

Culture and Stress

Recently, we have been looking at how factors such as personality and gender can influence how people are affected by stress. This article examines research into cultural differences in people's experience of and response to stress.

By culture, we mean the set of ideas, beliefs, expectations and behaviours that are shared by a particular group of people. Where it comes to stress, an individual's culture could affect their experience in a number of ways including:

- The types of stressor to which they are likely to be exposed
- The way these stressors are perceived and understood
- The extent of the physiological stress response produced
- The coping mechanisms available to deal with the stressor

Type of Stressor

Different cultural groups inhabit different geographical, economic and political areas. For this reason, they are likely to be exposed to different types of stressful event. For example, in the UK we tend to define stress in terms of the workplace (e.g. job overload), the social environment (e.g. family relationships) and economic factors (e.g. debt). This is reflected in the types of stressor that are listed in the Social Readjustment Rating Scale and other measures of life stress (e.g. divorce, change of job, change of financial circumstances). In other cultural contexts, different stressors are likely to be experienced. For example, in some parts of the world natural disasters such as earthquakes, floods and tornadoes are more common, making exposure to extreme stressors more likely. Other parts of the world may be affected by war or famine that make daily survival very difficult and render the types of concerns that predominate in the UK largely irrelevant.

Different sources of stress are experienced by members of a minority culture living within a majority culture, for example, immigrant refugees in the

UK. Such groups are affected by a range of stressors, some of which are shared with members of the majority culture (e.g. poverty, poor housing) and some of which, such as discrimination in the workplace and the threat of racist abuse and physical attack, are not.

Perception of Stressors

Cultures differ according to what their members perceive as stressful. For example, in parts of South East Asia, such as Korea or Japan, Academic success is given higher importance than it is in the UK. This is reflected in the degree of educational stress suffered by South East Asian students. In Japan, for example, there are regular reports of students committing suicide because they have not passed an exam. Whilst such occurrences are not unheard of in the UK, their relative absence compared to Japan suggests that cultural differences in beliefs lead to differences in the experience of exams as stressful (Colby, 1987).



Japanese and Korean students seem to suffer greater exam stress than British

Cultural norms can influence whether an event is seen as stressful at all. For example, in a largely monogamous culture such as the UK's, the discovery that one's significant other has taken another partner is generally perceived as stressful. However, in some African cultures where polygamy is the norm, the taking of another partner might be welcomed, as it means that there will be another person to help with childcare and running the household. Schwartz et al (1983) conducted a study where Black and White South Africans completed Holmes and Rahe's (1967) SSRS and a variety of other measures of perceived stress. They found that, whilst for the White participants there was a positive correlation between SSRS scores and perceived stress scores, there was no such relationship for the Black participants. This seems to indicate that the types of event experienced as stressful for people with a European

cultural background are different to those experienced as stressful by Black South Africans, whose cultural beliefs, understandings and expectations are different. Similarly, Zheng & Lin (1994) used the SSRS with Chinese participants. Although the Chinese people rated death of spouse the most stressful life event, as Westerners do, there were significant differences with some of the other questionnaire items. For example, they rated the death of a close family member as more stressful than divorce.

Booyesen (2000) has conducted research into some of the differences between White and Black South Africans that affect their responses to workplace stressors. She found that Black participants were significantly more tolerant of uncertainty than White. This was related to the African cultural belief of not having control over the future, which contrasts with the European cultural outlook. Because of this difference, Black South Africans were less prone to work stress than White South Africans, who were more likely to become anxious when confronted by unstructured situations.

Physiological Responses

Recently, some evidence has emerged that people from some cultures produce stronger physiological stress responses than others. This difference does not seem to relate to genetic differences between cultures (which are generally very small) but has more to do with culturally preferred child-rearing practices.

Commons and Miller (1998) carried out a large scale study that compared American parents with a number of other cultures, including the Gusii people of Kenya. They looked at a variety of measures including parental behaviour, attachment, emotional learning and brain functioning. They found significant differences between American and Gusii parents including:

- American infants and children are expected to sleep in a separate room, whereas Gusii children sleep in the parental bed.
- American parents emphasise verbal interaction with children, whereas Gusii parents emphasise physical contact.
- American parents are much more tolerant of crying and

leave their infants to cry much longer than Gusii parents before attempting to console them.

- American parents stimulate their children for longer periods (e.g through extended play) than Gusii, who prefer short bursts of interaction, which stop when the child becomes too excited.



A Gusii mother and child

According to Commons and Miller, the American approach to child rearing is related to the goal of promoting independence. American parents typically voice the concern that, for example, unless the child learns to sleep on its own, wait for its meals and so on, it will grow up dependent on others. This runs counter to the generally individualistic outlook of Western culture, where independence and self-reliance are favoured. However, there is the possibility that the early experiences of American children have an effect on their physiological stress responses in later life.

Because of their parental behaviours, American children spend long periods in high states of arousal, from a very early age. Of particular concern to Commons and Miller is the observation that they may be left to cry for long periods and receive relatively little physical contact compared to Gusii children. When the child is distressed, the adrenal cortex releases cortisol, a stress hormone (Haley & Stansbury, 2003). It is possible that, because the infant's brain is still developing, the increased cortisol levels in American children could have an effect on the way their brains develop, making them more vulnerable to stress in later life

(Todd et al, 1995). Siegel and Shore (1998) conducted a longitudinal study in which children were followed for 17 years. Those who showed the highest levels of cortisol during parental separation in early childhood were most vulnerable to psychological problems, including stress-related ones, in later life.

Similar results have been found when subcultures within a particular society have been investigated. For example, it has been found that African Americans produce more extreme stress responses than European Americans to a range of stressors including injury or illness, change in work responsibilities and change in living conditions (Comer, 1998). Similarly, hypertension (high blood pressure) is twice as common in African Americans as in European. One possible interpretation of these data is that minority groups, who are exposed to poor living conditions and social discrimination very early in life develop hyper-responsive stress hormone systems that increase the intensity of their stress responses later in life (Marano, 1999).

All of this research suggests that the early experiences of members of different cultures may affect the way they respond to stress throughout their lives.

Coping Mechanisms

A further way in which a culture may mediate the effects of stress is through the way it makes available different coping mechanisms to its members.



For many African Americans, religious involvement and belief is an important source of stress coping and social support

Some of the ways that cultures differ in this respect are:

- Beliefs that allow them to make sense of stressors
- Beliefs about how stressors should be coped with
- The availability of social support

Cultures transmit belief systems that may affect the way their members make sense of stressors and, consequently, how well they are able to cope with them. One such example is religious belief. People with a religious belief system may be able to draw on 'divine assistance' to help them cope with the stressors that affect them. For example, Gillard and Paton (1999) investigated the responses of Fijian islanders to Hurricane Nigel in 1997. They found that the majority of their interviewees felt that their religious beliefs had been helpful in adjusting to the stress brought on by the disaster. Besides a subjective impression that religion assists coping, it has also been shown to have beneficial health effects. Cooper-Patrick (1998) reports that African Americans make frequent use of religious and spiritual beliefs to cope with stress and adversity. Steffen et al (2001) found that religious coping (e.g. praying for assistance) was associated with significant reductions in blood pressure amongst African Americans but not in a matched sample of European Americans, which might suggest differences in the way these two cultures use religious beliefs to structure their experience.

Different cultures also transmit different values and beliefs about the appropriate way to cope with stressors. As was indicated above, US American culture emphasises independence and self-reliance, which could have an impact on a person's willingness to access coping resources such as social support. Commons and Miller (1998) suggest that the individualistic outlook predominant amongst European Americans leads them to regard stress and trauma as "shameful, something the individual should have controlled or avoided as part of their independence, and typically something to be dealt with alone". Even within Euro-American cultures there appear to be differences in the ways that people attempt to cope with stressors. Kohlmann et al (2002) compared German and US American students on the types of coping strategies they used when faced with a variety of stressful situations including public speaking, exams and job interviews. They found that the American students were more likely to use 'cognitive avoidance' strategies such as positive reinterpretation (e.g. 'I treat it as an opportunity to practice my skills') whereas the German students were more likely to employ 'vigilance' strategies (e.g. 'I think about everything that could go wrong').

Finally, cultures vary according to the amount of social support they make available to their members. A distinction can be drawn here between individualistic cultures, where individuality, self-reliance, independence and competition are emphasised, and collectivist cultures, where mutual inter-dependence and co-operation are considered more important. In the West, individualism predominates whereas many non-Western cultures have a more collectivistic outlook. Not only does this have an impact on the individual's willingness to seek social support from others (see above) but it also affects the extent of the social support that is available to the individual. There is considerable evidence that social support is one of the most important variables that affects the impact of stress (Sarafino, 1998). Because some cultures offer more social support than others, it might be expected that individuals from within these cultures are able to cope more effectively with stress. Some evidence supports this view. For example, it has been found that non-Western patients with schizophrenia have more social support and better treatment outcomes than

Western patients. Since relapse in schizophrenia is associated with increased stress levels it seems likely that the social support offered by non-Western families is significant in producing a better prognosis for recovering schizophrenics.

However, although increased social support appears to significantly reduce the effects of stress amongst collectivist cultures, the tendency to rely on social support can cause problems if they are cut off from the community that provides it. This can especially be the case for immigrants. Kung and Castaneda (2000) compared stress and coping in immigrant and US-born Mexican Americans. They found that immigrants tended to rely on social support that might be lacking, whereas US-born Mexicans adopted active coping strategies that tended to be more effective in the social and cultural context of the US.

Conclusions

Members of different cultures vary in their stress responses. The sources of variation include the types of stressor they are exposed to, the way they perceive stressors, the responses they produce to stressors and the way they attempt to cope with them. These findings have practical implications in a variety of areas including medicine, psychiatry and social work, where professional psychologists could benefit from an insight into their clients' cultures in order to better help them deal with the stresses that may contribute to their clients' physical, mental and social difficulties.