

## The Effect of Chronic Stress on Learning Orientation: A Thailand Case Study

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**Abstract:** This study examines the effect of chronic stress on learning orientation. In particular, the study focuses on employees (N = 158) and university students (N = 123) in the Kingdom of Thailand. Due in part to the long-lasting world-wide recession, the American psychological association has found that there has been a sharp spike in individual chronic stress levels over the past 5 years. It is well known that high stress impairs one's ability to learn and thus reduces motivation. However, the results of this study show that Thais may be unique as chronic stress was not found to significantly impact learning orientation. Thais have previously been given the title of the master's of relaxation and typically adapt to change with an easy-going attitude. The findings suggest that adopting characteristics of Thai culture would help to negate the impact of stress on learning orientation.

**Key words:** Learning orientation, chronic stress, association, easy-going attitude, Thailand

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### INTRODUCTION

Students who are motivated to learn have better outcomes; this is a well-known fact. Teachers of all types, including university professors commonly do everything within their ability to deliver lessons that capture student's interest and increase their motivation to learn. This is not to say that the students themselves might not also be intrinsically motivated to learn, i.e., learning for the sake of learning itself. These students certainly exist. However, no matter what factors drive individual university student's motivation, it may be difficult for a particular student to maintain their motivation throughout the entire course of their studies. Being motivated to learn is equally important for employees. Managers typically encourage employee growth and learning to the best of their ability. Similar to how students may experience a motivational burnout due to their studies, employees may experience motivational burnout one or more times during their career.

One reason commonly linked to motivational burnout is stress. Several studies have directly examined how stress affects one's motivation to learn (Joels *et al.*, 2006; Lupien *et al.*, 2005; Shors, 2006). For instance, people who have experienced a very stressful event often show unreliable memory for details (Christianson, 1992). Furthermore, cognitive decline has been observed in individuals that experience high levels of chronic stress (McGaugh, 2004). Cognitive resource theory (Fiedler and Garcia, 1987) and cognitive load theory (Sweller, 1988,

1994), suggest that individuals in challenging and stressful experiences divert their cognitive resources and attention away from learning-related activities. Employees and students that experience high levels of chronic stress typically focus their cognitive resources on worries over possible performance failures or evaluation anxieties. When participating in learning-related activities, these same individuals may experience cognitive overload as there are not enough cognitive resources available to focus on both anxieties and learning (Weick *et al.*, 2008). It is, therefore necessary to understand the magnitude to which chronic stress effects learning orientation from both the employee and student prospective.

This study focuses on exploring the relationship between chronic stress and learning orientation in both students and employees in the Kingdom of Thailand. Hofstede (2001) defines culture, as the interactive aggregate of common characteristics that influence a human group's response to its environment. Culture determines the uniqueness of a human group in the same way personality determines the uniqueness of the individual. Thailand is an example of a country with very unique and strong cultural traditions. It is largely a mono-cultural and-religious country with approximately 95% of its citizens being Buddhist (Pagaram and Pagaram, 2006). Hofstede (2001) indicated that Thai culture was characterized by high power distance, high uncertainty avoidance, low individualism and low masculinity. Thai culture has several unique aspects that may uniquely insulate Thais from the effects of chronic stress. For

instance, the Thai word Sanook which can be defined as the feeling of enjoyment, excitement or pleasure that one has taking part in work, play or any other activities (Dakin, 1988) is an attitude that most Thais apply to their daily life (Blandin, 2003; Tiwsakul and Hackley, 2012). Having this easy going approach towards life should reduce the likelihood of chronic stress accumulating to high levels. This easy going nature, also serves as a coping mechanism for those who are in stressful situations.

Thai culture provides an interesting and unique context through which to study the relationship between stress and learning orientation. Chronic stress is commonly shown to have an adverse effect on one's motivation to learn. However in the context of a culture that has a mai ben rai attitude, Thai for never mind, the effects of chronic stress may be mitigated to the point that it does not affect one's motivation. Furthermore, it is interesting to study the effects of stress in a highly collectivist culture. Comparing Thailand to the United States of America, Marta and Singhapakdi (2005) state, Thailand is a more feminine culture which means they tend to prefer more nurturing over aggressive behavior and they also strive harder to avoid situations of uncertainty. The core objective of this study is to test whether or not Thais' learning orientation is negatively impacted by chronic stress as is true for many Western cultures or if Thais' are rather unique in their ability to cope and that their learning orientation is unaffected by chronic stress.

### **Literature review**

**Learning orientation:** The importance of understanding and encouraging individual learning orientation should not be understated. Learning orientation is defined as the manifestation of an individual's propensity to learn and adapt (Mavondo *et al.*, 2005). The key characteristics of learning orientation as presented by Bennett (1998), include commitment to learning, openness to the outside world, motivation to learn and overall commitment to knowledge. Individually, learning orientation is present in higher levels in people who place a greater value on learning new skills and increasing their competence and abilities (DeShon and Gillespie, 2005). In challenging or difficult situations, individuals who possess a high level of learning orientation respond with adaptive and problem solving behaviors (Elliott and Dweck, 1988). Therefore, employees and students with superior learning orientation have a greater propensity to seek and discover new solutions to challenging problems and assignments.

Huber (1991) gives us a cultural perspective when he proposes that learning orientation leads to the development of new knowledge or insights that have the

potential to influence behavior through values and beliefs. Learning orientation is present when students take further effective action after new knowledge has been developed (Argyris and Schon, 1978). One example would be a student who searches out further resources after they have read a chapter in their textbook. In the case of employees, it could be seeking to more deeply understand why a task is performed, instead of only how.

Students that have a high level of learning orientation have the potential to use that motivation to lead to many positive learning outcomes. Possible outcomes would be a higher than average GPA, graduating with honors, being able to apply knowledge outside of its presented context and graduating on or ahead of schedule. On the other hand, students who are not motivated to learn cannot be expected to actively share their knowledge with other students. These unmotivated students may, also experience lower than average GPA not be able to adapt knowledge for use outside of its original context and may graduate late. Similarly, there are many potential positive outcomes for employees possessing high levels of learning orientation. Possible outcomes would be a higher than average level of productivity are able to adapt previous work experiences to new contexts and could be eligible for promotion ahead of average employees.

**Chronic stress:** In 2012, the American psychological association reported that Millennials (18-33 years old) had a higher level of stress than older generations. The report goes on to state that 52% of young adults experience lying awake at night and 44% report experiencing anger or irritability due to stress. Perhaps a bigger issue is that only 29% of Millennials, compared to 35% of generation X and 37% of baby boomers, feel they are doing a good job managing their stress levels (APA, 2012). This disparity between university age students and adults is staggering. It points to the need for universities to have an understanding of how stress affects academic performance.

Thoits (1995) defines stress as any environmental, social or internal demands which require the individual to readjust his/her usual behavior patterns. The fact that one's homeostatic balance has been disrupted is the root cause of these changes in behavior. Individuals must then rebalance themselves to adapt to the changes that have occurred (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). Anything that causes a person to adjust his/her behavior should then be considered to be a potential cause of stress. The need for adjustment can come from social, professional or family situations. Stress is also physically and emotionally

draining because of the tension caused by the need to constantly regain homeostasis in response to a changing environment (Hobfoll, 1989).

Chronic stress is defined as stress that is persistent in nature and which causes the need for many adjustments over an extended period of time (Thoits, 1995). An example of this is, if an individual is over-worked for a long period of time. Also, Pearlin *et al.* (1981) suggest that stress is present when expecting change during the enactment of social roles. Therefore, if one is consistently experiencing interpersonal conflict in family life or within social circles chronic stress may result. Gierveld and Dykstra (1993) suggest that uncertainty about an anticipated event or role could also cause chronic stress. This is because people seem to desire that their experiences flow in a way that is understandable and predictable. Therefore, if someone experiences prolonged uncertainty about an anticipated event or role, this feeling may develop into a chronic stressor.

Chronic stress generally decreases a student or employee's motivation to learn. This is because stressors weaken the connection between effort and reward, such as the effort to study and the reward of new knowledge, thus eroding motivation to commit to the process (Dubinsky and Skinner, 1984; Walker *et al.*, 1977). Research related chronic stress has, also been shown to negatively affect similar types of achievement based motivation in several studies (Garrett and McDaniel, 2001; Hsu *et al.*, 2010). From a student's perspective Halbesleben and Bowler (2007), showed that achievement motivation, such as the motivation to achieve a bachelor's degree or education related certification is lessened when one experiences emotional exhaustion.

However, there are reasons to believe that Thais may not be affected by chronic stress in the same way as those from other cultures. For example Tiwaskul and Hackley (2012), found that critical self-reflexivity is a cultural anomaly in Thais, meaning that they tend to accept situations as they are. This easy acceptance of a situation would cause less of a need for behavioral readjustments caused by stress, as one's homeostatic state has not been adversely affected. As Thoits (1995) definition includes the idea that stress comes from the rebalancing of one's homeostatic state, it is reasonable that Thais in general would not be strongly impacted by chronic stress. Therefore; H<sub>1</sub>: There is no relationship between Thais learning orientation and their level of chronic stress.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

**Data collection:** The data used to test this hypothesis was obtained from under-graduate students studying

at 3 universities located in Bangkok, Thailand. The average age of the under-graduate students was 20 years old. Further, data was collected from employees working for 9 different firms throughout Bangkok, Thailand. Data was obtained through the usage of a paper questionnaire administered to students in a classroom setting. A total of 123 useable surveys were obtained from a total of 250 surveys given to students for a useable response rate of 49%. The data represents students from each of the university's majors and each stage of the degree process. A total of 158 useable responses were obtained from employees from a total of 400 given for a useable response rate of 39%. For employees, a paper-based questionnaire was handed-out during working hours. This data represents employees from a diverse array of firms and from various positions ranging from entry to mid-level management.

**Measures:** The scale for learning orientation was developed based upon VandeWalle (1997) scale. This measure was deemed appropriate due to its widespread usage. A 6-point Likert scale was used ranging from 1 strongly disagree to 6 strongly agree. A composite score of 6 indicates an individual with high learning orientation while a score of one would indicate low learning orientation. The 5 measured items in the scale indicate an acceptable level of reliability ( $\alpha = 0.742$ ).

The measurement for chronic stress was adapted from Mathur *et al.* (2008). This scale was chosen because the items within could apply to stress in different role settings and for its widespread acceptance. Respondents were asked to indicate how they felt the statement applied to them during the previous 12 months. A 5-point Likert scale was used ranging from 1 strongly disagree to 5 strongly agree. A higher score would indicate a high level of chronic stress and the reverse is true for a low a score. Measurement reliability was assessed as acceptable ( $\alpha = 0.613$ ).

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Results were obtained by using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) software version 17. The distribution for all constructs was deemed normal because kurtosis and skewness were both well within the recommended ranges (Hair *et al.*, 1998). Multiple regression was used to test the hypothesis (Table 1).

The results of the regression model are valid ( $F = 16.212$ ). Chronic stress is not a predictor of learning orientation ( $\text{Sig.} = 0.996$ ). Hypotheses 1 is confirmed, as the data supports there being no relationship between learning orientation and chronic stress in Thais. These findings go against what previous stress literature has

**Table 1: Regression results for learning orientation**

Variables	Output
Constant	4.1
Chronic stress	0.000 (0.996)
Students	0.323 (0.000)**
F	16.212
R <sup>2</sup>	0.098
N	280

Standard errors in parentheses; \*\*Significant at 5%

suggested the relationship between learning orientation and chronic stress are. Though this finding is the opposite of what would be expected from a sample of students or employees from Western cultures, it is fairly unsurprising in the Thai context. This is evidence to support the claim that Thais do not experience a reduction in motivation due to stress. This could be due to Thais having a greater propensity to cope with stress than other cultures. Mulder (1978) dubbed Thai's the masters of relaxation. This moniker is appropriate because typical interactions between Thais relaxed, pleasant and light, yet fun and humorous in nature and is plausibly the reason that Thais are able to remain unstressed (Komin, 1990). This sanook orientation, translated as fun is deeply ingrained in Thai culture and is passed on through socialization from generation to generation (National Identity Office, 2005).

The findings, also suggest that being a university is a predictor of one's learning orientation (Sig. = 0.000). This is a sign that under-graduate students are more motivated to learn than their employee counterparts. This may be explained by the fact that those in the role of an under-graduate student self-selected themselves to enter university and thus most likely are persons with an inherently higher level of learning orientation. Students learning orientation is most likely reinforced and strengthened by continual exposure to a learning environment and by a desire to connect to their peers through shared classroom experiences. Furthermore, students may experience achievement motivation within the university environment. As achievement motivation in this context is most likely related to achieving high marks from their studies, it is natural for students to associate this achievement with the learning process, thus increasing their motivation to learn.

## CONCLUSION

Thais have been shown to be unique in their ability to have their motivations unaffected by chronic stress. This is intriguing, as it is different from what has been found to be true in other nationalities by previous stress researchers. This research has not pinpointed what it is about Thai culture that allows Thais to

escape the negative effects of chronic stress. However, it does pinpoint an area in which future research can be conducted into what possible stress coping mechanisms enable Thais learning orientation to remain unscathed.

Numerous companies and school psychologists employ tactics to help their employees/students to deal with stressors. As previously noted, the APA (2012) has found that the amount of stress felt by young adults is increasing rapidly. In order to combat this sharp rise in stress related health and social issues, new coping mechanisms must be sought out. Perhaps, Western psychologists can learn better methods of treatment through the study of Thai mai ben rai and sanook orientations.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

More research needs to be undertaken to understand the underlying reasons why Thai students and employees motivation is not affected by chronic stress. Future research should seek to test if this unique Thai characteristic can be adopted by students and employees from different cultural backgrounds. It is plausible that this phenomena is something that could be ingrained into those from other cultures via socialization with Thais. If so, this could be a beneficial stress coping measure, particularly for university students and employees with high amounts of stress.

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