"I never expected this": Expectancy Violations and Stress in Millennials

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“I never expected this”: Expectancy violations and stress in millennials

Millennials are said to be the most stressed out age group in the United States (Coccia, & Darling, 2016). Between general life stressors and the new stress that has emerged due to the increase in technology and social communication, millennials are simply overloaded with stress from all angles. In order to communicate and make sense of this stress, most millennials find themselves discussing these stressful events with their close friends. In fact, according to Jody Koenig Kellas, Haley Kranstuber Horstman, Erin K. Willer, and Kirsten Car (2015), 95% of people tell stories about stressful events soon after they occur to someone they trust. The purpose of this study is to build off of previous research in order to understand the nature of stories that millennial college students are telling one another.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Millennials have been brought up in a world of technology and communication overload. They are constantly surrounded by social media sites, networking sites, text messages, and phone calls. Not only are there computers and cell phones, but there are also devices such as Apple Watches that keep us constantly communicating and in touch with technology. It is nearly impossible for a millennial to get a real break from communicating with others (Bland et al., 2012).

Because of social media, millennials tend to hold themselves to very high standards of achievement (Bland, Melton, Welle, & Bigham 2012). As they scroll through their Facebook feed or view Instagram stories, they are constantly comparing themselves and deciding whether or not they measure up to society’s idea of perfection. Due to this constant comparison, unrealistic expectations, and overload of technology and communication, it is no wonder
millennials are said to be the “most stressed out of any age group” (Coccia & Darling, 2016, pp. 28).

According to Bhujade (2017), everyone reacts to stress differently. However, this stress seems to be inevitable for almost all college students as it is the top health problem that worries them most—it is worried about even more than body image. Put simply, the feeling of stress is what is stressing millennials out more than anything else. This stress is seen as “challenging” and “threatening,” and it is leading to more anxiety and depression as these students emerge into adulthood (Bhujade, p. 750).

What Stresses Millennials Out?

Prior research has been done on what exactly stresses millennials out. Peer, Hillman, and Van Hoet (2015) found that there are four major stressors that today’s college students face: (1) school, (2) finances, (3) family relationships, and (4) personal relationships. Bland et al. (2012) had similar results, however, these researchers broke their findings down into two major categories: life events and daily hassles (2012).

The life events that the researchers found to be most prominent were school, parental expectations, starting college, choice of major, and choice of career. The daily hassles, on the other hand, included exams, procrastination, texting, and lack of sleep (Bland et al., 2012). Although the stressors that college students experience are generally felt across the board, the way that each individual reacts and tolerates those stressors differs.

For some students, social intimacy when first coming to college is a challenge (Bhujade, 2017). This can persist throughout one’s college career, especially if social and coping skills are not learned. For others, most stress can be drawn back to the simple fact that the students have left home and are no longer surrounded by what they have physically and emotionally been used
to being surrounded by. Coupled with the abrupt change in academics from high school, the transition to college and into adulthood can be daunting (Bhujade).

**Factors That Effect Tolerance of Stress**

One of the factors that researchers have found makes a difference in how students tolerate stress is biological sex (Coccia, & Darling, 2016). There is no black and white rule for how females and males differ with stress—rather, there are general correlations that can be observed. For example, women tend to manage their time better, thus experiencing less procrastination. If they do get behind, they are typically able to recover quicker than men do. Women also tend to self criticize more than do men (Szabo, & Marian, 2017). Because of this, they also tend to spiral into clinical anxiety and depression due to constant stress more often than men.

Another factor is age. This correlation is fairly linear—typically, as one gets older, one is able to deal with the stresses of life in a more mature and responsible fashion (Coccia & Darling, 2016). Although an individual cannot control age and sex, one such factor that can is the amount of sleep that a student gets. According to Coccia and Darling, as sleep decreases, stress and the reactions to and effects of stress increase. Although some students are able to combat this or even become unaffected by it, most students experience higher stress when they are lacking sleep.

**Coping Mechanisms**

Stress on college students affects both physical and mental health. Coping with stress is a skill that is vitally important to one’s health—however, 40% of millennials reported that they feel as though they have poor coping skills when it comes to stress (Peer, Hillman & Van Hoet, 2015). Moreover, there has not been much research done by experts on *active* coping strategies
that students can use. Rather, most studies have focused on the current coping mechanisms used by millennials as well as the fact that most do not have these skills at all (Li & Yang, 2016).

As Li and Yang (2016) put it, there are two types of coping mechanisms that are used by college students: adaptive and maladaptive. Adaptive coping mechanisms include making plans and strategizing solutions as well as positive reframing of problems or stressful situations. Maladaptive mechanisms, on the other hand, include substance abuse, risky sexual behavior, excess sleeping, repressed feelings, and skipping classes, thus leading to academic difficulty (Li & Yang).

Overall, studies have shown that most college students do one of three things in order to cope with stress: they (1) listen to music, (2) sleep, or (3) involve themselves in some type of social interaction (Bland et al., 2012). While these tactics are helpful, Koenig Kellas et al. found that communicating stress to a close friend can significantly decrease stress for those experiencing it (2015). Since nearly all people communicate their stress to a close friend soon after it is experienced (as previously stated, 95% of people use this tactic), this communication becomes an important topic of research. Many researchers have agreed that social support is a major factor when attempting to decrease stress as a millennial. In fact, this support can create hope, which then leads to better coping skills and a faster recovery process after a stressful event occurs (Chadwick, Zoccola, Figueroa, & Rabideau, 2016).

**Supportive Communication**

Supportive communication does not just involve *what* a friend says to someone who is sharing a stressful situation with him or her. Rather, it involves the content itself, the process of sharing that information, the depth of the information, how the listener reacts both verbally and nonverbally, and the physical and emotional responses that are experienced by both the listener
and the teller (Chadwick et al., 2016). If either the listener or the teller misconstrues any of these, it can create relational turbulence or emotional contagion, thus making it a very intricate process (Koenig Kellas et al., 2015).

**Communicated Narrative Sense-Making Theory (CNSM)**

Jody Koenig Kellas has done extensive research on what she calls Communicated Narrative Sense-Making (CNSM) theory. According to her research, CNSM is about shedding light on both the content and process of storytelling (Koenig Kellas, 2018). Further, CNSM shows the functions of storytelling and how it can affect individual and relational health and well-being. Through storytelling, stress goes from being strictly individual to becoming something that can be made sense of together. This process of creating shared meaning not only helps one make sense of what is stressful, but it also allows one to cope with that stress in a healthy way.

For the purpose of my study, I have chosen to focus on proposition #1 of Koenig Kellas’s CNSM theory. This proposition states that it is rooted in post-positivism, however, it has the potential to be used in the interpretive paradigm. Typically, proposition #1 is used in qualitative interviews with open-ended questions, such as the research that was done for this study. The content, then, is analyzed thematically (in this case, I analyzed the content of the stories that were told by the friend pairs). According to this proposition, storytelling unveils one’s messages, values, and beliefs. Further, it can be used in order to discover the specific values and beliefs that millennials hold about emerging adulthood (Koenig Kellas, 2018). Koenig Kellas also discusses the relationship between talking about positive stories (e.g. romantic relationships, overcoming adversity) and an increase in health and well-being. Using this theory, I will investigate the stress
that millennials face and how they communicate this stress with their close friends. The following is the research question that I will pose:

RQ: What is the nature of stress in the stories of difficulty emerging adult college students tell their friends?

**METHOD**

**Participants**

For this study, students at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln who study communication were recruited in their classes. These students were offered extra credit for their participation. This study researched 37 pairs of millennials who were friends in their classes ($M_{age} = 20.49, SD = 2.22, N = 74$). The sexes of the participants were nearly split down the middle, although six of them did not report on their sex (male ($n = 35, 51.5\%$) and female ($n = 33, 48.5\%$)). Thirty of the friend pairs (81\%) were of the same sex, while the remaining (19\%) were of the opposite sex. Forty-nine participants were Caucasian (66.2\%), eight were Asian (10.8\%), one was African American, one was Hispanic, and one was Native American (1.4\% respectively), and nine reported Other (12.2\%). The average length that the pair had been friends was 38.51 months ($SD = 43.90$), and the friends said that their level of closeness was moderate ($M = 3.80, SD = 1.21$ on a 5-point scale).

**Procedures**

Those communication students were interested in participating in the study recruited one of their friends to help them. There was a control group as well as a treatment group who told stories of stressful events or listened to their friend tell a story of a stressful event. There were three phases involved: pre-study (24 hours prior to the first lab visit), three separate storytelling interactions (all on different days within the same week; 10-minutes long each), and post-study,
which occurred three weeks later. The roles of storyteller and listener were randomly assigned to the friends. Because I am interested in how the millennials used CNSM to communicate their stress, I focused only on the first day of storytelling. Storytellers were required to tell the same story three days in a row to the listeners, thus creating an unrealistic response by the listeners on days two and three as they had already heard and responded to the story being told. Therefore, day one was likely the most ecologically valid marker of students’ stress stories. In the remainder of this study, I will be describing my methods and results based only on the first day of storytelling.

**Storytelling Interaction: Day 1**

During the first day, the research participants were randomly assigned either the role of the storyteller or the listener and asked to complete questionnaires. The storytellers filled out a Life Experience Questionnaire (LEQ, Lyubomirsky, Sousa, & Dickerhoof, 2006) so that the researchers could inquire their difficult life experience (DLE) that would be the focus of their storytelling. Both the storyteller and the listener also filled out questionnaires that were not relevant to this study. Next, the two friends were placed in a room together sitting across from one another. They were told to act as if they normally would, and the storytellers were specifically instructed to tell the story of the stressful event that they had selected along with instructions adapted from Lyubomirsky et al. (2006). This included talking about deep thoughts and feelings and tying their story to relationships they have or have had, identity, and their past, present, and future. The researcher then left the room for ten minutes. During this time, the teller and the listener interacted with one another while being recorded with a video camera.

**Data analysis**
Each friend pair was recorded and placed on a DVD. I did not conduct this research myself, therefore I viewed the videos for the first time as I was analyzing the data. Before I watched and coded the videos, I familiarized myself with the topic of stress in emerging adults by conducting a literature review. Through this research, I was able to receive a general idea about what was already known about this topic as well as what I could contribute to it. Because I researched the topic before I watched and coded all of the videos, my approach was theoretical rather than inductive (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

After researching and familiarizing myself with both what is known and what is unknown, I watched each video and took notes on both what the tellers and the listeners were saying. Since each video was ten minutes long and I had a limited amount of time to do my research, I chose not to transcribe the videos completely. Rather, I jotted down information and quotes that I felt were important and stood out to me. Later, using methods outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), I went back through my notes and highlighted them in order to start the initial coding process. My initial codes were data-driven; I was originally interested in studying and researching stress and millennials, but my data analysis was what helped me narrow my study down and focus on expectancy violations. I continued to go over my notes, narrow down my ideas, and solidify the themes that I wanted to explore. These themes were carefully refined, and I was then able to begin connecting my themes with previous research.

RESULTS

My research question asked what the nature of stress was in the stories told by emerging adults to their friends. Through my qualitative coding, I found the following categories as the main stressors told by millennials: family members dying, grades, disappointed parents, choice of major, and athletics. After analyzing these themes, the main finding was that, across different
story types, some level of an expectancy violation was present. An expectancy violation is a pattern of anticipated behavior that has not been followed, therefore evoking what is often an emotional response (Burgoon, 2015). In other words, when emerging adults experience a gap between what they expect and what their reality is, stress can emerge in the form of anger, sadness, grief, or anxiety. Because each student was prepared for things to go a certain way, he or she had to pivot and reconfigure a way to move forward with the unexpected situation at hand. In what follows, I will discuss how each category represents a violation of expectancies and why that caused stress for the millennials in the study. In order to best illustrate this, exemplars will be provided.

**Family Members Dying**

Out of the 37 friend pairs, 11 talked about a family member passing away. This was the most common category that was found. While most pairs talked about grandparents passing away, a few mentioned that their mom, dad, or both parents had passed away. One person also discussed the passing of her dog (who she considered part of the family) as an extremely stressful and traumatic event.

There were several expectancy violations in these situations. The students that talked about this believed that their family members would be there for big events in life such as college graduation, their weddings, having children, etc. Rather, they had to learn how to move on and make these memories without these key people in their lives.

The same can be said about holidays. One girl who lost her grandma talked about how her mom, sisters, aunts, and cousins had to take over cooking and cleaning during the holidays, which was a big job since they had a large extended family. Another boy said that after his
grandmother died, his grandfather no longer wanted to host holiday get-togethers, so they stopped going to that side of the family for these days altogether.

For those who lost grandparents, an expectancy violation that was fairly prominent was that they were no longer able to go to their parents for emotional support the way they used to be able to. As children, we often depend on our parents for security and support when bad things happen. However, when a grandparent dies, it can be difficult for the parents to provide this support to their emerging adult children.

One girl tearfully described her mother falling apart at her grandmother’s funeral. She said that she had “never seen her [the mother] fall apart like that,” and that watching her mother grieve was the most difficult part of losing her grandmother. Further, this girl was not able to talk with her mom about missing her grandma or how different it was going to be without her because her mother could not handle the conversation emotionally.

As the participants emerge into adulthood, they are faced with the reality of losing those they love. It is a difficult adjustment to make because up until that point, they were unsure of what it would be like to live without that person in their lives. In other words, they are not sure what to expect or how they will feel. When a loved one dies when they are not prepared to lose him or her, this transition is even more difficult, and a deeper violation of our expectations is experienced.

**Grades**

Six pairs discussed grades as their most prominent stressor. Each of these millennials expected their grades to be higher if they studied more, did the work that their professors provided as practice, and attended class and took notes. However, some found that getting good grades in college was much more difficult than they thought it would be.
One boy, who was taking a calculus course, expected to get a much higher grade on his first exam. Rather than getting an A like he thought he would, he received a low B. This boy told his friend how he had studied several hours, done all of the practice problems and homework that his professor gave him, and even met with the TA to discuss the coursework. Although he believed that he did everything he could to succeed, his grade did not reflect this.

Another boy talked about how he did not expect grades to matter so much once he graduated college. He understood that grades in high school were important to get into a good college, however, he didn’t expect there to be so much pressure to succeed academically in his college courses—even the general course requirements were stressful for him. As humans, the students wish to find success in what they do—aiming for good grades in college is part of this. When they feel as though they are more talented or intelligent than their results are showing, their expectations for our success are being violated.

**Disappointed Parents**

Tied with grades as the second largest stressor was disappointed parents. Some students communicated their parents’ general dissatisfaction with them in different areas of their lives. One girl said that her parents were perfectionists and expected her to be the same—when she didn’t live up to their idea of excellence, they treated her differently, and she struggled emotionally with the thought of displeasing her parents.

Another friend pair both traded stories about how going home was not calming, relaxing, or fun like most college students expect and experience. Rather, going home was a stressful event in and of itself for them. Instead of being welcomed home, they were asked lots of questions, judged for decisions they were making, and they overall just felt uncomfortable being home because they seemed to be disappointing their parents. One of the friends told a particular
story about constantly being compared to her other friend who was very smart. Because her grades were not the same as her friend’s, her parents believed she was not trying as hard, and they were disappointed in her.

One boy described his experience getting a DUI and explaining that situation to his displeased parents. He talked about how every kid wants to please his or her parents, however, the mistakes he had made were making it difficult for his parents not to be disappointed in him. He told his friend that he knew his parents still loved him, however, they did not agree with the decisions he was making.

As he went through the process of going to court, being on probation for six months, and doing community service to pay for his mistake, the boy had to depend on his parents for basic help more than he expected he would have to at his age. He had been driving on his own and had been fairly independent for years, but after he got his license suspended, he had to count on his parents for rides wherever he went, thus taking away his freedom and independence. This was a difficult experience for him, but he said that disappointing his parents felt worse than depending on them to drive him where he needed to go.

One of the most difficult parts of becoming an adult and gaining independence is finding the balance between appeasing one’s parents and following one’s own wishes. Since college-aged individuals are not fully developed mentally, they tend to make more mistakes than adults do. Therefore, they violate the expectations of their parents and other elders who are guiding them into adulthood. As emerging adults, millennials also experience an expectancy violation of their own because they have the expectation that their parents will be proud of them, will agree with their decisions, and will support them through the mistakes that they make. This, however, is not always the case.
Majors

Choosing a major seemed to be stressful for six of the story tellers. Two main topics were discussed with this stressor: (1) believing that a major would be easier than it actually was and (2) the criticism of a major by friends and family.

Four of the friend pairs conversed about majors being more challenging than they expected them to be. One student who chose to study accounting said that he expected accounting to come easily to him because he had taken a class in high school on finance and received an “A.” He had also been good at math in the past, so he correlated his success in mathematics to his expected success in accounting. Needless to say, accounting ended up being more difficult than he expected. His first year as an accounting major was only slightly worse than he expected, however, the following two years proved to be a major challenge for him. He planned on completing his degree in accounting, however, he said that if he had it to do all over again, he would not have made the difficulty of courses such a deciding factor when choosing his major. Moreover, he would not assume that any one major was easier or more difficult than another.

The other topic discussed was the criticism of a student’s chosen major by family and friends. A couple of millennials talked about how excited they had been to choose a major, but then their friends and family criticizing that major or the classes they were taking caused them to second guess their decision. Both of them were expecting to love their major so much that it wouldn’t matter what anyone else thought—however, the disapproval of their friends and family members weighed on them more than expected.

One of these students ended up staying with her major despite the criticism she was getting. She was pleased with this decision because she knew that she was following her passion
and doing what made her happy. The other student, however, decided to listen to his friends and switch majors. He ended up switching majors three times before he finally ended up with one he was happy with. He said that he did not regret his decision to leave his first major, however, he wished that it would have been more of his own individual choice than the choice of his family and friends.

According to my analysis, participants seemed to experience expectancy violations when choosing their careers because their choice was often guided by what they believed they were good at and what they tended to enjoy. However, the majors and careers they chose did not always end up being as great as they seemed on the outside. Often there were parts of their majors that they did not like, and they may even end up hating their career altogether. On the other hand, choosing a major or a career that others do not expect can create turbulence in relationships, therefore creating another expectancy violation because millennials tend to believe that those they love will support them no matter what.

**Athletics**

Finally, four of the friend pairs shared stressful stories they experienced as Husker athletes. Two of these stories stuck out as great examples of an expectancy violation. The first was a girl who was an international student athlete. She chose to attend the University of Nebraska-Lincoln because they had the most successful and competitive program in her sport. When she got to UNL, however, she discovered that she did not mesh with the coaches and their coaching style very well. She was not sure whether she was expecting them to have different techniques that they shared with her or whether she was just struggling because she was away from home, but either way, she was not performing as well as she wanted to and expected to. She said that her skills decreased when she came to Nebraska—she had been playing her sport for 11
years, so this expectancy violation was very surprising and difficult for her. Rather than improving her game and contributing to their team like she thought she would, she felt as though she had gotten worse and failed her teammates and coaches.

The other student talked about how she had expected to play her sport her freshman year at the university, however, her coaches ended up red shirting her. This expectancy violation was difficult and stressful for her because she was not receiving the playing time that she had expected and was originally told she would have by her coaches. Moreover, she began to question her decision to play for UNL rather than another university who would have played her all four years. Athletes experience different results on different days—no two practices or competitions are alike. Some days, they perform better than they expected to, while other days, they perform worse (sometimes significantly worse). Therefore, they experience both positive and negative expectancy violations.

The remaining four pairs discussed something outside of these categories, and thus, they were not mentioned in detail in this section. However, each of them constituted an expectancy violation in its own way. No matter what situation millennials are in, they have expectations for what the potential outcome will be. When the reality does not end up being what they expect, it can be difficult to adjust.

**DISCUSSION**

A large part of the human experience has to do with expectations. In nearly every situation, there are expectations held by each individual that, if not followed, may evoke a negative reaction (Burgoon, 2015). Expectations are, simply put, the anticipation one has of what the other person in a social interaction is going to do or say. This can be based on social norms,
past relational history, the type of interaction, or the setting in which the interaction is taking place.

Although these expectancy violations can be positive at times, they are mostly seen in a negative light. In this study, I found that almost all of the friend pairs discussed their expectancy violations as the latter. These situations in which their expectations were violated caused them to become increasingly stressed, thus affecting their perceived quality of life. Though there were many different story types, each of the storytellers seemed to receive some relief when talking through his or her experience and making sense of it with his or her friend.

This study adds on to previous research done about expectancy violations and stress by focusing on the specific cohort of millennials. As I previously stated, research had already been done on what stresses college students out (Peer et al., 2015 & Bland et al., 2016), what they do (or don’t do) to cope with that stress (Bland et al., 2016 & Li & Yang, 2016), and how talking with a friend typically helps them make sense of what is stressing them out (Koenig Kellas et al., 2015). My data aligned with previous studies about what was stressing these emerging adults out. For example, the major categories that Peer et al. (2015) found to be stressful to college students were school, family relationships, and personal relationships. Further, Bland et al. (2012) added to this list by placing grades, parental expectations, and the choice of major and career as main stressors for millennials. All of these categories coincided with what I found in my analysis. Finally, Koenig Kellas et al. (2015)’s research on CNSM theory and communicating one’s stress with a close friend was directly related to the data that was collected for my study since the prompt was to simply chat with a friend about a current stressor. My study also provided a new lens through which to view this stress by interpreting how each friend pair
discussed not only what was stressing them out and why, but also how this stress was caused by something unexpected happening in their lives.

**Future research**

Currently, there are not many research studies that have been done on how expectancy violations affect the amount of stress that millennials experience. There is room for more research to be done on this topic, which can be built from the research that I have done. In addition, Koenig Kellas’s CNSM theory should be further researched in relation to expectancy violations theory (EVT) and stress. The way in which people make sense of their stress (and related expectancy violations) through talking with a close family member or friend provides a good amount of information to be collected and analyzed. An interesting path to follow with this would be to study specific types of relationships—for example, EVT and stress in relation to a romantic relationship versus a platonic relationship.

**Limitations**

The sample in this study was rather homogeneous. Most of the friend pairs were Caucasian, and the sample size was fairly small. Research was also conducted in a state that is fairly rural, thus limiting the participants and their backgrounds. Perhaps with more diversity in cultural backgrounds, socio-economic status, etc., the results would have differed.

**CONCLUSION**

Overall, I believe that this study greatly contributed to communicative research on college students. Previously, little was known about the values and expectations of millennials, the way in which they reacted to expectancy violations, and how they communicated and made sense of this with their peers. Not only does this study answer the question of the nature of stress experienced by emerging adults, but it also provides ground for future research to be done.
References


