

## Research Work

# The Relationship between Life Stress and Superstitious Beliefs of Graduate Students

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*Received: 2018/10/04; Accepted: 2018/10/18*

### Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between life stress and superstitious beliefs. A total of twenty-five graduate students in MBA program at a selected public university was gathered for data collection through a questionnaire. The results of simple linear regression indicated that life stress could explain 32.7% of variance to superstitious beliefs of graduate students in MBA program ( $F(1, 25) = 11.193$ ,  $p < .003$ ). All in all, the greater life stress level of graduate students had, the more likely they engaged in superstitious beliefs. This indicated that graduate students searched for the external control over outcomes of their lives when they experienced the stressful situations. Limitations and recommendations for further studies were also discussed.

**Keywords:** Life stress, Superstitious beliefs, Superstition, Graduate students

### Introduction

Life stress occurs when demands placed on a person are assumed to exceed one's ability to deal with. In this situation, an individual attempts to use biological response mechanism to cope with stressors (Slocum & Hellriegel, 2007). Today, people have to deal with various stressors; they cope with these stressors distinctively as a result of their age, gender, personality, experience, and other characteristics. Sudden changes in life are viewed as weighty stressors that have a big impact on one person both mentally and physically. When experiencing too much change, an individual will have more stresses, which can exhaust the body's ability to respond leading to a negative consequence for one's health and work performance. Thus, learning to cope with life stressors in an effective way is a vital key for a person to overcome stress. People can manage their stress through the use of two key approaches including eliminating or controlling sources of stress and making themselves

to be better to deal with stress. Among numerous basic practices of stress management that individuals can use to cope with stress, past studies revealed that superstitious beliefs and behaviors were used to substitute their ability to respond to conditions that they have no control because people feel better if they have a sense of control over situations. When individuals are in overwhelming situations or they have no control over that events, they tend to have superstitious behaviors in order to influence situations (Langer & Roth, 1975). Scholars pointed out that an individual experiencing a high uncertainty situation has a tendency to open to superstitious beliefs and behaviors (Parinyaporn, 2016). In fact, stresses can be diminished because an individual holds the illusion of control at times of uncertainty (Malinowski, 2014). Past research confirmed this phenomenon as the significant relationship between stress and superstitious beliefs and behaviors was

found (Markel, 2005; Futrell, 2011; Shrivastav, 2017).

Like other cultures, Thai culture is carried out superstition. People tend to act in a superstitious way if they think that those behaviors or beliefs can bring good lucks or fend off bad lucks. For example, some people believe that if a lizard makes a sound, one should not leave home because one may experience misfortunes or a person should not turn one's head to the west because it is a direction of the dead, if do so, a person will have a nightmare, etc. Even though Thai people have a tendency to believe in superstition, a few research has paid attention on this area, especially the exploration of the relationship between life stress and superstitious beliefs. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between life stress and superstitious beliefs.

### Literature Reviews

There are two parts of the literature reviews in this study, which include concepts of stress and superstitious beliefs concepts. After reviewing the related literatures, research hypothesis was proposed in order to answer the objective of this study.

### Stress

Stress is "an unpleasant emotional state that results when someone is uncertain of his or her capacity to resolve a perceived challenge to an important value" (Wagner III & Hollenbeck, 2005, p. 138). Stress can be distinguished into two forms including emotional stress and physiological stress. While experiencing stressful situations, a body of individuals is trying to restore the imbalance that has been made by stress, which refers as the stressor response. Individuals who experience stress can be resulted in three consequences including psychological, behavioral, and physiological consequences. Anxiety, depression, frustration, and sleeplessness are examples of psychological consequence while physiological consequence relates to high blood pressure, muscle tension, headaches, and impaired immune systems. In addition, behavioral consequence refers to substance abuse, excessive smoking, and appetite disorders (Hitt, Miller, & Colella, 2006). To manage stress effectively, previous psychological research has suggested five healthy ways to help reduce stress in a short-term and a long-term, which include taking a break from a stressor, exercise, smiling and laughing, getting social support, and mediation (American Psychological Association, 2018).

### Superstitious Beliefs

Superstitious beliefs and behaviors are not solely limited to one group of people, but can also be found across all nations and cultures (Futrell, 2011). Superstitious belief is defined as the belief that specific incidents occur in a way that cannot be elucidated or described by a scientific reason (Huque & Chowdhury, 2007). Superstition can be viewed as either cultural or personal beliefs, which can bring good lucks or ward off bad lucks (Block & Kramer, 2009). Irrational fear of unknown shared among people in the specific society or culture depicts superstitious beliefs (Dayal, 2015). For instance, Thais believe that one should not have a haircut on Wednesday because it will bring a bad luck to one's life. This belief reflects superstition of Thais in a way that an individual can fend off bad lucks if they avoid doing this kind of action. On the other hand, plenty of Thais' superstitious beliefs that can be tied with a good luck such as if one dreams of snake binding, it means that the single will find the soulmate in the near future. However, the occurrence of superstitious beliefs can be resulted in different reasons such as "not knowing the nature of objects and events", "desire to know the future", "fear and stress", "need for security", "need for social cohesion", and "feeling of uncertainty" (Mutlu, Öntürk, Zorba, Karafil, Yuldiz, & Kartal, 2016).

Past research showed that superstitious beliefs usually occur in contexts of ambiguity and uncertainty (Shrivastav, 2017). In addition, Langer and Roth (1975) described that when individuals are in uncontrollable situations or they have no control over that events, they tend to have superstitious behaviors in order to influence incidents. Previous research indicated that an individual who experiences a high uncertainty situation may tend to expose to superstitious beliefs and behaviors (Parinyaporn, 2016). Anxieties and stresses can be reduced more easily when a person holds the illusion of control at times of uncertainty, which means that superstitious beliefs and behaviors are used as a way to fulfill what a person desires to accomplish in order to influence the situation (Malinowski, 2014).

Futrell (2011) studied a relationship between superstitious behaviors and anxiety by using a questionnaire to collect data from college students in the U.S.A. Results indicated that there was a positive correlation between superstitious beliefs and anxiety symptoms. Also, this study found that female students had higher superstitious beliefs than male students. Additionally, Shrivastav (2017)

investigated the relation between stress and superstitious belief. This study gathered data from a sample of 300 people in Uttar Pradesh, India, which age of samples were limited to 20-40 years. High validity and reliability of scale measurements were used to assess stress and superstitious behavior of participants. Results of this study demonstrated a statistically significant relationship between stress and superstitious behavior at 0.01 level. This can be concluded that high stress led to high superstitious behavior. Based on the literature reviews, the research hypothesis of this study was proposed as there is a positive relationship between people's life stress and superstitious beliefs. The findings of this study can help enhance a body of knowledge in this field, and can also be used as a fundamental for a further study in related topics.

### Methodology

This study was an exploratory study in which the relationship between life stress and superstitious beliefs was examined. A sample of twenty-five graduate students who enrolled in MBA program at a selected public university in Thailand was gathered for data collection through a self-administrated questionnaire. A questionnaire consisted of three parts including socio-demographics part, life stress part, and superstitious beliefs part. An 8-item of life stressful scale proposed by Robbins, Decenzo, and Coulter (2015) was utilized to assess life stress of participants. For determining superstitious beliefs, a 20-item of newly developed instrument was used to measure Thai superstitious beliefs. These scales were a 5-point rating scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Examples of questions in this scale measurement were "it is not appropriate to wear black to visit the patient because black is a symbol of grief and death" and "do not have a haircut on Wednesday because it will bring a bad luck to life", etc. To ensure the quality of this scale measurement, content validity with index objective congruence (IOC) method and reliability with Cronbach's Alpha test were conducted. The IOC score of each item for both scales was greater than 0.5, which indicated the acceptable validity of these scales. In addition, internal consistencies of these scales were acceptable as the alpha scores were greater than 0.7, as shown in Table 1 (Nunnally, 1978). In order to explore the relationship between life stress and superstitious beliefs of participants, linear regression analysis was utilized. According to the sample size rule of thumb, the appropriateness of using linear regression analysis requires at least 20 cases per independent variable (Statistics Solution,

2018). Thus, a sample of twenty-five participants was the appropriate number for linear regression analysis in this study since only one independent variable (life stress) was studied.

**Table 1 Reliability Coefficients of Life Stress and Superstitious Beliefs Scales**

Scale Measurement	Number of Items	Alpha Scores
Life Stress	8	0.791
Superstitious Beliefs	20	0.916

### Results

Simple linear regression was calculated to assess whether life stress variable explain superstitious beliefs of graduate students. A normal P-P plot was made to check on normality. The plot showed no serious departures of dependent variable, which determined that normality assumption was met. The Durbin-Watson was also tested to assess independence of errors. The value of 1.923 determined that assumption of independence of errors was met. A significant regression equation was found ( $F(1, 25) = 11.193, p < .003$ ), with an  $R^2$  of 32.7. This result indicated that life stress could explain 32.7% of variance to superstitious beliefs of graduate students in MBA program (Table 2). This suggested that there were other variables that could explain superstitious beliefs of graduate students that had not been included in this study. In sum, graduate students' superstitious beliefs is equal to  $1.522 + .566(\text{Life Stress})$ . As a consequence, research hypothesis of this study was confirmed.

**Table 2 Simple Linear Regression of Life Stress on Superstitious Beliefs**

Model	Unstandardized		Standardized	t	Sig.
	B	S.E.	Beta		
(Constant)	1.522	.494		3.082	.005**
LS	.566	.169	.572	3.346	.003**
<b>n=25      df =1      F = 11.193      Sig. =.003</b> <b>Durbin-Watson = 1.923      R<sup>2</sup> = .327</b> <b>Adjusted R<sup>2</sup> = .298</b>					

\*\*Significant Level at .01, LS = Life Stress

### Conclusion, Discussions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to examine the association between life stress and superstitious

beliefs. Twenty-five MBA students at a selected public university agreed to participate in data collection. Findings of this present study revealed that life stress had a significant influence on superstitious beliefs of graduate students. The result of this present study confirmed the findings of Shrivastav's study (2017), which a significant relationship between stress level and superstitious behavior was found. Also, this current study supported the findings of Futrell's work (2011), which a positive linear relationship between superstitious beliefs and anxiety symptoms was discovered.

As Hitt, Miller, and Colella (2006) suggested that individual can manage stress effectively by dealing with it rather than trying to avoid it, this may result in behaviors of this group of graduate students to utilize superstition as the way out to cope with stress. From the researcher's viewpoint, superstitious beliefs can be perceived as a positive coping mechanism compared to other approaches such as using alcohol or self-abuse with the myth that these can help reduce stress. Findings of this present study confirmed previous research, which found that individuals have a tendency to increase their superstitious beliefs when they are in stressful incidents as an effort to gain a delusion of control over outcomes (Lasikiewicz & Teo, 2018). As far as superstitious beliefs will not endanger oneself and others, it can be viewed as a healthy way of coping with stress. Also, as individuals have been involved with multiple sources of stress, having various strategies including superstitious beliefs to cope with stress is normal. Since participants looked for the external control of their lives when they experienced the stressful events despite they had been educated in a graduate level, this finding suggested conducting the further study in the comparison between participants with different educational levels. The major limitation of this present study was a sample size, which was very small and needed to be expanded in a future research. Thus, the findings of this current study cannot be generalized, and need to be used with caution.

### Acknowledgement

I am very thankful to Rajamangala University of Technology Phra Nakhon for facility support and sponsorship for publication.

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