ARI Research Note 91-29

Cultural Parameters of Stress
AD-A232 526

Vernessa R. Clark

Morehouse College

DTIC
ELECTE
MAR 0 6 1991
S
B
D

Basic Research
Michael Kaplan, Director

February 1991

United States Army
Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences

91 3 04 119

U.S. ARMY RESEARCH INSTITUTE
FOR THE BEHAVIORAL AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

A Field Operating Agency Under the Jurisdiction
of the Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel

EDGAR M. JOHNSON
Technical Director

JON W. BLADES
COL, IN
Commanding

Research accomplished under contract
for the Department of the Army

Morehouse College

Technical review by

Michael Kaplan

REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE

Form Approved
OMB No. 0704-0188

REPORT SECURITY CLASSIFICATION classified		1b. RESTRICTIVE MARKINGS --
SECURITY CLASSIFICATION AUTHORITY		3. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY OF REPORT
DECLASSIFICATION/DOWNGRADING SCHEDULE		Approved for public release; distribution is unlimited.
'ERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER(S)		5. MONITORING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER(S) ARI Research Note 91-29

NAME OF PERFORMING ORGANIZATION rehouse College	6b. OFFICE SYMBOL (If applicable) --	7a. NAME OF MONITORING ORGANIZATION U.S. Army Research Institute
ADDRESS (City, State, and ZIP Code) partment of Psychology 0 Westview Drive lanta, GA 30314		7b. ADDRESS (City, State, and ZIP Code) 5001 Eisenhower Avenue Alexandria, VA 22333-5600
NAME OF FUNDING/SPONSORING ORGANIZATION U.S. Army Research istitute for the Behavioral id Social Sciences	8b. OFFICE SYMBOL (If applicable) PERI-B	9. PROCUREMENT INSTRUMENT IDENTIFICATION NUMBER DAAL03-86-D-001

ADDRESS (City, State, and ZIP Code)

)01 Eisenhower Avenue
.exandria, VA 22333-5600

10. SOURCE OF FUNDING NUMBERS

PROGRAM ELEMENT NO.	PROJECT NO.	TASK NO.	WORK UNIT ACCESSION NO.
61102B	74F	N/A	N/A

TITLE (Include Security Classification)

iltural Parameters of Stress

PERSONAL AUTHOR(S)
.ark, Vernessa R.

. TYPE OF REPORT inal	13b. TIME COVERED FROM 90/05 TO 90/08	14. DATE OF REPORT (Year, Month, Day) 1991, February	15. PAGE COUNT 13

SUPPLEMENTARY NOTATION

ntracting Officer's Representative, Michael Kaplan.

COSATI CODES			18. SUBJECT TERMS (Continue on reverse if necessary and identify by block number)
FIELD	GROUP	SUB-GROUP	Cultural differences, Performance
			Stress Coping

ABSTRACT (Continue on reverse if necessary and identify by block number)

This paper discusses the role of culture diversity in the mediation of stress
)praisal. First a discussion of mediators, such as ratings of life events and perceived
ontrol, is presented. This discussion is followed by a brief discussion of ways in
nich people of different cultures contend with stress.

DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY OF ABSTRACT ☑ UNCLASSIFIED/UNLIMITED ☐ SAME AS RPT. ☐ DTIC USERS	21. ABSTRACT SECURITY CLASSIFICATION Unclassified	
. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE INDIVIDUAL ichael Kaplan	22b. TELEPHONE (Include Area Code) (202) 274-8722	22c. OFFICE SYMBOL PERI-BR

Form 1473, JUN 86   *Previous editions are obsolete.*   SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF THIS PAGE

UNCLASSIFIED

Cultural Parameters of Stress

Introduction

Selye (1956) described stress as a adaptation syndrome that occurs in response to any stressor. Lazarus (1966) viewed it as an interaction between the individual and the stimulus and proposed that this interaction is based on the individual's appraisal of the stimulus and his/her ability to cope with it. Conceptualizing it more in psychological terms, Burchfield (1979) defined stress as a disruption in psychological homeostasis. This disruption is within the awareness of the organism and is usually accompanied by changes in physiological responding. The many definitions of stress show that it is difficult to come to a consensus on issues concerning stress within the American culture. It is even more difficult to assess and define stress in other cultures where different parameters of stress may exist. Cultural variability provides an explanation for the ways people appraise and cope with stressful events. In the present paper the author will discuss the role of culture diversity in the mediation of stress appraisal. A discussion of mediators such as ratings of life events and perceived control will be presented. This will be followed by a brief discussion of ways in which people of different cultures contend with stress.

Discussion

Cultural Differences in the Appraisal of Stress

According to Smith (1985), everyone develops a world view based on one's culture. This world view in turn affects the manner in which we assess stressful stimuli and life events. It provides us with an understanding of the nature of man, an understanding of man's relationship with each other and with the environment, and an understanding of our spirituality (Smith, 1985). The hypothesis that one's culture influences his assessment of stressful life events was supported by Harmon, Masuda and Holmes (1969) who conducted a cross-cultural study using the Social Readjustment Rating Scale (SRRS). The authors found that although subjects of French, Swiss, Belgian and American descent reported agreement in some life events ratings, there were significant differences in overall European and American views of stress. European subjects were found to be more concerned with vacation and leisure time, this finding was especially prevalent in single subjects. In addition, European subjects reported that events such as pregnancy, beginning and ending formal school, having an outstanding personal achievement, detention in jail and a major change in eating habits are stressful. In contrast, the Americans reported that foreclosure on a mortgage, retirement from work, death of a close family member, and a change in residence or living conditions required the most amount of adjusting. It appears that changes in family

life had more of an affect on the American sample than their European counterparts. This concern for family life was also seen in a study by Orth-Gomer (1978). This author compared Swedish and American ischemic heart disease patients on stress experiences in education, work and family life. She found that the Swedes were more satisfied with their family life than the American sample and therefore viewed it as less stressful. The American sample reported more problems at home and reported that they would change their family life if they were given the opportunity. The Swedish sample on the other hand reported more work related stress. In a similar study, Masuda and Holmes (1967) administered the Social Readjustment Rating Scale to a Japanese sample of adults. They found that compared to an American sample, more Japanese reported that detention in jail and minor violations of the law required much adjusting. This difference in stressfulness was attributed to the obligation the Japanese individual feels he has to his family, his name and to his social status. In essence, each of the studies provide support for the supposition that as cultural differences increase, agreement among life events ratings decrease.

Another well documented mediator of stress is perceived control. Much of the research on this topic attempts to answer the question of whether one attributes the events that involve him as being out of his control (external locus of control) or within his control (internal locus of control). Research has

shown that the more control an individual believes he has over a situation, the less stressful it will appear (Smith, 1985). This is one of the reasons that an internal locus of control orientation has been favored in the American culture. Other cultures however place emphasis on an external orientation. For example, in the Chinese culture, chance and fate are perceived as being apart of everyday life, therefore major life events are often viewed as being outside of one's control. This is in contrast to the American culture which emphasizes rugged individualism, independence and self reliance. Hsieh, Shybut and Lotsof (1969) supported these statements when they studied internal versus external control in Hong Kong Chinese, American-born Chinese and Anglo-American high school students. Using Rotter's Locus of Control Scale, the authors found that the Anglo-American subjects were the most internal and the Hong Kong Chinese subjects were the least internal. They also found that the American-born Chinese subjects were significantly more internal than their Hong Kong counterparts.

Shejwal and Palsane (1986) reported a similar pattern of scoring while studying Hindu adults in India. After administering the Rotter Locus of Control Scale and a Life Change Measure (measure of stress level), the authors found that the Hindu sample possessed more external orientations than their American counterparts. The variation in orientation was attributed to differences in the belief systems within the two

cultures. The Indian people place a great emphasis on religion and the karma philosophy. Their external orientation may be the result of their great reliance on these external forces. In addressing cultural differences in the stress concept, Palsane, Bhavsar, Goswami and Evans (1986) stated that the word "stress" is not used in the Indian tradition. Instead, references such as nirvana (suffering or misery), klesa (affliction) and kama (desire) are used to describe the stress syndrome. According to traditional Indian thought, the root of stress is desire (kama). It is believed that desire causes worries and nourishes misery (nirvana), and the gain of undesirable things or the lost of desirable things may lead to psychic diseases. Strong desires also produces goal oriented behavior which leads to narrow or inflexible thinking (Palsane et al., 1986). Desires are especially a problem when the ego becomes involved. If the thing one desires is closely related to the "self" then strength is added to the attractions or repulsions and as a result, afflictions (klesas) arise (Palsane et al., 1986). This explanation of Indian tradition is in concordance with Shejwal and Palsane's (1986) findings.

Cultural Differences in Coping with Stress

The ways in which people choose to cope with stress depends greatly on the way in which they appraise stressful events. For example, Americans tend to cope with stress by finding ways to eliminate its source or reducing the impact of its force.

However in cultures more characteristic of an external orientation, the people rely more on outside forces to change their view of the stressor. Instead of trying to change the source of the stress, they alter their belief systems in an effort to contend with the stressor. This can especially be seen in the Indian tradition where disorders are believed to be an imbalance between dosas (physical body) and gunas (mind). Stress reduction is achieved through obtaining a balance of these two components (Palsane et al., 1986). Two primary methods of achieving this balance in the Indian tradition are yoga and karma. Yoga is a form of meditation that inhibits the distortions of the mind and frees it from conflict. Karma is a philosophical way of approaching life events. An individual believing in karma believes salvation is obtained by performing one's duties in life and expecting no reward or punishment in return. He does things because of the feeling that they are the right things to do. Therefore the person learns to accept negative life events as a natural part of life and tries to handle them to the best of his ability without troubling about the outcome. According to Palsane et al. (1986), an individual subscribing to the karma philosophy decreases stress by accepting the afflictions in life without putting significance on their consequences.

Other cultures also rely on external factors in coping with certain stressful stimuli or events. Dressler (1985) found that

"personalistic belief systems" influenced the way members of three different cultures coped with stress. Studying people who live in a small town in St. Lucia, West Indies, in a small rural town in Alabama and people who have migrated from Puerto Rico to Connecticut, the author reported that each of the groups believed in a form of sorcery as a way of combatting social stressors. For example, persons in St. Lucia believed in a set of ritualistic practices called "obeah" (Dressler, 1985). These practices include the use of spirits and supernatural beings and are often used for personal gain. Persons in Alabama believed in a similar practice called "hoodoo". Just as with those studied in St. Lucia, supernatural beings are used in an effort to prevent certain stressors in the environment. The author also found similar belief systems in a Puerto Rican sample who were at the time living in another distinct culture. He found a strong belief in "espiritismo" a form of sorcery in the Puerto Rican culture. According to the author, each of these belief systems "enable[s] the individual to formulate and express their distress in a culturally appropriate way. It enables them to resolve their own distress by projecting it onto the supernatural world" (Dressler, 1985, p. 279).

In summary, there appears to be a direct linkage between an individual's cultural beliefs and his manner of coping with stress. People with external locus of control orientations tended to rely more on outside forces in coping with stress. In

utilizing these forces, persons try to accommodate the source of the stress by altering their belief system or their way of thinking. This behavior is in contrast to that of individuals with an internal locus of control orientation who attempt to alleviate stress by altering the stressor or its impact.

Concluding Comments

Although Selye professes that his stress concept is employed in all nations (Selye, 1975), the question of whether the people of these nations conceive of it the same way is a salient one and should be investigated. As was shown in this paper, there are cultural variations in the appraisal of stressful life events and in the ways of coping with stressful events or stimuli. Similar variations are believed to occur in terms of performance under stress (Kaplan, in press). Scientists conducting cross-cultural research on stress should recognize that the individual's perception is greatly influenced by his culture. Shejwal and Palsane (1986) failed to acknowledge the importance of cultural differences when they examined the relationship between levels of stress and internal locus of control. As with the American culture they hypothesized that they would find a negative relationship between the two variables in a sample of Hindu adults. Unexpectedly they found that the high stress group possessed more internal orientations than the low stress group. This finding should not be surprising to someone who understands that Hindu people depend a great deal on external support systems

in an effort to reduce stress. In their culture, an external orientation may lead to lower stress levels.

In summary, it appears that there are boundaries set by each culture in terms of how we react to stress. It is imperative that scientists have an understanding of these cultural parameters before attempting to obtain or explain these reactions.

References

Burchfield, S.R. (1979). The stress response: A new perspective. Psychosomatic Medicine, 41, 661-672.

Dressler, W.W. (1985). Stress and sorcery in three social groups. International Journal of Social Psycniatry, 31, 275-281.

Harmon, D.K., Masuda, M. & Holmes, T.H. (1985). The Social Readjustment Rating Scale: A cross-cultural study of western Europeans and Americans. Journal of Psychosomatic Research, 14, 391-400.

Hsieh, T.T., Shybut, J. & Lotsof, E.J. (1969). Internal versus external control and ethnic group membership. Journal of Counseling and Clinical Psychology, 33, 122-124

Kaplan, M. (In press). Cultural ergonomics: An evolving focus for military human factors. In R. Gal & A.D. Mangelsdorff (Eds.), A handbook of military psychology. London: Wiley.

Lazarus, R.S. (1966). Psychological stress and the coping process. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Masuda, M. & Holmes, T.H. (1967). The Social Readjustment Rating Scale: A cross cultural study of Japanese and Americans. Journal of Psychosomatic Research, 11, 227-231.

Orth-Gomer, K. (1979). Ischemic heart disease and psychological stress in Stockholm and New York. Journal of Psychosomatic Research, 22, 165-173.

Palsane, M.N., Bhavsar, S.N., Goswami, R.P. & Evans, G.W. (1986).

The concept of stress in the Indian tradition. <u>Journal of
Indian Psychology</u>, <u>5</u>, 1-12.

Selye, H. (1956). <u>The stress of life</u>. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Selye, H. (1975). Confusion and Controversy in the stress field.
<u>Journal of Human Stress</u>, <u>1</u>, 37-44.

Shejwal, B.R. & Palsane, M.N. (1986). Locus of control: A
personality correlate in life events stress. <u>Journal of
Indian Psychology</u>, <u>5</u>, 177-181.

Smith, E.M.J. (1985). Ethnic minorities: Life stress, social
support, and mental health issues. <u>The Counseling
Psychologist</u>, <u>13</u>(4), 537-579.

Taylor, M.C., Rhyne, L., Rosenthal, S. & Dogbe, K. (1987).
<u>Introduction to sociology</u>. New York: MacMillan.