

**Stress in the workplace: A qualitative examination of generative eustress in two countries
from the East and West**

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Abstract

Typically most of the research on stress have focused on “distress” and the negative outcomes of stress in the workplace. While there is a plethora of research on distress, there is in contrast a dearth of research on eustress. It is only recently, that there has renewed interest in understanding the positive aspects of stress. In this cross-cultural study, we examined a sample of university professors from two countries one from the east: India, and one from the west: USA and studied what factors makes individual feel positive even in environments that are intrinsically very stressful. An open-ended culture-specific methodology that was qualitative was used. Some significant cultural differences emerged in the perception of eustress and the emotional reactions.

There were no gender differences in both countries. Implications and directions for future research are discussed. Application of how organizations could create a climate and culture that could be conducive to eustress is also addressed.

Keywords: stress, eustress, open-ended methodology, cross-cultural, university professors, positive well-being

Introduction

Although stress can be both positive (eustress) and negative (distress) typically most of the research on stress have focused on “distress” and the negative outcomes of stress. While there is a plethora of research on distress, there is in contrast a dearth of research on eustress. It is only recently, that there has renewed interest in understanding the positive aspects of stress.

Hans Selye was one of the earliest researchers who pointed out that stress can sometimes result in positive outcomes a term researchers refer as “eustress” and stress is not always negative. (Selye, 1975). Quick et al (2000, 2007) have pointed out that eustress can be a healthy and positive constructive outcome of stress.

Literature Review

Gmelch (1983) examined the performance of Little League baseball players and found that stress increased players' performance levels. Benson and Allen (1980) found that in a high-powered business environment individuals performed with moderate stress than low levels of stress.

Despite these few studies in general there is a dearth of research on eustress and most of the previous studies have focused on "distress". Many researchers are now calling for studies and models of stress that examine conditions of "generative eustress" (Quick et al, 2007; Simmons & Nelson, 2007), in contrast to previous research on stress which has primarily focused on "preventive distress". Many studies are being done with a positive approach to stress and concepts such as hope, vigor, self-efficacy, are being examined.

These researchers (Nelson & Cooper, 2007 ; Simmons & Nelson, 2007 Quick et al, 2007) point out why this direction to understand stress is needed as they believe there can be many benefits and advantages of this positive approach. For example, Cartwright and Cooper (2014) has pointed out how focusing on a positive direction and a positive approach to stress could enhance the mental capital. Isen and Baron (1991) have contended that one's positive affect states even if induced by very minor factors, everyday events can have a significant effect on one's social and cognitive behavior and this could be important for organization functions. Other researchers also state that such positive effects could lead to behaviors that could be reflected in higher job satisfaction and organizational loyalty (Wright and Cropanzano, 1998).

Fredrikson (2003) has theorized that positive emotions can broaden one's habits of thinking and acting to have healthier outcomes. Isen (2003) has pointed out how positive affect can facilitate creativity. Nelson and Simmons (2004) also point out how eustress can help one to savor the

positive aspects in the environment. Luthans (2002) has pioneered the positive approach to organizational behavior by focusing of human strengths. Luthans and Youssef (2007) have proposed the construct of psychological capital which is comprised on 4 positive components, the states of confidence, efficacy, hope and optimism. Simmons and Nelson (2007) propose a holistic model of stress and recommend that we study how individuals savor eustress rather than cope with distress.

To summarize, many researchers who have focused on studies from a positive psychology perspective have found that eustress though less examined can result in many positive outcomes in the organizational environment. These researchers strongly recommend and feel a dire need for more research to be done on eustress to understand how this could enhance positive organizational behavior. They believe the goal of future studies should be to understand the pleasurable, motivating aspects of the stress response.

The present study

Moving away from this predominantly negative approach to stress, in this study we attempt to examine what are the perceptions of events, incidents, or episodes that individuals experience that have been positive experiences for them. Additionally, the present study is also cross-cultural. Several researchers have pointed out that emotional experiences are deeply affected by culture. Kitayama and Markus (1999) have shown how emotion and culture are strongly intertwined and they explain how culture penetrates deeply into our emotional experiences.

Cross cultural studies have also demonstrated how individuals in different cultures could vary in their emotional perception and experience. For example, it has been found that people from

individualistic cultures most frequently experience 'ego focused' emotions as pride or frustration, whereas those from collectivistic culture frequently experience 'other focused' emotions such as sympathy and shame (Markus & Kitayama, 1994). It has also been found that when we measure emotions positive emotions such as happiness, individual from East Asian cultures may show a hesitant attitude as compared to Western cultures (Suh, 2000). Other research has shown that Westerners may engage in self-enhancement (Chang et al. 2001; Heine & Lehman, 1999; Kitayama et al. 1997), and Easterners in self-criticism (Kitayama et al. 1997).

We feel that the emotional experience and the perceptions and the experience of eustress are strongly linked and may be very culture-specific and strongly embedded in and affected by one's culture. We chose two countries that differ culturally based on the criteria and the cultural framework postulated by Hofstede (1984, 2006). We chose an Eastern culture and a country that is high on the cultural dimension of collectivism – India, where values such as interdependence, deference to authority, and compliance are predominant. We also chose a Western culture that is high on the cultural dimension of Individualism, where values of autonomy, independence and self-determination and self-control are valued and US. Schimmack, Oishi, and Diener (2002) have suggested that Asians may be dialectical in their way of thinking and experience emotions of opposite valence.

Purpose of this study

This study has many purposes. First, this study examines an area where there is a dearth of research, namely the area of eustress. This is examined not only at a national level but from a cross-cultural perspective examining two different types of cultures. Our goal was to identify those conditions that are related to the perception of eustress. Finally, this study will also look at differences among cultures in the perceptions of eustress. To these researchers' knowledge there

have been no studies that have examined eustress with this type of methodology and with these kinds of samples

Methodology

In contrast to traditional close-ended measures of stress, we used an open ended qualitative approach. There were many reasons why we chose this methodology. First, since eustress is still a relatively unexplored construct and much research is still needed, this methodology will be more appropriate in an exploratory study. Also, since this is a cross-cultural study, this method will allow respondents to elicit culture-specific responses. Traditional close ended methods may not be able to capture the unique and culture laden emotions and perceptions of stress in each culture. Two countries were examined, USA, and India. All participants were faculty teaching in universities in the respective countries.

Since there have few studies that have examined eustress in this context, and based on the research literature of perceptions of stress in the two different cultures, the following hypotheses were made:

1. There will be differences in the sources of eustress between the two countries
2. There will be differences in the emotional reactions to the events or episodes between the two countries
3. Emotional reactions will be more “I” driven in the US and more other driven in India
4. There will be differences in the intensity of felt emotions in the two countries.
5. There will be gender differences within each country and between each country on the intensity level of felt emotional reactions to these events

The measure employed was a modified version of an instrument we have used in earlier studies (Narayanan, Menon, & Spector, 1999a, 1999b). This measure was originally developed by Keenan and Newton (1985). In this study, instead of measuring stress (distress), we measured eustress. We also modified the scale considerably with instructions that were designed to evoke positive responses. Participants were asked to describe briefly any event, episode, or incident that was really memorable that had happened to them in the past 2 months that made them feel good, such as making them happy, thrilled, excited, energized and aroused positive feelings in them in any way. If there was no such event, they could simply say “None”.

To measure the intensity of eustress, they were also asked to rate the level of positive feelings that were aroused in them with a 4-point scale which ranged from “not very”. “somewhat much”, “much” to “very much”.

They were also asked to reflect and report how they felt at that time and what were their emotional reactions after the event.

We also selected a random sample from these groups and conducted some focus groups in the second phase of the study. Some specific additional questions were asked to understand why this incident was so positive for them They were asked what made this incident so positive for them and if it have any positive impact or effect on them and changed their behavior or thinking in any way. **We did not ask them about negative outcomes**, since the focus of this study was only to look at positive outcomes.

Sample

There was an original sample of 180 university professors from India and 180 university professors from the US. Many of the participants said they had no incident to report. The final

usable responses was 160 for the Indian sample and 163 for the US sample. Out of the 160 respondents in India 82 were male and 78 female. In the US, out of the sample of 163 respondents there were 83 male and 80 female.

Results

All the qualitative responses were subjected to a content analysis to look for common themes that emerged from the data. We followed a procedure we have used in our earlier studies (Narayanan, Menon & Spector, 1999a).

Table 1 presents frequencies of types of incidents reported by students from each country.

A 2 (COUNTRY) X 12 (SOURCES) Chi-square analysis was done and there was a significant difference between the type of incidents that were perceived positively in the two countries ($X^2 = 36.37, p < .000$).

First, based on the categories and themes that emerged it was found that respondents in both countries had events in all categories except for the “other” category which we did not analyze.

For the US sample the event most frequently reported that was related to eustress was getting published (23) followed by completing a challenging assignment (19) and student appreciation (18). For the Indian sample the most frequently reported incident related to eustress was when they received a call from parent of the family of a student to express special thanks (24), helped and were publically appreciated (19) and felt how lucky they were (19) and volunteered and helped a poor student (18).

Table 1

Sources of eustress in the two countries

	TYPE OF INCIDENT/EPISODE	Frequency	Frequency
	Country	USA	INDIA
1	Received special praise/compliment for a job well done by colleagues/supervisor	15	11
2	Received a special call from parent or family of student to express special thanks	11	24
3	Completed a very challenging assignment with a very appreciative and hard working class	19	9
4	Was publically appreciated, received award/certificate	7	19
5	Got published in a major peer reviewed	23	13

	journal/went to a prestigious conference		
6	Received a unexpected pleasant surprise/ verbal message or actual event from someone I did not get along	9	14
7	Discovered and uncovered hidden talent and potential in some students that made me proud	15	11
8	Helped/ volunteered to help a low ability student/students and the student transformed her performance and grade	10	18
9	Students telling me I was the one person who changed their life and I would be remembered life-long	15	9

10	Students coming to the office and expressing their deep appreciation for me	18	7
11	Read a book/article that was mind altering and inspirational	14	6
12	Personal life event made me realize how lucky I was/ how I took things for granted	7	19

Table 2 presents frequencies of types of emotional reactions reported by students from each country. A 2 (COUNTRY) X 10 (Emotions) Chi-square analysis was done and there was a very significant difference between the type of incidents that were perceived positively in the two countries. ($\chi^2 = 38.80, p < .000$)

For the US sample the event most frequently reported emotional reaction was Thrilled/Elated (25), followed by Motivated/Energized (22), Proud (21) and Joyful (20).

For the Indian sample the most frequently reported emotional reaction was Gratified/Touched (26) followed by Hopeful (23), Calm and Relaxed(19) and Honored (18).

Table 2

Emotional Reactions

	Type of Emotion	Frequency	
		USA	INDIA
1	Excited	19	13
2	Motivated and energized	22	17
3	Thrilled/ Elated	25	8
4	Proud	21	9
5	Hopeful	8	23
6	Gratified/touched/	8	26
7	Honored	14	18
8	Joyful	20	11
9	Calm/relaxed	9	19
10	Encouraged	17	16

The focus groups we conducted revealed some insight into how these positive eustress experiences had an impact on the respondents. Although we only selected a sample in each focus group we asked them to comment in general about their perceptions and whether these incidents changed their perceptions or beliefs, here are some of comments made.

In both countries the responses were similar, they felt these incidents helped to buffer some of the stress and negative aspects of their jobs, it gave them a “high”, helped them to get recharged and motivated especially when they felt burnt out. It was interesting to note that in both countries

most of the respondents said many of their eustress experiences were directly related to student behavior and they felt that being appreciated and complimented really helped them to be more self-confident and feel better about themselves.

In the Indian sample many complained about bureaucracy and red tape that was a big stressor for them, but these eustress experiences made their job special and motivated them to stay.

We did a series of t-tests, first to test whether the intensity level for eustress was significantly different for the two samples, next to test if the intensity level felt for eustress was different for men and women within each culture and across both cultures.

There was a significant difference in the mean scores of the intensity levels of eustress between the two countries. The t-test results revealed a significant difference in the mean scores between the two countries. Mean (US) = 3.10; Mean (India) = 2.80. $t=3.39$, $p<.000$; $df=319$). None of the other t-tests were significant. No gender differences were found within each country and between the two countries.

Conclusion

The results of this study supported many of the hypotheses postulated. There were significant differences in the sources of eustress between the two countries. It was interesting to note that for both cultural groups, receiving praise and compliments was seen as very important, and this points to the importance of positive reinforcement, in line with decades of research by learning theorists such as Skinner and Bandura. Catania (2001) has stated that positive reinforcement research has been largely neglected and she has advocated researchers on positive psychology to increase their research on behavioral analysis and positive reinforcement and find ways to apply these findings in practice in the real world.

The second hypotheses that emotional reactions will be significantly different for the two groups was supported. Also, the next hypothesis that emotional reactions will be more “I” driven in the US and more “other” driven in India was also supported. The US had responses such as thrilled, elated, motivated, and proud which seem to be more “I” driven and the Indian sample had gratified, honored and hopeful, these responses seem to be more “other” driven. These responses also are consistent with the individual values of the US and the collectivistic values of India supporting the third hypotheses. These results support earlier research on cultural differences in emotions (Chang et al, 2001; Markus & Kitayama, 1994).

There was a high support for the fifth hypothesis regarding the intensity of emotions, there was a significant difference in the level and intensity of felt emotions, the sample in the US reported significantly higher intensity levels in emotions. Finally, we found no support for the last hypothesis on gender differences. It was interesting to note this was the same across both cultures. It is possible that this could have also resulted because of the low numbers of participants in each category, so this could not be statistically detected. It may be possible that these differences could have emerged with larger samples.

Practical implications

With globalization and MNC's that work in many countries today there is a great challenge for both employees from another culture and local employees to adjust and adapt to one another. The local employees also have to adjust, communicate with, and work with one another. This study sheds some light into what makes individual feel positive even in environments that are intrinsically very stressful and that there are cultural differences even in the perception of eustress. The implications of this are profound especially in improving employee productivity.

This study although done with only one type of occupation, gives us some insight into what factors and conditions that make individuals promote positive and healthy perceptions and feelings. The study also found that these minor one time incidents can have some powerful perceived impacts on the individuals in line with research done by Isen & Baron (1991). So if organizations promote such conditions such as providing challenging work situations, create conditions and opportunities that could awaken one's potential, reinforcing employees with appreciation for jobs well done, encouraging mastery of skills in a learning and training environment, encouraging citizenship behaviors such as volunteerism, this could increase the overall eustress in the organization. More studies need to be done with a focus on the positive in line with research on positive psychology (Fredrickson, 2001; Luthans, 2002; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

The study has many limitations, it was done on a sample of academicians, in only two countries. There was only the qualitative method used, and only eustress examined. We also need to be cautious about over generalizing such results. We need to recognize that distress is still a major problem and there will continue to be negative outcomes as organizations today continue to have increasing levels job stress. The teaching profession is one that is intrinsically rewarding so we have to be cautious about generalizing this to other occupations. This study does not underscore the negatives of jobs stress and the important role organizations have to play in the management of stress, including colleges and universities.

However, we suggest that stress research should take a different direction and attempt to look for some positives in the negative world of job stress. Researchers need to come up with unique methodologies and approaches to understand better the construct of eustress and future studies need to examine new concepts described in this paper such as vigor, and continue to proactively

understand how eustress can be generated instead of just research on prevention of distress. As Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) state, future researchers should focus on positive features of life, such as hope, wisdom, creativity, courage and responsibility. We recommend that future researchers examine what are the environmental conditions and factors that enhance and support positive behavior, as this will add to the knowledge base of the much neglected research on eustress and enhance our understanding of positive organizational behavior.

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