

The belief in beneficial stress: a matter of social value?

ARNOLD Pierre¹, SCHIFFLER Frédéric², CARUANA Sylvain² & MOLLARET Patrick¹

¹ Université Paris 8 / LAPPS

² Université de Reims Champagne-Ardenne / C2S

Introduction:

The literature of the last twenty years has shown that mindsets have an effect on different facets of everyday human functioning such as health, judgment or evaluation processes, behaviors, emotions, etc. (for a review, see Crum et al., 2013). Broadly speaking, these "mindsets" are defined as social-cognitive structures that help the individual to organize and encode information from the environment in a selective manner (adapted from Crum et al., 2013). This belief system, an organizer of simplified knowledge, guides how an individual understands and copes with the situations they encounter on a daily basis.

More recently, researchers have been interested in the question of mindsets related to stress, particularly in professional contexts. For example, one study showed that employees anticipated differently a heavy workload depending on the stress mindsets they adopted (Casper et al., 2017), and another research linked individuals' stress mindsets to their judgment about a target person's stress status and likelihood of promotion (Ben-Avi et al., 2018). In both of these studies, and in general, these stress mindsets are understood as an individual variable, defined as the degree to which an individual adheres to the belief that stress has enhancing (vs. debilitating) consequences on different aspects of their functioning (Crum et al., 2013).

This contribution proposes a socio-normative approach to these beliefs about stress which, like other beliefs, are determined by the roles and social positioning of the agents who express them and convey social value above all (Dubois & Beauvois, 2005), *a fortiori* in a work environment. We formulate the general hypothesis that the fact that an individual adopts and displays a belief in enhancing or debilitating consequences of stress has an effect on the social judgments made about him or her. This research is in line with the theoretical and methodological framework used by researchers who are particularly interested in the question of the social value conveyed by personality adjectives used in everyday life and in the scientific field in psychology (Dubois & Aubert, 2010 ; Caruana et al., 2014).

For several decades now, research on social judgments has shown that they are based on two fundamental dimensions, recently called the Big Two (Abele & Wojciszke, 2014). The first dimension, Communality, describes a person's social and moral qualities while the second, Agentism, reflects their motivations or abilities to achieve their goals. Although there seems to be a consensus around this two-dimensional structure of social judgment, recent research has highlighted different facets within these main dimensions. Thus, it has been shown that the dimension of Agentism contains both a dynamic facet, turned towards self-promotion (ambition, self-confidence) called Assertiveness, and a facet related to the ability to mobilize resources to succeed in a task (efficiency, capacity) named Competence (Mollaret & Miraucourt, 2016). The normative issues conveyed by language are all the more glaring when researchers focus on social status differences. Recent French studies using the judge paradigm show that, in a classic social judgment task, high and low status targets are more differentiated on Assertiveness than on Competence (Carrier et al., 2014; Louvet et al., 2019).

Echoing this research, we postulate that there are normative issues in the stress-is-enhancing/stress-is-debilitating distinction proposed by the research field about stress mindsets. Indeed, it seems to us that displaying a stress-is-enhancing mindset conveys the idea of a "positive" stress that is a vector of motivation and performance at work, a managerial leitmotif that is all the more shared and valued as one climbs the ladder of hierarchy and power at work. More specifically, we hypothesize that displaying a stress-is-enhancing (vs. debilitating) mindset is more valued in terms of Agentism (vs. Communality) and more particularly through the facet of Assertiveness (vs. Competence). On the other hand, we hypothesize that this distinction in terms of social value will be more important for high status (vs. low status) targets.

Method:

The belief in beneficial stress: a matter of social value?

ARNOLD Pierre¹, SCHIFFLER Frédéric², CARUANA Sylvain² & MOLLARET Patrick¹

¹ Université Paris 8 / LAPPS

² Université de Reims Champagne-Ardenne / C2S

In the two experimental studies we conducted online, participants were asked to rate the profile of a person engaged in a process of applying for a promotion in a company. The manipulation of the profiles involved the different "Stress Mindsets" displayed (enhancing vs. debilitating vs. ambiguous). In the second study, the target's status in the company (technical agent vs. team leader) was also manipulated. These profiles were assessed in both studies through personality adjectives used in the literature (Cohen et al., 2017) to illustrate Community ("altruistic," "pleasant," etc...) and the different facets of Agentism namely Assertiveness ("self-confident", "ambitious", etc...), Competence ("competent", "efficient", etc...) and Effort ("courageous", "persevering", etc...). Cronbach's alphas were satisfactory in both studies (between .74 and .91). A comprehension check of the information given about the targets (type of stress mindset and social status) was addressed to participants before the social judgment task.

Results:

For our first study (N= 144), a priori contrast analyses in a repeated measures ANOVA show that, consistent with our hypotheses, there is a Mindset*Dimension interaction ($F = 52.8$, $p < .001$) that shows that a stress-is-enhancing (vs. debilitating vs. ambiguous) mindset engenders higher target valuing on the Agentism dimension than on the Community dimension ($t(141) = 10.18$, $p < .001$). On the other hand, within the Agentism dimension, we observe a higher valuation of the stress-is-enhancing mindset on Assertiveness than on Effort and Competence taken together ($t(282) = 4.90$, $p < .001$). The valuation of profiles displaying a stress-is-enhancing mindset is based on the Assertiveness they convey and not on the Competence. The results of the second study (N=286), obtained by the same method of contrast analysis, again show that the social valuation of profiles displaying a stress-is-enhancing is specific to Agentism, in particular when the judged target occupies a higher hierarchical position ($t(280) = 2.05$, $p = .04$). On the other hand, when the target's social status is taken into account, the results no longer allow us to observe this specific valuation on Assertiveness since no contrast is significant. Instead, valuation seems to be associated with a combination of Assertiveness and Effort taken together.

Conclusions:

This last point accentuates the idea that the facets of Assertiveness and Effort can be understood as facets with a dynamic, active and controllable character by the individual in contrast to the Competence facet with a more static and uncontrollable character (Carrier et al., 2014). Taken together, these results verify the idea that beliefs about stress convey social value and that it is relevant to propose a socio-normative analysis of these stress mindsets. The theoretical framework and methodological paradigms proposed by the social-cognitive perspective in social psychology allow us to envisage a consequent research work on the normative stakes of the discourses about stress.

Bibliography:

Abele, A. E., & Wojciszke, B. (2014). *Communal and agentic content in social cognition: A dual perspective model*. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* (1st ed., Vol. 50). Elsevier Inc. <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-12-800284-1.00004-7>

Ben-Avi, N., Toker, S., & Heller, D. (2018). "If stress is good for me, it's probably good for you too": Stress mindset and judgment of others' strain. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 74 (March 2017), 98-110. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2017.09.002>

The belief in beneficial stress: a matter of social value?

ARNOLD Pierre¹, SCHIFFLER Frédéric², CARUANA Sylvain² & MOLLARET Patrick¹

¹ Université Paris 8 / LAPPS

² Université de Reims Champagne-Ardenne / C2S

Cohen, J., Darnon, C., & Mollaret, P. (2017). Distinguishing the desire to learn from the desire to perform: The social value of achievement goals. *Journal of Social Psychology*, 157(1), 30-46. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00224545.2016.1152216>

Carrier, A., Louvet, E., Chauvin, B., & Rohmer, O. (2014). The primacy of Agency over Competence in status perception. *Social Psychology*, 45(5), 347-356. <https://doi.org/10.1027/1864-9335/a000176>

Carrier, A., Louvet, E., & Rohmer, O. (2014). Compétence et agentisme dans le jugement social. *Revue Internationale de Psychologie Sociale*, 27(1), 95–125. Retrieved from <https://www.cairn.info/revue-internationale-de-psychologie-sociale-2014-1-page-95.htm>

Caruana, S., Lefeuvre, R., & Mollaret, P. (2014). Looking for performance in personality inventories: The primacy of evaluative information over descriptive traits. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 44(6), 622–635. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2034>

Casper, A., Sonnentag, S., & Tremmel, S. (2017). Mindset matters: the role of employees' stress mindset for day-specific reactions to workload anticipation. *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*, 26(6), 798–810. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1359432X.2017.1374947>

Crum, A. J., Salovey, P., & Achor, S. (2013). Rethinking stress: The role of mindsets in determining the stress response. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 104(4), 716-733. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0031201>

Dubois, N., & Aubert, E. (2010). Valeur sociale des personnes : Deux informations valent-elles mieux qu'une ? *Revue Internationale de Psychologie Sociale*, 23(1), 57-92.

Dubois, N., & Beauvois, J. L. (2005). Normativeness and individualism. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 35(1), 123-146. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.236>

Louvet, E., Cambon, L., Milhabet, I., & Rohmer, O. (2019). The relationship between social status and the components of agency. *Journal of Social Psychology*, 159(1), 30-45. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00224545.2018.1441795>

Mollaret, P., & Miraucourt, D. (2016). Is job performance independent from career success? A conceptual distinction between competence and agency. *Scandinavian Journal of Psychology*, 57(6), 607-617. <https://doi.org/10.1111/sjop.12329>

Keywords: Social Value / Stress Mindset / Agency / Assertivness