Handbook of Multicultural Perspectives on Stress and Coping
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Handbook of Multicultural Perspectives on Stress and Coping

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With 16 Figures

Springer
Foreword

The frontispiece of Geert Hofstede’s influential book, Culture’s consequences: Comparing values, behaviors, institutions, and organizations across nations (Hofstede, 2001) includes the following quote: “Vérité en-deça des pyrénées, erreur au-delà”. Written about 350 years ago by the French mathematician and physicist Blaise Pascal and included in his Pensées, Hofstede’s translation is “There are truths on this side of the Pyrenees that are falsehoods on the other.” One can find hundreds of similar phrases in world literature. They are all variations of the axiom that what is true or valid in one’s neighborhood, region or nation is not necessarily true or valid elsewhere. The quote, however, is not given here because it is clever or cute, or made more important because of the immense status of Pascal, but because it says something quite important about the seemingly eternal tendency of inquisitive humans to try and understand the differences in the psychological makeup among people, as well as to comprehend their similarities. Centuries earlier, Theophrastus, primarily a botanist and taxonomist, and apparently Aristotle’s favorite student, was reported to have said the following in 319 B.C.:

I have often applied my thoughts to the perplexing question – which will probably puzzle me forever – why, while all Greece lies under the same sky and all Greeks are educated alike, we have different personalities. I have been a student of human nature for a long time, and have observed the different composition of men. I thought I would write a book about it.

A century earlier, another Greek scholar by the name of Protagoras, said that “Man is the measure of all things: of things that are, that they are; of things that they are not, that they are not.”

Fast forward to 1990 and we find a similar sentiment expressed by the cultural psychologist Richard Shweder:

(What) is truly true (beautiful, good) within one intentional world – is not necessarily true (beautiful, good) in every intentional world; and what is true (beautiful, good) in every intentional world may be truly true (beautiful, good) in this one or that one.

Humans, in other words, have been curious about differences among and between people since the dawn of time. Indeed, these differences have led to any number of wars and have been the source of ridicule, prejudice, and many misunderstandings, both large
and small. They have also been the source of fawning admiration, myths, and benign envies. Fortunately, however, many scholars throughout the ages have, like Theophrastus, sought to understand them by using various scientific methods and modes of inquiry. For many years, psychologists and other social scientists have shown considerable interest in the phenomenon of individual differences in a wide range of human characteristics. If one were to examine the psychological (and surely the anthropological) literature during the past 150 years, reams of material would be found in a quest to find and explain differences, and similarities, between human beings on all sorts of human capacities, qualities, abilities, beliefs, emotions, languages, and so forth.

Because this edited book has a focus on stress and coping, my brief comments will be limited to the field of psychology and, perhaps tangentially or by implication, to a few neighboring fields. Stress and coping, as well as numerous related concepts such as anxiety, emotionality, and adjustment, have been part of the psychological literature since psychology became a modern and respected field. The same concepts or constructs, when considered against the background of culture, have been heavily studied. This is also true of many other aspects of interest to psychologists. Thus, studying the various ways in which stress and coping come into play in different cultures or ethnic groups is not at all new. What is new, however, is the relatively recent emphasis that cross-cultural and cultural psychologists have placed on these areas in terms of intensity, sophistication, and international cooperation in scholarship and research. This Handbook is an example of this recent heightened interest. To explain, at least partially, how this came about requires a little background information.

It is generally agreed, among psychologists who identify themselves as cross-cultural psychologists, that the “modern movement” in cross-cultural psychology began in the mid-to-late 1960s. While this foreword is not the place to give the details about these beginnings, a small number of independent efforts converged to form the nucleus of a concerted and growing effort to understand, more than ever before, the nature and scope of human differences and similarities across cultures. The coalescing factors led, for instance, to the inauguration in 1972 of the International Association for Cross-Cultural Psychology. This effort spawned an ever-increasing sophistication of both scholarship, collegiality in sharing and designing studies, organization, and the dissemination of research findings in such publications as the Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology, Culture and Psychology, Transcultural Psychiatry, and the International Journal of Intercultural Relations.

A critical factor, and one that is a clear measure of the growing sophistication of this area, has been the appearance of a small number of influential handbooks. Specifically, the seminal six-volume Handbook of Cross-Cultural Psychology, published in 1980, signaled that cross-cultural psychology had finally “come of age.” Volume 6 in the HCCP, subtitled Psychopathology, included chapters of major concern to researchers who studied a wide range of phenomena within the context of other cultures. The HCCP was revised in 1997, but contained only three volumes (many of the previous chapters were archived). The revised Handbook contained several chapters of interest to those who study stress and coping. The Handbook of Intercultural Training appeared in 1996 and it contained some material relevant to the content of the present handbook. A related work, the Handbook of International and Intercultural Communication appeared in 2001. It, too, has chapters that are relevant in the understanding of stress and coping within and across cultures. Finally, the Handbook of Culture and Psychology, also published in 2001, con-
tained several chapters of interest to those whose career orientations fall within the domain of stress, coping, and its various components. One chapter, concerned with the large area of research on acculturation, is especially relevant in this context.

And now we have a most welcome newcomer, the Handbook of Multicultural Perspectives on Stress and Coping. A sure sign of increasing interest in this important area, the HMPSC, as it will become known among the cognoscenti, will take its place among the growing collections of work that will contribute in numerous important ways to an understanding of the ways in which the complexities of culture interact with equally complex concepts of stress and coping. I congratulate Paul and Lilian Wong for their diligent efforts in this important project. To provide such a compendium of perspectives and challenges is a remarkable service to those who wish to contribute to an understanding of the various ways that culture interacts with stress and coping. They and the approximately 50 contributing authors merit applause for this effort. I am nearly certain the HMPSC will be revised within the next decade. The work that is done between now and then will inform an even better Handbook. The revision will likely be more expansive and more inclusive. Whatever shape it takes, those who are involved will have benefited greatly from the present energetic effort.

Walter J. Lonner
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REFERENCE

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Introduction
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BEYOND STRESS AND COPING: The Positive Psychology of Transformation

Paul T. P. Wong, Lilian C. J. Wong, and Carolyn Scott

1. INTRODUCTION

Often, it is easier to study a subject than to define it. Anyone foolish enough to attempt a comprehensive and universally acceptable definition of human culture would be like a blind person trying to describe an elephant. A similar difficulty exists in defining the psychology of stress and coping. Nevertheless, we cannot simply run away from these challenges; we still need to clarify and differentiate some of the key concepts, such as multiculturalism, stress, and coping in order to synthesize the vast and complex subject matter of this edited volume.

It is our hope that this book will inspire scholars and professionals to develop new visions of the human drama of surviving and flourishing in an ever-changing cultural context. We want to challenge our readers to venture out from their familiar territories of well-defined and rigorous research paradigms and consider larger but more abstruse issues of human existence. It is through integrating and transcending the various fragmented research paradigms that we can gain greater understanding of both the universal and culture-specific adaptive process of human beings.

2. WHAT IS CULTURE?

In our everyday conversations, the word “culture” is typically used to connote the customary practices and language associated with a particular racial or ethnic group. Culture is also commonly conceived as a way of perceiving the world based upon a shared set of social beliefs and values. However, at a deeper level, culture is a much more complex construct. Cultures are human creations, socially constructed and transmitted through language, conventions, socialization, and social institutions.
Cultures are created not only to enhance human beings’ physical survival and creature comforts, but also to meet their deeper psychological needs for meaning and significance through shared cultural metaphors and symbols. According to Brislin (1990), “culture refers to widely shared ideals, values, formation, and uses of categories, assumptions about life, and goal-directed activities that become unconsciously or subconsciously accepted as right and correct by people who identify themselves as members of a society” (p. 11).

In many important ways, cultures are the expressions of human nature in all its complexity and duality – fears and hopes, cravings and aspirations, selfishness and generosity, cruelty and compassion. Cultures are also manifestations of the human capacity for imagination, creativity, intellection, and adaptation. Cultural differences exist because each culture is shaped by its unique set of physical environments, historical context, political events, and dominant religions and philosophies. These differences may gradually diminish, when the hegemony of one culture dominates the global village.

We cannot overstate the importance of culture. Pedersen (1991, 1999) has emphasized that all behaviors are shaped by culture. Even when behaviors are largely genetically determined, their manifestations are still subject to cultural influences. At the same time, we also shape and create the culture in which we live. Various chapters in the first Section of this book clearly document that culture influences every aspect of our existence and prescribes ways for living. Segall, Lonner, and Berry (1998) are absolutely correct, when they write that “human behavior is meaningful only when viewed in the sociocultural context in which it occurs”, but psychology has nonetheless “long ignored culture as a source on human behavior and still takes little account of theories or data from other than Euro-American cultures” (p. 1101).

All cultures are fluid and dynamic, subject to the impact from epochal events in the world and from frequent encounters with other cultures. To the extent a culture is resistant to change, its likelihood for survival is reduced. However, cultural changes need not follow the path of least resistance; both leaders and ordinary citizens of every nation have the responsibility to safeguard their cultural treasures and protect their civilization from pathological elements. This kind of awareness and vigilance is necessary, because culture is a powerful change agent, both for good and evil.

Ho (1995) proposes the concept of internalized culture that describes the psychological process of enculturation rather than culture as a reality external to the person. He suggests that internalized culture functions as a cognitive map for our social world and influences the formation of our worldviews. Ho also writes: “human beings are both the products and creators of culture” (p. 19), and that “the relation between individual behavior and culture is best conceived as one of continuous interaction” (p. 19). Chun, Moos and Cronkite (Chapter 2) also emphasize the constant interplay between culture and individuals.

Because of the interactive nature of culture, psychologists need to study not only how culture impacts cognitive and behavioral processes, but also how human and social factors impact emerging cultures. The greatest challenge facing psychologists is to understand what contributes to the development of toxic, pathological cultures of tyranny, terrorism, and despair, and what contributes to healthy and salutogenic cultures of freedom, compassion, and optimism.
3. THE POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY OF TRANSFORMATION

When we apply the challenge of transforming culture, different kinds of questions arise in studying stress and coping. Instead of simply asking how people in different cultures cope with stress differently, we need to ask more fundamental questions, such as: What are the toxic and healthy elements in any particular culture? What are the social-economic, political, and behavioral factors contributing to a high level of stress or psychopathology? What can be done to transform a toxic culture? Some theorizing and research have been done about the positive psychology of cultural transformation at the organizational or corporate level (Wong, 2002; Wong & Gupta, 2004), but to our knowledge, little has been done regarding positive cultural transformation at the national level.

Different from situational coping, cultural transformation is a meta-coping strategy, which requires a variety of leadership skills, such as team work, shared vision, transparency, and treating people with dignity. It may include multicultural competencies (Sue & Sue, 2003). Cultural transformation may also be conceptualized as a form of macro-stress management, because it is aimed at a complete overhaul of the total environment rather than the solution of specific problems.

In some communities with pervasive, chronic conditions of poverty, terror, and suffering (Naji, Chapter 20), nothing short of regime-change and culture-transformation can provide some relief to the suffering people. However, it may take more than one generation to transform a society from a culture of oppression and terror to a culture of freedom and love. The important lesson is that for many pervasive societal stressors (Wong, 1993), it requires national/communal leadership and cultural transformation, and demands much more than what an individual could offer. The entire area of cultural transformation as a way of coping with societal or organizational stress remains under-researched.

Another challenge to psychologists is to discover the potential of personal transformation. This mode of coping refers to the strategy of changing one’s personal meaning-value system, worldview, lifestyle, and some aspects of one’s personality as a result of enlightenment (Chen, Chapters 4 and 5), spiritual conversion (Klaassen, McDonald, & James, Chapter 6), transcendence and duality (Lee, Chapter 8), personal growth and restructuring (Wong, Reker, & Peacock, Chapter 11). Personal transformation is developed and practised mostly in Asia and has received only scant attention in Euro-American psychology.

The relevance of personal transformation is self-evident, when the stressful situation is chronic and beyond personal control. In such situations, at best one can do is to transform oneself so that the stress would become less threatening and the pain more bearable. In some cases, such as a Zen Master or a Catholic Saint, personal transformation can attain such a high level that everyday hassles and even major life events become passing vapour that hardly stirs a ripple in the calm water.

Different from cognitive reframing, personal transformation is proactive rather than reactive. Cognitive reframing typically occurs in an encounter with a specific problematic situation, while personal transformation is typically an ongoing, holistic change process. It would be instructive to carefully examine the different types of personal transformation in Chapters 4, 5, 8, 11, and 20.

The positive psychology of transformation is beyond stress and coping because it takes us to a point in time prior to a stressful encounter, and to a space much larger and deeper than the actual stressful transaction. Transformation can take place in the deepest
recesses of the human spirit. It can also take place in the political arena or boardroom. Transformation is more effective than coping, because when it is successful, it can eliminate most of the stress, whatever it maybe, and makes coping unnecessary in many situations.

4. MULTICULTURAL PERSPECTIVES

What makes this volume unique among stress-and-coping books is that it not only highlights the positive psychology of transformation, but also emphasizes the cross-cultural psychology of stress and coping. A word of explanation is needed to clarify the relationship between multiculturalism and cross-cultural psychology.

According to Leong and Wong (2003), multiculturalism, as a social movement in North America, is an important part of the larger, global human rights movement. As a social-political policy, multiculturalism endorses diversity, inclusiveness, and equality while recognizing the legitimacy and value of ethnic differences and cultural heritage. Multicultural counseling stems directly from this social movement. Leong and Wong (2003) make the point that technically, multicultural counseling should be called cross-cultural counseling, because it involves counseling across culturally different clients. However, multicultural counseling connotes a policy of embracing diversity, and challenging domination of “majority” values and worldviews.

Ibrahim (1991) emphasizes the importance for counselors to be aware of other people’s worldviews. She believes that “the multicultural encounter is to a large extent dependent on ethnicity, cultures, and sociopolitical histories of the parties involved” (p. 17). It is through the multicultural perspective that we can gain a deeper understanding of individual differences. Ho (1995) makes the further distinction between ethnicity and culture because an individual may belong to a particular ethnic or racial group, but may have internalized one or more cultures from other ethnic backgrounds.

Cross-cultural psychology grows out of cultural psychology. It refers to the study of different cultures and nations in order to arrive at a fuller understanding of a psychological phenomenon – both its etic (universalist) and emic (culture-specific) aspects. Leong and Wong (2003) point out that the major flaw in Euro-American psychology is not that it is Eurocentric, but that it fails to recognize that it is Eurocentric. It is noteworthy that even the Euro-American brand of cross-cultural psychology is often Eurocentric, because it attempts to apply Euro-American psychological research to cultures that are very different. Segall, Lonner & Berry (1998) have pointed out the problems associated with the application of Euro-American theories and instruments to conduct research in other cultural settings. To impose our own culture’s values and theoretical constructs as the standard to study and understand behaviors in other culture groups would not only be ethnocentric but also “bad science”.

Therefore, we have chosen “multicultural perspectives” as part of the book title to signal that, much like counseling and education, the cross-cultural psychology of stress and coping needs to assume a multicultural stance as an antidote to the pervasive, insidious ethnocentric tendency. In other words, any theoretical model, any empirical finding, and any claim of truth must be examined through the lens of multiculturalism. It is only through multicultural perspectives that cross-cultural research can break away from the mindsets of Euro-American psychology and encompass the richness and complexity of indigenous psychology in diverse cultures.
If anything, this edited volume has provided ample evidence that our conceptions and understanding of stress and coping have been enlarged by learning from how people in other cultures cope with the demands of life. It has also documented the inadequacy of Euro-American psychology of stress and coping when it is applied to cultures with a very different history and dynamics. The future of psychology must take on multicultural and international perspectives, not only for the sake of scientific progress, but also for the practical benefits of learning to understand and get along with each other in multicultural global village.

5. CROSS-CULTURAL PSYCHOLOGY OF STRESS AND COPING

One of the most frequent complaints of Euro-American stress research is about decontextualization or acontextualization. For example, Moos and Swindle (1990) have pointed out that the ongoing context in which stressful events occur is typically ignored. Stress must be viewed in context, both cultural and situational. However, recent reviews of stress and coping (Lazarus, 1999; Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004; Snyder, 1999; Somerfield and McCrae, 2000) have shown a clear lack of research in cultural contexts. There are indeed a number of studies on ethnic/cultural differences in coping (Bjorck, Cuthbertson, Thurman & Lee, 2001; Chang, Tugade, & Asakawa, Chapter 19; Cross, 1995; Lam & Zane, 2004; Wong & Reker, 1985), but the comparisons are based on concepts and instruments rooted in Euro-American psychology.

Snyder (1999) asks a rhetorical but important question: “To what extent are our coping ideas a by-product of our Western society?” (p. 331). He further points out that “most researchers merely have borrowed from the prevailing research paradigms that form the zeitgeist in clinical, social, and personality psychology more generally. This status quo mentality about our methods, however, will not suffice as we address the complex and grand coping questions in the twenty-first century” (p. 327).

The lack of progress in stress and coping research has been attributed to theoretical and methodological limitations (Coyne & Gottlieb, 1996; Somerfield & McCrae, 2000; Snyder, 1999; Tennen, Affleck, Armeli, & Carney, 2000). However, we believe that the hegemony of Euro-American psychology is not necessarily healthy for the field, especially when it is dominated by a single paradigm. The supremacy of Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) model has remained uncontested for two decades and is clearly evident in this volume.

According to this model, coping is defined as the dynamic efforts, which involve “the thoughts and behaviors used to manage the internal and external demands of situations that are appraised as stressful” (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004, p. 745). Many of the existing coping questionnaires focus on problem-focused and emotion-focused coping behaviors (e.g., Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) rather than on culturally specific coping strategies and resources. One of the major findings from coping research is that problem-focused or action-oriented coping is strongly related to positive psychological outcomes, while emotion-focused coping, such as avoidance, tends to be associated with poorer mental health (e.g., Endler & Parker, 2000; Folkman, Lazarus, Gruen, & DeLongis, 1986b; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). This cannot be the last word on coping. We really need to venture beyond the confines of Euro-American psychology and explore other coping strategies in different cultures. For example, research on the adaptive functions of personal transformation can greatly expand the knowledge of coping.