

# SOCIO-ECONOMIC PRECARIOUSNESS AND PSYCHOLOGICAL VULNERABILITY comparison between the French and the Portuguese people about stress and coping

Sordes-Ader, F.; Tap, P.; Vasconcelos, M. L. V.; e Fonseca, M.  
European Research Centre into Conducts and Institutions (CEICI)  
Foundation Bissaya-Barreto  
Coimbra - Portugal

The individuals more currently affected by precarious processes are those who live in situations characterised by great social vulnerability: the long-term unemployed, working people with low income, young people in precarious jobs, single mothers with meagre income, children who do not attend school, unqualified young people, and others. Without their being explicit diseases, these situations characterised by impasse and discomfort are a threat to the individual's integrity. They pave the way for the emergence or aggravation of chronic pathologies, psychic problems, psychic and somatic imbalances leading to psychic suffering that is difficult to manage (*Haut Comité pour la Santé Publique*, 1998). The term suffering itself has a negative connotation and is often replaced with the term stress, which leads to the feeling one experiences on interpreting or assessing a situation.

However, each person has his or her own way of responding to the stimuli coming from their social environment and their personal history. The same event may have various consequences depending on the individuals. The same setback may, on the one hand, completely destroy someone's capability to tackle a problem and, on the other hand, prompt somebody else into action. This capacity to deal with problems (called coping) involves the ability to endure, accept, avoid or reduce stress. According to their personal history, but also depending on the internal and external resources available to them, individuals may or not emerge from a situation of precariousness feeling stronger, and conceive a project, namely a professional one, that will help them become socially integrated again (Tap and Vasconcelos, 2004).

## METHOD

### Participants

► N = 449

	Portugal (Coimbra)	France (Toulouse)	Total
Male	68	156	225
Female	81	144	224
Precarious situation	42	150	192
Not precarious situation	107	150	257

### Materials

#### ► Stress

The experienced stress was evaluated on the basis of a scale designed by Tap and Vasconcelos (2004) (who drew on the work done by Lemyre and Tessier, 1998). The scale consists of 30 elements divided into four dimensions: depressive mood, physical manifestations, lassitude/tiredness, and feverishness/tension. Here, we propose a reduced scale of twelve elements (three per dimension). The answers' format is carried out by means of a scale of the Likert type (going from 1=I totally disagree to 5=I totally agree). The global self-esteem score may range from a minimum of 12 points to a maximum of 60 points.

#### ► Coping strategies

In order to determine the strategies for stress management (coping), we adopted the Toulouse Coping Scale of Tap, Sordes-Ader, and Esparbès-Pistre (1993), and constructed them on the basis of a critical analysis of existing coping scales, whereby 6 initial strategies were assessed: focalization, social support, withdrawal, conversion, confrontation, and denial. We retained 18 of the 54 items on this scale, three for each of the 6 strategies.

### Procedure

► The compilation of data was carried out in Public Health Care Centres in the central region of Portugal and in Toulouse, in France, with the co-operation of GPs, social workers, and psychologists. The users were requested to fill in the questionnaire in full. In case the participants showed difficulties seeing, reading and/or understanding, they would be assisted by the researcher, who would read the questions and/or explain their meaning to them. Participation was voluntary.

## RESULTS

### ► Stress:

An analysis of the main components, followed by a *varimax rotation*, shows a three-factor structure (and not a four-factor one, as expected). These three factors are:

- *Depressive mood* (31.1% of variance / alpha is .85 for the global population), consisting of five elements;
- *Tiredness and physical manifestations* (10.3% of variance / alpha is .79 for the global population), also consisting of five elements;
- *Temporary disturbances* (8.5% of variance / alpha is .65 for the global population), consisting of two elements.

The internal consistency of this scale is excellent, with alpha .89 for the global population.

### ✓ Global stress

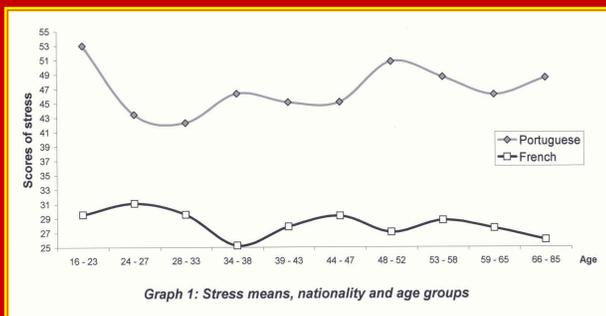
An analysis of the differential results concerning the global score of stress shows that:

As expected, people who live in a situation of precariousness (M=39,30) are subject to more stress tension than people who are in a non-precarious situation (M=37,29), although there is no significant difference between means and medians (F=3,11, p<.07).

In the various age groups (Graph 1), the Portuguese (M=47,98) are more affected by stress than their French counterparts (M=28,61; F=289,39, p<.001).

Women (M=40,25) are more affected by stress than men (M=36,34; F=11,79, p<.001). However, an in-depth study shows that there are variations when gender and country are taken into consideration. In fact, French women (M=31,44) experience more stress than French men (M=25,79; F=39,91, p<.001), whereas among the Portuguese population there is no significant difference between the level of stress observed in women and that observed in men.

On the other hand, there is no significant difference between the Portuguese in a precarious situation and those in a non-precarious one either, whereas the French in a precarious situation (M=30,22) are more affected by stress than the French in a situation of non-precariousness (M=27,01; F=15,66, p<.001).



### ► Coping strategies:

The analysis of main components with varimax rotation yielded three factors:

*Factor 1: Withdrawal and social support* (M=16,77), 6 items (16.2% of variance; alpha .57)

*Factor 2: Control and focalization* (M=18,58), 6 items (15% of variance, alpha .61)

*Factor 3: Denial and conversion* (M=17,08), 6 items (7,86% of variance, alpha .54).

#### ✓ Withdrawal and social support (factor 1)

This strategy is more used by the Portuguese (M=19,07) than by the French (M=14,93; F=72,20; p<.001). Precariousness influences the two groups differently. As regards the French, people in a precarious situation tend to evoke withdrawal and social support more frequently. Conversely, as far as the Portuguese are concerned, withdrawal-social support occurs more frequently among people who are in a non-precarious situation.

These first results must take into account that: French women resort more frequently to withdrawal and social support than their male counterparts, especially among people in a precarious situation. On the other hand, Portuguese men resort to this strategy more often than Portuguese women, particularly those in a non-precarious situation.

#### ✓ Control and Focalization (Factor 2)

This strategy is more frequently used by the French (M=19,11) than by the Portuguese (M=16,43; F=19,03, p<.001) among people in a non-precarious situation rather than among those in a precarious one (M=16,73; F=11,39, p<.001). No global difference emerges between men and women regarding this strategy. However, precarious Portuguese men (M=15,75) use control-focalization more often than precarious Portuguese women (M=13; F=3,18, p<.08), whereas this difference is not visible among the French. The difference is especially significant among the precarious French (M=19,09) (more controlled) and the precarious Portuguese (M=14,37; F=21,11, p<.001). The interaction between country and status appears to be determining here.

#### ✓ Denial and Conversion (Factor 3)

Denial and conversion are more used by the French, and by the non-precarious among them. Once again, no difference was found between men and women. It is the country-status interaction that is significant here as well: the precarious French (M=17,77) use this strategy more often than the precarious Portuguese (M=14,08; F=3,22, p<.07). These results show that the defensive character of denial, associated with the will-based character of conversion (the need to change one's conduct, one's attitudes or values), lend a positive colouring to this factor (in terms of social desirability), just as it happened with the control-focalization strategy.

### ► Coping strategies and stress level:

So as to understand the combination of these coping strategies and the level of stress, correlations have been found.

The non-precarious Portuguese:

**Connection between global stress and withdrawal-social support: .44\*\***

**Control-focalization: -.46\*\***

**Denial-conversion: -.37\*\***

The precarious Portuguese:

**Connection between global stress and withdrawal-social support: .22 NS**

**Control-focalization: -.52\*\***

**Denial-conversion: -.24 NS**

The non-precarious French:

**Connection between global stress and withdrawal-social support: .54\*\***

**Control-focalization: .24\*\***

**Denial-conversion: .06 NS**

The precarious French:

**Connection between global stress and withdrawal-social support: .51\*\***

**Control-focalization: .16\***

**Denial-conversion: .05 NS**

## DISCUSSION

The analysis of the connections found between stress and coping strategies shows that the *withdrawal-social support strategy* is very positively correlated with the global stress result, in three of the four groups. On the other hand, this connection is not significant for the precarious Portuguese. This result indicates that, in this group, withdrawal is not systematically associated with high levels of stress, as if marginalization had become a natural part of people's lives.

Nevertheless, we may consider the existence of a connection between the level of stress and the type of coping strategy employed. People who experience more stress tend to frequently avoid stressful situations and to request help. Thus, we understand why French women, who are more stressed than French men, resort to withdrawal and social support more often than the latter. On the other hand, no difference was found between the precarious and the non-precarious Portuguese, men and women. The fact that Portuguese men resort to withdrawal and social support more often than Portuguese women goes against the usual belief according to which women are simultaneously more stressed, more withdrawn, and more likely to request help.

As expected, the control-focalization strategy is associated with a low level of stress, but only as regards the Portuguese, whether they are precarious or non-precarious. On the contrary, the French show that control is positively associated with the global stress result, in particular concerning the non-precarious group. Control and focalization prove to be inadequate to reduce stress among the French. However, regarding the latter, there is a difference between the emotional aspects involved in the action and the effort to control stress-provoking situations. At any rate, stress is viewed as less negative by the French, since it is not regarded as contradicting the problem-resolving process.

The denial and conversion strategy may only be found in a negative connection, with a high level of stress, among the Portuguese, particularly those who are in a non-precarious situation. On the other hand, there appears to be no connection between stress and denial among the French (precarious or non-precarious).

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