and the relationship between COVID-19 fear and psychological distress. Lastly, this research aims to outline a better understanding of Malaysian's mental health during the pandemic.

## **1.9 Definition of Terms**

### **Fear**

#### **Conceptual definition:**

Fear is a primal, normal, and intense human emotion. It involves both a universal physiological reaction and a strong individual emotional reaction. Fear warns us that there is a risk or a threat of harm, whether it is physical or mental (Fritscher, 2020). Besides, Fear referring the state produced by exposing an individual to an object highest in his or her hierarchy of objects to be avoided.

#### **Operational definition:**

The fear of COVID-19 scale (FCV-19S) is widely used to measure participants' fear toward COVID-19. This questionnaire consists of only 7 items with a 5-point Likert scale: 1 = strongly disagree (almost never), 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral, 4 = agree and 5 = strongly agree (almost always). Total scoring range between 7 to 35, the higher the score of the participants, the higher the level of fear toward COVID-19 (Ahorsu, 2020).

### **Psychological distress**

#### **Conceptual definition:**

Psychological discomfort encompasses a wide range of stress, anxiety, and depression symptoms. Psychological discomfort is a sign of poor mental health and can be a symptom of common mental diseases such as depression and anxiety. Psychological discomfort is a condition of emotional anguish caused by everyday pressures and obligations that are difficult to manage (Arvidsdotter et al., 2015).

#### **Operational definition:**

The Kessler psychological distress scale (K10) is widely used to measure psychological distress of an individual. This questionnaire consists of only 10 items with a 5-point Likert scale: 1 = none of the time, 2 = a little of the time, 3 = some of the time, 4 = most of the time,

5= all of the time. The total scoring range between 10 to 50, the higher the score of the participant, the higher the level of psychological distress (Kessler et al., 2003).

### **1.10 Chapter Summary**

This chapter outline the introduction towards the prospectus, background study regarding emergence of a pandemic, problem statement, research objective, question and hypothesis, conceptual framework, study limitation and definition of terms used in this study.

## **2 Literature Review**

### **2.1 Introduction**

This chapter covered experiments, findings from past researches. The literature review on previous researches from multiple parties were cited extensively throughout the chapter. Related theories and principles also be associated on key findings.

### **2.2 Research Context**

#### **2.2.1 Fear of COVID-19**

COVID-19 which is also known as SARS-CoV-2 virus was first detected in Wuhan city in China (Zhu, Wei, & Niu, 2005). The virus was famous for its attack towards the respiratory system of the human body and often resulting in death. The first case of known COVID-19 infected Malaysian, was detected back in 4th February 2020 when the patient was returning from Singapore while the first sporadic case was detected back in 12th March 2020. The first movement control order was announced on 18th March 2020 to 14th April 2020 (Elengoe,2020). On the basis of widespread of COVID-19, human's natural instinct will kick in, resulting a sense of fear and extreme cautions, else death may be inevitable. During the early stage of the outbreak, people can be seen hoarding masks and sanitizers as, they fear of supply issues, which eventually causes a collapse in the supply chain with prices of mask and sanitizer sky rocketing up few hundred percent. On top of that, fear of being infected the virus or fear of spreading the virus to the love ones has certainly on the mind of every population (Mertens et al., 2005).

The nationwide lockdown has also disrupted the economy with businesses closing down and people losing their jobs, especially those from the lower end of poverty line, they are the most affected. The result of combination of losing jobs, struggling financially, loss of love ones to the virus, chances of infection, and uncertainty of the future has strained the mental

wellbeing of everyone (Pang et al., 2021). High level of depression, anxiety, insomnia, chronic distress and burdensome were the side effect of fears. Fear is a good thing if it helps human to stay alive, but too much of it will causes breakdown and detrimentally degrade our mental health.

### **2.2.2 Gender**

Among the binary gender, female tends to suffer more mentally due to COVID-19 compare to male as they are built differently. Female tends to show more intense emotional responses regardless it's positively or negatively (Remes, 2016). In addition, females are more likely to experience an emotion swing throughout their life as they endure hormone fluctuation and chemistry changes (Cronkleton, 2021). Females with marital statuses are often the group with higher risk of getting stress out, depression and anxiety, because, they bear the sense of responsibility around family. By comparing male and female, we can agree that, female is often required to handle diversified duties within their circle and we all expected them to. Last but not least, gender inequality does happen in Malaysia, females are often view as the weaker ones and males as the dominant counterpart. The long-term side effect of that can be magnified by the presents of a pandemic.

### **2.2.3 Psychological Distress**

Psychological distress encompasses a wide range of stress, anxiety, and depression symptoms (Viertiö et al., 2021). Psychological discomfort is a sign of poor mental health and can be a symptom of common mental diseases such as depression and anxiety. These emotion and feelings will change our interpretation to our life and how can we react to the people around us. There are a few fundamental causes arise from the pandemic with one of it being the extreme uncertainty (Glowacz & Schmits, 2020). The public is always under constant fear of being infected and spread the virus among their love ones, this can be easily proof by overreaction towards normal cold. Furthermore, financial hardships and difficulty of finding

jobs resulted closure of businesses and loss of job can also contribute greatly towards psychological distress. Lastly, low socio-economic status also indirectly influences individual's mental health.

#### 2.2.4 What is the impact of psychological distress?

The repercussion of psychological distress can vary among individual. The majority of the consequences happens to be mentally, with rage, worry, sleeplessness, perplexity and numbness among them (Serafini et al., 2020). In addition, psychological distress also detrimentally impacts our physical health by increasing the risk of heart attack and other chronic disease. It's often known that psychological distress will provoke blood sticking and increases chance of blood clot.

### 2.3 Related Theories

#### 2.3.1 James-Lange Theory (Fear)

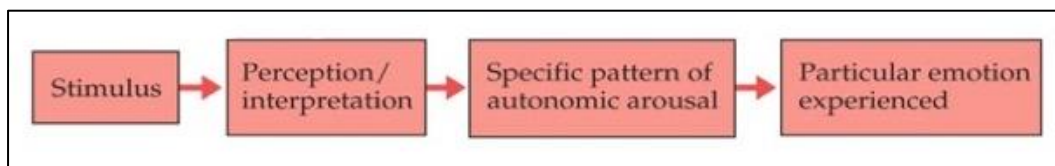


Figure 2.3.1.1 James Lange Theory

This theory defined emotions are the outcome of physiological reactions to events. To put it another way, this theory posits that humans have a physiological reaction to external stimuli, which is subsequently interpreted as an emotional experience. This theory emphasizes there is a need for the present of physical reaction to trigger any emotion (Cherry, 2020). For example, someone perceive or encounters an aversive or stimulus (high number of mortality rate of COVID-19 virus), the individual will experience a physiological reaction to it (fear of the COVID-19 pandemic).

### 2.3.2 Cannon Bard Theory (Fear)

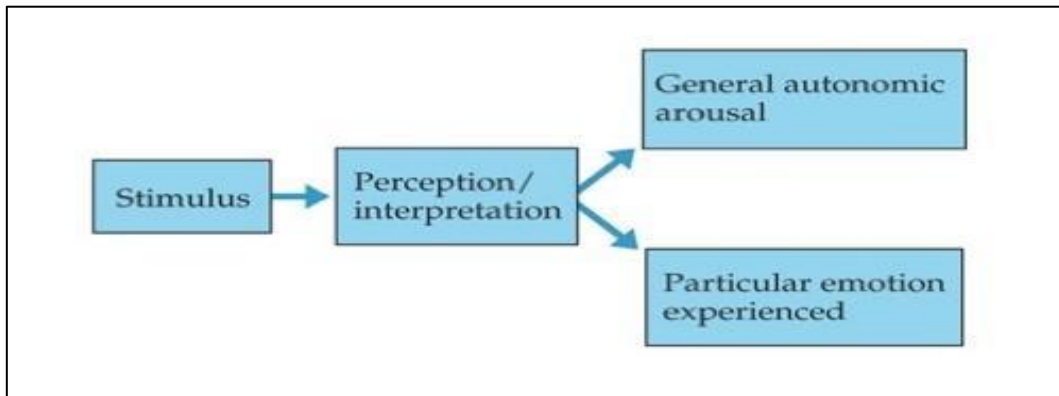


Figure 2.3.2.1 Cannon Bard Theory

Walter Cannon and Philip Bard established the Cannon-Bard theory of emotion, commonly known as the Thalamic theory of emotion, which provides a physiological explanation of emotion. According to the Cannon-Bard hypothesis, we sense emotions and physiological responses like sweating, trembling, and muscular tension all at the same time (Cherry, 2020).

Its criticisms included, overemphasizes the involvement of the thalamus in emotions while essentially neglecting the role of other regions of the brain (Cherry, 2020). Although the thalamus is a unit of the limbic system and does play a role in emotional experience, current research reveals that the process is more sophisticated than the Cannon-Bard theory predicts.

### 2.3.3 Schachter Singer Theory (Fear)

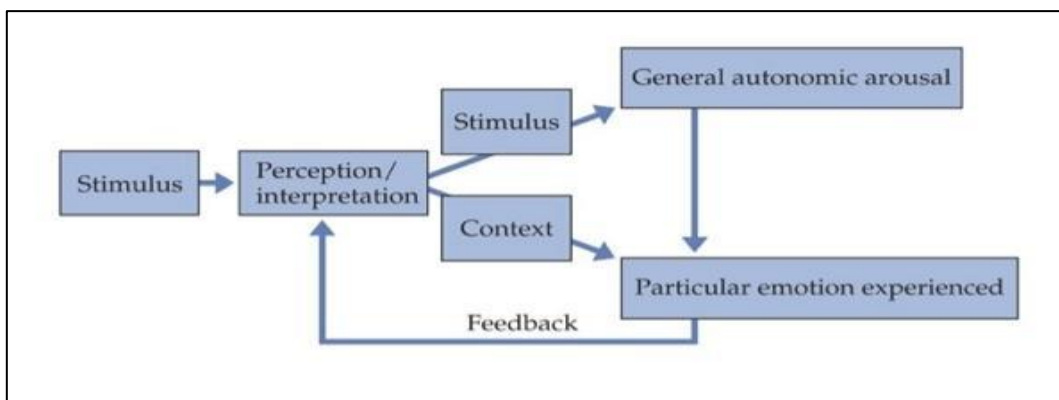


Figure 2.3.3.1 Schachter Singer Theory

The founder of this theory was Schachter and Singer (Cherry, 2019). In year 1962, Schachter and Singer conducted an experiment to examine the factors that cause a particular emotion to arise. When they carried the experiment, they injected adrenaline (epinephrine), a hormone to inject to the participants. The epinephrine plays important role generates a variety of physiological effects such as increased blood flow to the muscles, rapid breathing and a faster heart rate. They discovered that administering the medication did not cause participants to feel any particular feeling.

Based on the experiment, they reveal that physical arousal might not be the only cause of emotional reactions. There are two basic components of emotion based on the Schachter and Singer's factor theory which are bodily arousal and a cognitive label. To put it another way, the experience of emotion begins with a physiological reaction that the mind then recognizes.

### 2.3.4 Leonard Pearlin's Theory of Psychological Distress

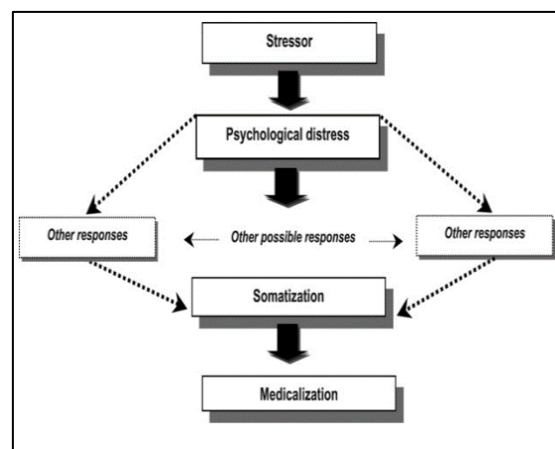


Figure 2.3.4.1 Leonard Pearlin's Theory of Psychological Distress

This theory is developed by Leonard Pearlin. He contributed significantly towards to sociological study of mental health. His theory stated that, values, beliefs, ideologies and etc. are subjected to changes as one ages. Our emotion is subjected to changes according to our circumstances. In this study, COVID-19 pandemic is our circumstance, this had brought a lot bad consequence towards the individual such as fear, anxiety, stress and all these indirect lead to psychological distress.