

Stress: The Development and Influence on Self-Identity

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Abstract

Using a grounded theory methodology and constant-comparative analysis, the investigator sought to develop an empirical understanding of the experience of stress and its influence on identity development. The 23 participants, who did not meet criteria for a DSM-IV-TR diagnoses, received 10 - 60 minutes sessions of eye movement desensitization and reprocessing treatment (EMDR). EMDR treatment targets stressful memories and elicits recall of thoughts, imagery, emotions, and physical body sensations related to the stressful experience. The data from video recorded sessions provided holistic information regarding each participant's experience and recall of stressful events. The results yielded thematic developmental patterns of thoughts, emotional experiences, and physical body sensations. These thematic patterns provide improved understanding of the influence of stress on holistic identity development. The findings have implications to manage stress, compassion fatigue, burnout, and anxiety.

Problem

The problem is that the practice and research of stress management has focused on evaluating assessment and interventions of stress. In approaching stress management from a reactionary lens, scholars have neglected to provide a clear and empirically validated theory to justify the selection of what to assess and which intervention to validate.

Populations of individuals with occupational stress, depression, trauma, parenting stress, first responders, children with special needs, teachers, and other identities have all been parameters of research on stress.

Purpose

Using a **constructivist qualitative grounded theory approach**, the purpose of this study was to gain an empirical understanding of stress in a population that did not meet any clinical mental health diagnosis.

Relevant Literature

The research on stress management has historically taken a **reactionary** approach to investigation. The focus of studies have been on the process to assess, manage, and resolve stress include stress management, burnout, compassion fatigue, resilience, traumatic stress, emotional strain, and coping (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013; Shin, Park, Ying, Kim, Noh, & Lee, 2014).

These studies have **neglected** to address a **grounded theoretical understanding of how stress manifests and impact development over time** (Cieslak, Shoji, Douglas, Melville, Luszczynska, & Benight, 2014).

Further, researchers have reduces stress magement to a dimension of controllability (Heim, Ehlert, & Hellhammer, 2000; Dickerson &Kemeny, 2004; Mason et al., 2001; Sapolsky, 1998; Weiner, 1992). Among these studies, **none have understood controllability using a qualitative lens.**

The neglect of fully grounding stress research in empirical theory, will begin to be addressed with this investigation.

Research Questions

What thematic patterns existing in subcilinally stressed individuals in terms of thoughts, emotions, and body sensation?

What are the holistic developmental patterns of stress among subclinically stressed individuals?

Procedures

Sample

- **23** participants that did not meet criteria for a DSM-IV-TR diagnoses.
 - **13 female**; 6 EuAm; 4 AfAm; 1 AsA; 1 LA
 - **9 male**; 4 EuAm; 2 AfAm; 1 AsA; 2 LA
 - **1 genderQ**; EuAm

Procedure

- 10 - 60 minutes video-taped sessions of **eye movement desensitization and reprocessing treatment** (EMDR) to target stressful memories and elicit recall of thoughts, imagery, emotions, and physical body sensations related to the stressful experience (Shapiro & Maxfield, 2002).
- Sessions transcripts were dissected into unit of measure (a phrase) using standard grammar as guidelines for a phrase.

Data Analysis

Followed the directives of **constant comparative data analysis** guided by grounded theory methodology (Berg, 2007).

Member checking and **thick description** were used to assure the credibility, dependability, and verification of this study's results (Mertens, 2005).

Limitations

The participants were not representative a cross-cultural sample. The participants were diverse, but all US natives.

Conclusions

The results of this study provide implications for

- understanding the experience and development of stress
- treating a sub-clinically stressed population.

The results of this study can be applied to more effectively assess a person for the necessary themes that must be addressed for an adaptive resolution to stressors.

This study **expands the knowledge of human stress** by discovering that stress develops from an internal assessment process guides by the themes of responsibility, safety, power, value, and adaptive choices.

The theme of **choices are important** in understanding a potential adaptive resolution to stress.

Social Change Implications

Having an empirically grounded understanding of stress development can aid is more direct stress management and reduction practices.

Humans experience stress may benefit from the results of this study.

Application of these findings can provide a clearer approach to aiding individuals to recover and manage stress.

Findings: Thematic Patterns					
Theme	Responsibility →	Safety →	Power →	Value →	Adaptive Choices
Thematic Stress Response	Overly-Responsible	Unsafe	Power-less	Value-less	"Anti-dote" to stress
Cognitive Stress Response	It's all my fault.	I am in danger.	I am helpless.	I am less than defective/damaged	I have options.
Emotional Stress Response	Internalized anger	Fear	Externalized anger	Sadness	Release/Relief/Calm
Physical Stress Response	Head	Chest	Arms/Legs/Head	Stomach/Solar plexus	Chest