

# Chapter 11

## Understanding Cross– Cultural Differences in the Work Stress Process

**Marcus J. Fila**  
Hope College, USA

**Morgan S. Wilson**  
Hope College, USA

### ABSTRACT

*Work-related stress is considered to be a modern-day pandemic. Excessive work stress has costly implications for individuals, their organizations, and societal functioning, due to its links to physical and psychological strains, and unwanted behavioral reactions. Cross-cultural differences in how stressors are appraised and responded to add nuance and enormous complexity to the work stress process. However, it is becoming increasingly imperative for business educators to understand what these differences are as more workers move from one country to another, and more organizations operate across national boundaries. Therefore, this chapter reviews research to date on how work stress is interpreted and responded to differently across national cultures. A theoretical framework of cross-cultural work stress is presented to help inform business educators and practitioners about the influences of national culture on the work stress process. Finally, recommendations for future research and practical implications of cross-cultural work stress considerations are offered.*

### INTRODUCTION

Understanding and predicting work stress, resultant strains, and behavioral outcomes continues to be pivotal to the success of business-related issues of worker well-being, job design, and organizational functioning (Griffin & Clarke, 2011). Work stress is defined stress as “a particular relationship between the person and the environment that is appraised by the person as taxing or exceeding his or her resources and endangering his or her well-being” (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p.19). Thus, work stress is not a single event, but an ongoing process that involves an employee’s appraisal of stressors– which

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are demands from the work environment as experienced by individuals, and coping response patterns through which the employee attempts to manage stressors in order to meet goals (Kahn & Byosiére, 1992; Sulsky & Smith, 2005). Some stress is thought to be healthy, even necessary for effective functioning (Selye, 1976). However, strains constitute the psychological and/or physiological reactions to situations, or periods of time, when coping with response patterns are insufficient for effective functioning given these stressors, or challenges. Finally, strains can contribute to a host of behavioral responses on the part of the employee, such as counterproductive work behavior, absenteeism, and withdrawal from the organization; which carry negative consequences for individual workers, their organizations, and societies alike (Kahn & Byosiére, 1992).

The devotion of scientific resources as well as business educators and practitioners toward better understanding work stress and strain may be motivated by these negative consequences. For example, the cost of excessive work stress in to the US economy alone is over \$300 billion annually in healthcare, missed work, and stress reduction treatments (Stambor, 2006). Accordingly, Sulsky and Smith have labeled excessive work stress as a “modern day pandemic” (2005, p. 2); and attempting to understand, predict, reduce and control stressors before the onset of physical and/or psychological strains, as well unwanted behaviors is arguably one of the most important challenges of the modern age.

Work stress has been at the forefront of organizational research for several decades, with numerous theories having been proposed to explain how characteristics of work relate to individual stress and strain, and behavioral as well as organizational outcomes. A focal point in many of these theories is the desire of employees for *homeostasis* or *equilibrium* between demands, and the availability of coping resources within the work environment, in order to facilitate consistently manageable work (Griffin & Clarke, 2011). In addition to, or in conjunction with its prominent theoretical frameworks, increased attention has relatively recently been given to the role of *national culture* in the work stress process (Beehr & Glazer, 2001; Burke, 2010; Liu & Spector, 2005). National culture reflects the shared cultural meaning system of members of a certain country (Betancourt & López, 1993; Rokeach, 1968). Differences between one nation’s culture and another are thought to outweigh differences between sub-cultures *within* a country, such as across geographic regions or within different organizations (Hofstede, 1980). Cross-cultural differences add enormous complexity and nuance to the work stress process as outlined by Kahn and Byosiére (1992). Specifically, these differences are thought to shape or influence perceptions of work stress based on normative prescriptions about how employees appraise and respond to working conditions (Fila et al., 2017; Hofstede, 2001). However, from business management perspective, understanding what these differences are– and the psychological processes that underpin them– is becoming ever more imperative, given the increasing exposure many workers have to colleagues, supervisors, and subordinates from other countries; and the growing number of organizations that operate across national borders (Gesteland, 2012). As such, it is essential for business educators and practitioners alike to better comprehend the nomological network surrounding work stress in increasingly culturally complex environments; in order to better inform individuals and organizations about how to minimize stress at work, as well as manage its egregious effects on strain and behavioral outcomes.

Given the importance of this issue, the goals of this chapter are to review alignment of the work stress and national culture literatures by (i) outlining the stress process and prominent theories of work stress; (ii) reviewing frameworks of national culture within the organizational research domain; and (iii) summarizing research to date on how work stress is *interpreted* and *responded to* differently across national cultures, both within and outside of these aforementioned cultural frameworks. Building on these first three aims, we present a theoretical framework to help guide and inform business educators

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