Cultural differences in coping with interpersonal tensions

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Stressors, such as getting into arguments or disagreements with others, have been linked to poorer physical and mental health. Research has shown that how a person emotionally reacts to stressful events can predict future health outcomes, such as chronic health conditions, anxiety, and even mortality risk.

Gloria Luong, a Colorado State University assistant professor in Human Development and Family Studies who studies socioemotional development and health across adulthood, has published a paper investigating how Chinese Americans and European Americans choose different coping strategies in response to a social conflict stressor that may either pay off immediately or in the long run.

An immediate payoff will make a person feel better in the moment, while a long-term pay off will make them feel better when they look back on the situation.

Luong's latest paper, published in *Cognition and Emotion*, found that culture helps to shape what people value in different situations and their social relationships.

"Even though we may not be able to control all stressful situations in our lives, we can work on controlling how we choose to cope with those stressors and how we emotionally respond to those events," said Luong, who found that coping preferences differed by cultural groups.

Chinese Americans were more likely to choose strategies that made them feel better at the moment by seeking supportive responses from their conflict partner.

In contrast, European Americans were more likely to confront their conflict partners, which was associated with feeling less positive during the conflict discussion. By opting for this coping strategy, however, European Americans were more likely to look back on the event in a more positive light one week later than Chinese Americans.

These findings suggest that people may prefer to use different coping strategies that pay off immediately or in the long term, and these choices may have consequences for longer-term health and well-being.

According to Luong, stressors can exert a detrimental effect on physical health equivalent to smoking five cigarettes a day and can increase the risk of coronary heart disease by 50 percent.

"If we are not able to find ways to effectively cope with everyday stressors to mitigate their negative effects on our health and well-being, we may be putting ourselves at risk," said Luong.

"The more reactive we become in response to stressors in terms of emotional and physiological arousal, the riskier our health profiles become."

Previous research

Luong explained that in the scientific literature, much of the work has largely ignored contextual factors of stress responses, such as how culture might shape the kinds of coping strategies people might prefer to use, or how people may prefer to make tradeoffs in terms of shorter-term vs. longer-term payoffs.

Instead, research has focused on coping strategies that are generally considered to be adaptive with respect to how effective a person deals with a stressor or how they reduce negative responses to stressors.

Cultural differences

Culture helps to shape what people value in different situations and their social relationships. Individualistic contexts like European American cultural contexts in the United States are more likely to view themselves as unique individuals who are independent and have freedom in decision making.

"I think we are seeing a lot of that now across the U.S. with people protesting the social distancing measures as an encroachment on their freedom and choices," said Luong.

In contrast, in more collectivistic contexts, such as in East Asians and Asian American cultural contexts, people view their identities more as being part of a larger social fabric, so that there is a recognition that the choices they make are more likely to affect others around them.

In collectivistic contexts, people may care more about maintaining social harmony and conformity.

"We believed we would find some of the largest cultural group differences when looking at how European Americans and Chinese Americans choose to cope with an interpersonal stressor, in which they discuss emotionally-charged moral and ethical dilemmas with another person and that person challenges them and tells them they are wrong," said Luong.

The study found that this was indeed the case. European Americans were more likely to stand up to their study partner when the study partner disagreed with them.

In contrast, Chinese Americans were more likely to seek out emotional support from their study partners, which, in turn, was related to smaller decreases in their positive emotions.

Memories of interaction

The study also asked participants how they remembered their negative and positive emotions one week later.

"We know that memories are reconstructed; they are not just like

playing videotapes or looking at photographs," said Luong. "New experiences can change how people remember what happened to them, and to the extent that people are able to reframe past negative events in a more positive light, they may be better able to cope with and move on from such events."

European Americans remembered experiencing more positive emotions and fewer negative emotions than they had actually experienced in the prior week. Only European Americans showed positive emotional memories. Chinese Americans showed no such memory biases because they remembered their emotional experiences as they had lived them during the prior week.

European Americans were more likely to confront the study partner, which reduced their positive emotions to a higher degree than Chinese Americans at the moment but may have helped them to process the event in such a way that they could be satisfied with how they dealt with the situation.

Luong believes her team was the first to show that these cultural differences in memory biases stem from how people coped with the stressor in the prior week.

Long-term health and well-being

"I am not sure we know enough right now about which strategies are more adaptive," said Luong. "If you did a good job of dealing with a stressor at the moment, and those short term strategies are maintained over time, then that's great for you and your health."

Luong explained that in her study, subjects never saw the study partners again. Still, if the study were to be extrapolated to real life where people have to deal with the same partners over and over again, then if the

person ignored confrontation continually, it could be a bad long-term strategy.

"In our study, it made sense to kind of ignore this study partner because people knew they would never see them again," said Luong. "It may not have been worth getting worked up to argue with someone who doesn't really care if you are right or wrong."

Luong argues the need to be careful about extrapolating the study findings out of context, but to take context into consideration on when each strategy may be adaptive, and for which dimensions of health or well-being.

What's next?

Luong's current study, the Health and Daily Experiences study, funded by the National Institute on Aging, is now trying to contextualize cultural group differences in coping and stress responses inside and outside of the lab.

The study is looking at differences between European Americans and LatinX/Hispanic participants in how they cope with challenging tasks in the lab, as well as how they deal with stressors in their daily life.

The study will be able to track people's physiological responses to understand how these responses may put people at higher risk for health problems.

More information: Gloria Luong et al. Cultural differences in coping with interpersonal tensions lead to divergent shorter- and longer-term affective consequences, *Cognition and Emotion* (2020). DOI: 10.1080/02699931.2020.1752153

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