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CHANGE IN THE STRESSFULNESS OF LIFE IN AMERICAN STATES AND REGIONS FROM 1976 TO 1982

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ABSTRACT. The State Stress Index (SSI) described in this paper measures difference between the states of the United States, and differences over time, in the occurrence of stressful “life events.” The method of constructing the SSI is described and the scores for each of the American states in 1976 and 1982 are presented. There are large differences between the states in the stressfulness of life. The construct validity of the SSI was supported by analysis which show that the higher the SSI, the higher the incidence of behaviors that have long been assumed to be affected by stress, such as violence and heavy smoking and drinking, and suicide. Scores on the SSI revealed an increase in the stressfulness of life between 1976 and 1982, largely due to the economic recession in 1982. Despite this the 1982 rank order of the states was essentially the same as their relative position in 1976. The West remained the most stressful region of the United States, despite its other attractions, and the North Central and North East remained the least stressful regions, despite their “rustbelt” and “frostbelt” images.

It is perhaps the fate of every society (our own included) to view its own times as uniquely and increasingly stressful. Such an hypothesis to our knowledge has never been formally tested. Probably the belief stems from a combination of cultural ethnocentrism regarding time and place, the immediacy of our own stressful experiences in comparison with those of others occupying more remote locations in time and place, and the persistence of a “golden age” mythology in which we view earlier periods in a more idyllic light.

If we were able to subject such beliefs to rigorous examination, we are not at all sure they would be supported. We further suspect that such an hypothesis, i.e. our own society and historical era is uniquely and increasingly stressful, may not even be testable in the usual scientific sense and would in any event be an enormously difficult undertaking.

STRESSFUL EVENTS AND THE MEANING OF STRESS

With some difficulty, we could probably approximate the long-term
changes in the likelihood of experiencing some of the more common stressful "life events" (Holmes and Rahe, 1967) such as loss of spouse, becoming orphaned, geographically uprooted, being subjected to financial stressors, technological job displacements, periodic food shortages, and physical dangers. The more difficult question, however, from the standpoint of assessing differences in stress levels across large expanses of time relates to the psychological impact and meaning of such events for those who experience them. The latter would require a much fuller knowledge of the cultural definitions surrounding such life events during particular periods in history than seems reasonable to hope for.

Some stressful events, for example, were clearly more common in earlier periods, such as infant and childhood deaths and loss of spouse at a comparatively early age. It is unclear whether the greater commonness of these stressful events made them more normative, more expected, and thereby mediated their stressfulness. Also, earlier families may have had larger kinship and support systems allowing the loss to be more widely shared and perhaps defusing the impact on those most directly related.

These are the types of considerations that make prospects for development of a precise calculus for assessing historical changes in subjectively experienced stress unpromising. But while we may not be able accurately to reconstruct the phenomenology of stressfulness in earlier periods, we can look at comparatively recent changes in stress levels with tools now in hand, on the assumption that cultural norms and expectations which structure the subjective meaning of stressful events are not likely to have changed importantly.

In our current research, we therefore opted for this more modest goal of attempting to measure recent changes in the rate of stressful events for states and regions of the United States. In doing this research, we have the advantage of using an already established, broad-based index of social stress, the State Stress Index (Linsky and Straus, 1986).

METHOD

The State Stress Index (SSI)

Previous publications examined the extent to which stressful situations