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# An Asian Perspective of Occupational Stress Coping Model: A Case Study of Sri Lankan Employees

Yong Wah Goh,<sup>1</sup> Sukanlaya Sawang,<sup>2</sup> Tian P.S. Oei,<sup>3</sup> and Don S. Ranawake<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *The University of Southern Queensland, Australia*

<sup>2</sup> *Queensland University of Technology, Australia*

<sup>3</sup> *The University of Queensland, Australia*

<sup>4</sup> *Institute of Counselling, Colombo, Sri Lanka*

Sri Lanka has one of the highest rates of natural disasters and violent conflicts in the world. Yet there is a lack of research on its unique socio-cultural characteristics that determine an individual's cognitive and behavioural responses to distressing encounters. This study extends Goh, Sawang and Oei's (2010) revised transactional model to examine the cognitive and behavioural processes of occupational stress experience in the collectivistic society of Sri Lanka. A time series survey was used to measure the participant's stress-coping process. Using the revised transactional model and path analysis, a unique Sri Lankan model is identified that provides theoretical insights on the revised transactional model, and sheds light on socio-cultural dimensions of occupational stress and coping, thus equipping practitioners with a sound theoretical basis for the development of stress management programs in the workplace.

■ **Keywords:** occupational stress, coping, transactional model, Sri Lanka, appraisal, collectivism

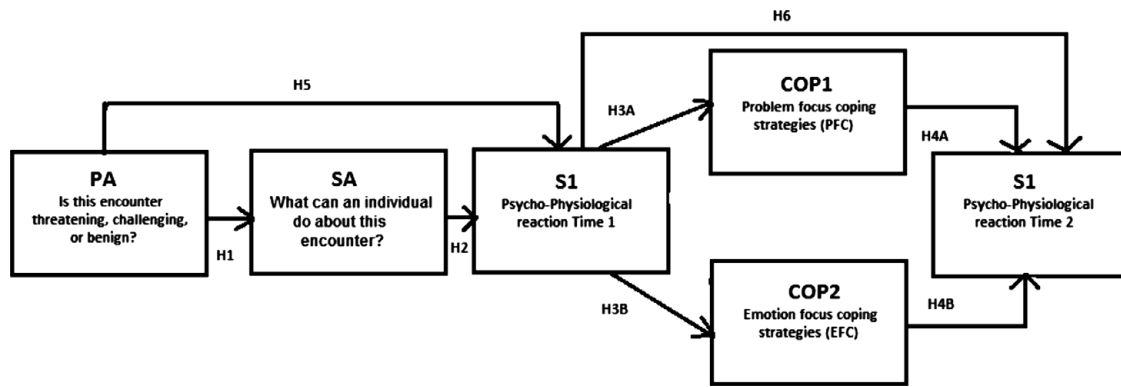
The highest suicide rate in the world comes from Asia, accounting for an estimated 60% of all suicides; countries such as India, Japan, Hong Kong and Sri Lanka have been experiencing an increase in suicide rates over the past 2 decades (Beautrais, 2006). In addition to this staggering figure, Asia has the largest number of people exposed to severe traumas such as earthquakes, tsunamis and violent conflicts (Fernando, 2008). A recent report on Sri Lankans' mental health condition has placed the number of suicide cases at an average of 6,000 deaths per annum, and Sri Lanka is ranked 5th in the world's nations with a high suicide rate (Nayanah, 2010). This scenario is very much a consequence of the civil war and natural disasters that has plagued Sri Lankans for decades. The aftermath of these catastrophes has not brought about an abatement in people's experience of stress and trauma as the challenges of rebuilding and refugee problems continue. With a ratio of one psychiatrist for every 500,000 people (Nayanah, 2010), the mental health status in Sri Lanka is indeed dire. Hence there are calls for more research to be conducted in Sri Lanka (e.g., Beautrais, 2006; Fernando, 2008); one of these research areas is stress and coping.

In a paper by Bolz (2002), it was noted that a major contributor to Sri Lanka's high suicide rate is the lack of conflict resolution. Specifically, the country has a repressive environment where the repertoire of conflict management and resolution strategies is greatly constrained by social norms. Consequently, one can do very little about a difficult situation that may further aggravate. A sense of helplessness or hopelessness may develop in such a restrictive environment and eventually manifest itself in the form of a suicide attempt. 'Collectivism' is a cultural feature of Sri Lankan society that lends support to Bolz's claim, and it is an integral part of the socio-cultural belief system of many Asian countries.

Collectivism is a cultural value that emphasises group harmony, solidarity, interdependence and group achievement (Markus & Kitayama, 1991, as cited in Spector et al., 2001). In a collectivistic society, the focus is on

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ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE: Dr Sukanlaya Sawang QUT Business School, Queensland University of Technology, GPO Box 2434, Brisbane QLD 4001, Australia. Email: s.sawang@qut.edu.au



**FIGURE 1**

Proposed model based on the Revised Transactional Model (RTM).

interdependency and adherence to social and cultural rules. Hence a group's decision often overrides an individual's decision, and conformity to group norms is paramount. Such a society can offer important sources of support to the individual in times of difficulties. A sense of confidence and calmness can be derived from the knowledge of readily available and ever-present supports from one's family and social/religious affiliations. However, in an extremely collectivistic society, the environment becomes restrictive and repressive. Consequently, one's freedom to assess the stressful encounter and decide how to cope with it is greatly diminished.

Researchers have long recognised the importance of culture in shaping a person's coping behaviours and cognition (e.g., Oyserman & Lee, 2008; Yeh, Inman, Kim, & Okubo, 2006). A case in point is the March 2011 triple disasters in Japan (i.e., earthquake, tsunami and nuclear plant accident); the orderly manner in which its population coped with the calamities, and the lack of looting or rioting, are often seen as testimonies of their cultural belief system or communitarian spirit. Thus, the cultural dimension of collectivism is capable of exerting influence on a person's stress and coping process. Yet to date there is no conceptual model or research that addresses the stress and coping process in Asian countries such as Sri Lanka and how cultural dimensions (such as collectivism) interplay with variables in the process. The consequence is wholesale or piecemeal application of Western-based theories in non-Western developing countries, and interventions with limited success. This has important implications for today's global organisations. Their various training and development programs (e.g., stress management, leadership development and performance management) will be ineffective without a sound knowledge of the indigenous culture. This is because the interventions can seem foreign or even contradictory to the employees' own cultural values, and consequently be rejected.

Therefore, a research approach that allows for the unique features of a culture to exercise their influence on the variables in question is needed. With stress and

coping, it is about examining how key components (i.e., cognitive, behavioural and psycho-physiological aspects) interrelate within the process and how this dynamic presents itself within a specific socio-cultural environment. This is because despite empirical findings that link some components together in the stress and coping process, how they all relate and behave with each other as a whole and within a complete etiological process or within a specific socio-cultural context remains lacking in empirical evidence. This article takes on an organisational perspective to examine how levels of collectivistic value influence the stress and coping model in Sri Lanka. This was done by using Goh, Sawang, and Oei's (2010) Revised Transactional Model as the template from which a culturally relevant Sri Lankan model can be developed. This model will be the prototype for future stress and coping research and development in Sri Lanka.

### Revised Transactional Model of Stress Coping and Collectivism

The latest transactional theory of stress and coping is the Revised Transactional Model (RTM) by Goh et al. (2010). It incorporates constructs from Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional theory of stress and coping and Karasek's (1979) job demand and control theory. RTM (see Figure 1) shows that when a potentially stressful event occurs, the individual's primary appraisal process (PA) will determine if it poses as a threat or challenge to the individual or if it is benign. If it is viewed as potentially threatening or challenging, the secondary appraisal (SA) is activated to determine if one has the resources to cope with the encounter. The perception of control is formulated in the SA, where one evaluates the availability and degree of personal power over the stressor. The more threatening or challenging an event is (high PA), the less perceived control one will have (low SA).

Stress outcomes at Time 1 or S1 (e.g., negative affectivity, increased heart rate and anxiety) are triggered by both PA and SA. Their relationship with PA and SA is such that high PA (high threat or challenge

appraisal) brings about a high level of S1, and low SA (low perceived control) will bring about a high level of S1. This stressful psycho-physiological arousal (S1) then triggers coping strategies to manage the stressor. Goh et al. (2010) found a significant relationship between S1 and coping; the more stress one feels the higher the number and/or frequency of coping strategies will be used. A new level of psycho-physiological stress experience Time 2 (S2) will eventuate depending on the coping outcomes and the level of S1. S2 is the last point in the transactional process that sends feedback to PA for further appraisal, thereby creating a cycle in the dynamic sequence.

With the RTM, it is possible to map out a cross-section of the etiological process of stress and coping in a Sri Lankan sample. Based on Occam's razor, this study will extract a model that is most parsimonious (i.e., with the least number of pathways) and has the best fitting indices to represent the transactional process of stress and coping in Sri Lankans. The RTM may not be the best model for the Sri Lankan sample because it was developed using Australian participants (Goh et al., 2010). Nevertheless it is the most up-to-date transactional model of stress and coping that deserves to be tested on different samples to extend its relevance to cross-cultural and organisational contexts. If the RTM is a poor fit, it can be modified, based on statistical and theoretical evidence, to bring about a significant fit on the Sri Lankan data. Once a best fit model is identified for the Sri Lankan sample, the cultural dimension collectivism will be tested to determine its effects on the variables within the model.

This study also extends the RTM by incorporating different types of coping strategies into the process (Figure 1). It has been well established that coping is a multifaceted construct made up of different subtypes or categories. A common agreement among researchers is that coping can be broken down into two general categories, namely Problem Focused Coping (PFC) and Emotion Focused Coping (EFC; Carver, Scheier & Weintraub, 1989). The examination of PFC and EFC in the Sri Lankan transactional process of stress and coping can shed light on Bolz's (2002) notion that the country's high suicide rate is attributed to a lack of conflict resolution. Specifically, if Sri Lanka's repressive environment greatly constrains one's choice and repertoire of coping strategies, then the model will offer insight into how EFC and PFC can affect the stress and coping process of Sri Lankans. Furthermore, this article has noted that Sri Lanka's repressive environment is a reflection of the cultural dimension, collectivism, where adherence to social rules and norms, interdependency, and group superseding individual decisions are widely upheld. This study examines the potential effect of collectivism on EFC and PFC in the RTM of Sri Lankan sample. The specific hypotheses are:

**Hypothesis 1:** Primary appraisal will negatively influence secondary appraisal.

**Hypothesis 2:** Secondary appraisal will negatively influence stress at Time 1.

**Hypothesis 3:** Stress at Time 1 will positively influence individuals to use problem focused coping strategies (H3A) and emotion focused coping strategies (H3B).

**Hypothesis 4:** Problem focused coping strategies (H4A) and emotion focused coping strategies (H4B) will reduce level of stress at Time 2.

**Hypothesis 5:** Primary appraisal will positively influence level of stress at Time 1.

**Hypothesis 6:** Stress level at Time 1 will be positively related to stress level at Time 2.

**Hypothesis 7:** Level of collectivistic value will influence the overall stress-coping model.

## Method

### Participants

One hundred and twenty-seven full-time working adults (male = 71, female = 56) were used in this study (response rate = 63%). They were clerical and administrative staff recruited from various organisations and institutions by a research collaborator from the University of Colombo. Participants' education was between senior high school to tertiary level. Age ranged from 18–63 years (mean age = 38,  $SD = 10$ ). Female mean age was 37 and male mean age was 39.

### Materials

**1. Primary Appraisal (PA) and Secondary Appraisal (SA).** Adopted from Dewe (1991), both PA and SA use 5-point scales (1 = *Not at all* to 5 = *Applies a great deal*). The PA scale consisted of eight items that measured why an event was appraised as stressful (e.g., feeling that you would not achieve an important goal). A high score meant an event was appraised as highly stressful. The SA scale consisted of six items measuring how one would actually cope with the stressful event (e.g., an event that you could change or do something about). A high score meant a perceived high level of personal control over the stressful event. Factor analysis revealed the two distinctive factors between PA and SA within the Sri Lankan sample.

**2. The Ways of Coping Checklist Revised.** This 42-item measure was adapted from Vitaliano, Russo, Carr, Maiuro, and Becker's (1985) Ways of Coping Checklist, and is comprised of five categories ( $\alpha = .94$ ). The categories (or factors) are Problem-focused coping (e.g., came up with a couple of different solutions to the problem), Seek social support (e.g., talked to someone about how I was feeling), Blame self (e.g., criticised or lectured myself), Wishful thinking (e.g., hoped a miracle would happen), and Avoidance (e.g., went on as if nothing had happened). It is a 5-point scale that assesses the frequency of

coping strategy used (1 = *Not relevant* to 5 = *Used a great deal*). The five factors were confirmed in an Asian sample (Sawang et al., 2010). Due to a limited sample size and this study's aims, we categorised coping strategies into the standard problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping (Carver et al., 1989) where emotion-focused coping is a composite of the categories Blame self, Wishful thinking, and Avoidance. Social support seeking was not excluded because past research had shown it to be a combination of problem- and emotion-focused coping (e.g., Terry, 1991).

**3. The occupational stress inventory.** Used by Osipow and Spokane (1987), this scale assessed overall occupational stress levels. There were three subscales within that measured three dimensions of occupational adjustment: occupational stress, psychological stress, and coping resources. Only two were used in this study. They were occupational stress (60 items), which measured the global stress level one experiences in the organisation, and psychological stress (40 items), which measured the individual's psycho-physiological experience of stress. The subscale Coping Resources was omitted because the dimension did not directly measure the experience of stress. Occupational and psychological stresses were both measured on 5-point scales with 1 = *Rarely or never* to 5 = *Most of the time*. High scores on both scales indicate that the level of stress experienced by participants in their work environment is high, and that the identified stressful event had contributed at least in part to that level of stress experienced by participants at work. Participants' overall stress level was measured twice; once after SA (stress level at Time 1), and once after coping (stress level at Time 2).

**4. Collectivism.** We employed Schwartz's Values Survey<sup>1</sup> (1992), measuring cultural values with a descriptive statement accompanying each item ( $\alpha = .90$ ). A 9-point rating scale was used on how important each value was as 'a guiding principle in your life' (Feather, 1994, 1995). The scale ranged from -1 (*Opposed to my values*) to 0 (*Not important*) to 7 (*Of supreme importance*). This study used the collectivism dimension with 15 items based on Schwartz's study. A high score represents a high level of collectivistic values.

### Procedures

The sample came from a larger research project on occupational stress and coping. The collaborator in Sri Lanka was fully instructed in the procedure of administering and collecting the survey, and data entry. The survey was translated into Sinhala and Tamil (the official languages of Sri Lanka), and then another group of bilingual volunteers back-translated the measure into English to ensure the content validity.

Because RTM (Goh et al., 2010) was the template tested on the Sri Lankan sample, this study adopted a time series procedure that was based on the design of

Goh et al.'s study for which the RTM was developed (see Goh et al., 2010, for details). There were two survey sessions (1 month apart) that measured the variables according to their sequence in the RTM. The Time 1 survey measured the first three variables — primary appraisal, secondary appraisal and stress level — at Time 1. Participants were asked to identify a stressful event at work that continued for an extended period of time, and assessed their appraisals and stress level based on that event. The Time 2 survey measured the remaining variables, coping strategies and stress level, at Time 2, based on the same event that was identified in Time 1. Participants kept a diary record of the coping strategies that they used between Time 1 and Time 2. This ensured accurate recollection of their coping when the Time 2 survey was administered. In turn, it facilitated the measurement of stress levels at Time 2, which was an outcome of their coping strategies.

### Results

Prior to analysis, normality testing was carried out on all studied variables. Collectivism, primary appraisal and stress levels at Time 2 emerged significantly skewed and kurtosed with three multivariate outliers. Steps were taken to normalise the data. Further analyses on both the transformed and nontransformed data showed no significant difference in the variables' correlation coefficients. Hence, to maintain the sample's integrity, the nontransformed data was used. This was relevant to Sri Lanka as collectivism was negatively skewed, which matched the high level of collectivism found in most Asian countries. The mean, standard deviation, Cronbach alpha and correlation of variables are presented in Table 1.

Path analysis via AMOS 17.0 was used to examine the RTM, with collectivism as our control variable on Sri Lankan data. The fit indices were acceptable,  $\chi^2 = 4.84$ ,  $df = 7$ ,  $p = .67$ , SRMR = .03, RMSEA = .01, GFI = .99, NFI = .97, CFI = 1.00 (see Figure 2 for details). PA negatively influenced SA ( $\beta = -.31$ ; H1 was supported), SA negatively influenced S1 ( $\beta = -.14$ ; H2 was supported). S1 positively influenced both coping strategies ( $\beta$  problem-focused (PFC) = .15 and  $\beta$  emotion focused (EFC) = .21; H3a and H3b were supported). However, only EFC strategy showed a positive significant influence on S2 ( $\beta = .12$ ; H4b was supported). PA also significantly influenced S1 ( $\beta = .41$ ; H5 was supported) and S1 positively influenced S2 ( $\beta = .55$ ; H6 was supported). Collectivism as a control variable did not significantly influence the variables SA, PFC, EFC and S2 in the model except PA ( $\beta = -.15$ ) and S1 ( $\beta = -.18$ ).

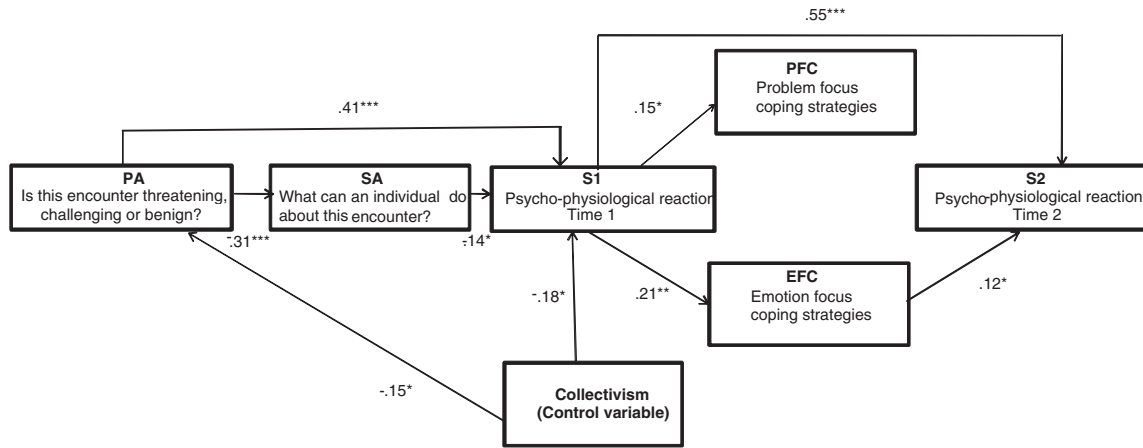
### Discussion

The above results provide empirical support for a Sri Lankan transactional model of stress and coping (SLTM). According to the model (Figure 2), higher PA triggered lower SA (i.e., greater appraisal of an event as being

**TABLE I**  
Means, Standard Deviation, Cronbach Alpha, and Correlation Table for the Sri Lankan Sample

	1	2	3	4	5	6	Mean	SD
Primary appraisal (PA)	(.69)	-.32*	.41**	.27**	.26**	.14	2.00	0.66
Secondary appraisal (SA)		(.69)	-.30**	-.19*	-.22**	-.11	3.31	0.61
Stress level at Time 1 (S1)			(.84)	.59**	.32**	.45*	2.22	0.35
Stress level at Time 2 (S2)				(.87)	.35**	.01	2.11	0.34
Emotion-focused coping (EFC)					(.86)	.47**	2.03	0.73
Problem-focused coping (PFC)						(.92)	3.00	0.83

Note: \*\* $p < .001$ , \* $p < .05$ .



**FIGURE 2**

Sri Lankan final model (SLTM) with collectivism as a control variable (only significant paths are displayed, \*\*\* $p < .000$ , \*\* $p < .001$ , \* $p < .05$ ).

stressful led to lesser freedom and options to cope as one wished) and higher S1 (i.e., greater appraisal of an event as being stressful led to a higher level of stress experienced at Time 1). Similarly, lower SA triggered higher levels of S1 (i.e., appraisal of lesser freedom and options to cope as one wished led to higher levels of stress experienced at Time 1). A high S1 in turn triggered a high S2 (i.e., high stress levels experienced at Time 1 led to high stress levels experienced at Time 2). The above relationships between PA, SA, and stress levels at Time 1 and Time 2 were also present in Goh et al.'s (2010) RTM. These findings therefore demonstrate the generalisability and cross-cultural robustness of the sequential links between one's cognitive appraisal processes and the psycho-physiological experience of stress.

However, the similarities between RTM and SLTM ended when PFC and EFC were examined. This study has directly addressed one of the issues that Goh et al. (2010) highlighted with regards to the need to test the model on specific coping strategies. Stress levels at Time 1 were found to significantly affect both PFC and EFC. It is logical that the more stress one experienced, the more intense or frequent one would use EFC strategies to deal with the stressful psycho-physiological experience, and PFC strategies to deal with the stressful event. However,

in this case, the impact of stress at Time 1 on EFC was stronger than PFC. This suggested that when Sri Lankan participants experienced stress at Time 1, they were more driven to engage in EFC strategies than PFC strategies. A plausible explanation is that in a highly collectivistic and restrictive socio-environment, when an individual faces a stressful event or stressor, his/her social affiliations (collective) will render assistance (Yeh et al., 2006) or stipulate a set of sanctioned coping responses. Therefore, there may be an over-emphasis or attention placed by the collective on the problem, but not enough on the individual's emotion. Hence the individual is left to focus on coping with his/her emotional experience of the stressor. Further research is needed to examine the above contention.

Our findings also revealed that participants with high EFC reported higher stress levels in Time 2 while PFC had no significant effect on stress levels in Time 2. The dynamics that transpired between stress levels in Time 1 and Time 2, EFC and PFC provided a plausible insight into how Sri Lankans could experience high levels of stress. They also appeared to support Bolz's (2002) claim that a lack of conflict resolution was found in Sri Lankan's collectivistic society. Both EFC and PFC were shown to be limited in shaping Sri Lankans' stress levels at Time 2. For example, if one experienced a high level of stress

in the beginning (i.e., high stress level at Time 1), the SLTM indicated that this individual would experience a high level of stress after coping (i.e., a high stress level at Time 2), a high level of PFC and EFC. However, both high PFC and high EFC could not reduce stress levels at Time 2 (Figure 2). Specifically, the participant's PFC had no significant association with stress levels at Time 2; this could be a lack of personal control over the stressful event when the collective was directly involved. The situation was aggravated by one's EFC, being increased by high stress levels at Time 1, which in turn increased the stress level at Time 2. Hence the coping strategies of Sri Lankans appeared limited in reducing their stress experience. Further research is needed to test the above scenario.

Although Sri Lanka could be considered as a collectivistic society, each individual might have a different level of collectivism. Therefore, we controlled this variable and found that high collectivistic respondents reported low PA (appraised an event as less stressful) than low collectivistic respondents. Similarly, high collectivist respondents tended to experience lower levels of stress (T1) than low collectivist respondents when facing a stressful event. There were two variables in the SLTM that collectivism could assert its influence on: first, the cognitive process (i.e., PA) and second, the initial stress experience (i.e., stress level at Time 1). A highly collectivistic Sri Lankan would experience less stress at the beginning with a low PA (appraising a difficult event as less stressful); his/her high collectivistic values would also bring about a low level of stress at Time 1. Collectivism therefore played an important role in the overall stress and coping process of Sri Lankans; it kept stress levels of the individuals at a low level during the early stage of the process (i.e., PA and stress levels at Time 1) and in doing so buffered the lack of effective coping strategies that awaited them at the later stage of the process. If this cultural dimension failed to affect PA and stress level at Time 1, then the stress levels of Sri Lankans would be amplified. Possible scenarios under which the impact of collectivism would break down were the civil war and tsunami that struck Sri Lanka. These catastrophes resulted in the destruction and massive displacement of families, relatives and other social/communal groups that one was affiliated with; therefore, the function of a collectivistic society was effectively disrupted.

### Limitations and Applications of the Study

There are some limitations in this study: first, we examined the relationship among variables across organisations. The organisational culture and climate might influence the stress-coping process. Furthermore, the respondents in this study were employed in an administrative capacity. Therefore the generalisability of the SLTM could be limited. To test the contention that the current findings were under-represented, future research could

include other high-risk occupations such as correctional officers, fire fighters, police officers, military personnel and nurses. The dynamic sequence in our model could also be examined further through more precise longitudinal research design. For example, instead of a time lag approach (i.e., Time 1 and Time 2), researchers might use real time measurement of one's cognitive, behavioural and psycho-physiological responses.

Despite the above limitations, the SLTM has important theoretical and applied implications in areas such as organisational psychology, cross-cultural psychology, positive psychology and social psychology. Specifically, it has verified the cross-cultural integrity of RTM by showing consistency in the basic chronological order of stress experience (i.e., PA-SA-S1-Cop-S2) in Sri Lankan and Australian samples. The versatility of this basic chronological order can be tested and extended further, not only to other cultures, but also to other social or organisational variables and settings. Furthermore, as a prototype, SLTM can guide investigations into whether collectivism moderates or mediates the relationship between components in the process. The SLTM is also a useful blueprint for future design of organisational development and training programs. For example, stress management program in Sri Lanka can focus on improving employees' corporate identity to increase their sense of belonging. Given that collectivism reduces the level of threat appraisal and initial experience of stress as shown in SLTM, an increased level of corporate identity can be beneficial in a stressful Sri Lankan work environment. Finally, with positive psychology gaining popularity over the decades, collectivism and the transactional models of stress and coping (e.g., RTM & SLTM) can contribute significantly to research areas such as positive leadership programs, resilience to negative emotions, mindfulness, and the transactional process of wellbeing.

### Conclusion

This study has produced empirical evidence for a transactional model (i.e., SLTM) that illustrates Sri Lankans' stress and coping process at work and how it relates to collectivism, a key cultural dimension of their society. It has also provided further support for the structural integrity of RTM on which the SLTM is based. Such details are crucial in understanding a country like Sri Lanka, where empirical data about its people's stress experience has been limited. Given the country's high suicide rates, the SLTM provides valuable information that will assist in the treatment of those experiencing severe stress and anxiety and hopefully in the prevention of suicide. Future initiatives to manage stress and its various negative consequences are advised to base their interventions on a culturally relevant theoretical framework such as the SLTM.



## Endnote

- 1 Family security, respect for tradition, social order, clean, moderate, forgiving, honour one's elders, politeness, protecting public image, national security, obedient, wisdom, devout, reciprocity of favours and self-discipline.

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