



## Case Report



# “If stress is good for me, it's probably good for you too”: Stress mindset and judgment of others' strain<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

Much is known about stress and its resulting strain (i.e., negative outcomes such as burnout or impaired health), but not about how we perceive others' strain and what the outcomes of such strain perceptions are. We integrated the social-projection and stress-mindset literatures to investigate, for the first time, the effect of holding a stress-is-enhancing, versus a stress-is-debilitating, mindset on social judgments of a target's strain, on the perceiver's consequent perceptions of the target's promotability, and on his or her intention to voluntarily help the target. We argued that perceivers may project their own stress-mindsets onto others, resulting in egocentrically-biased judgments of the latter's strain. We conducted four experimental and correlational studies, among 971 fully-employed Americans and Israelis, using a novel stress-mindset manipulation. We predicted and found evidence that, independent of the effects of mood, individuals holding a stress-is-enhancing versus a stress-is-debilitating mindset were less likely to judge a target experiencing a heavy workload as suffering from burnout, somatic symptoms, or presenteeism (i.e., reduced productivity at work due to health problems). We also revealed two important downstream outcomes: whereas the lower strain judgments associated with a stress-is-enhancing mindset led to a higher estimate of the target's promotability, they also led to a lower likelihood of helping him. Taken together, our findings establish a causal link between stress-mindset and judgments of others' strain, thereby extending the novel notion of stress-mindset beyond intra-personal outcomes to inter-personal effects. Results provide a foundation for future work addressing the accuracy of judgment of others' stress experience.

## 1. Introduction

No matter how stressed you felt during the past week, chances are that people around you did not perceive your stress the same way you did. In fact, we know a great deal about stress, but know very little about how we perceive others' stress. Stress is a complex concept that encompasses stressors (i.e., conditions and events), appraisals of stressors, and strains, defined as negative physiological, cognitive, emotional, or behavioral outcomes of stress (Bliese, Edwards, & Sonnentag, 2017; Cohen, Janicki-Deverts, & Miller, 2007; Karasek, 1979). The link between stressors (e.g., work hours) and strains (e.g., burnout, illness) is well documented, suggesting that exposure to stressors inflicts extensive personal, organizational, and societal costs (Johns, 2010; Maslach, 2003). Surprisingly, research has largely focused on individuals' perceptions of their own strain, whereas social perceptions of

other people's strain have largely been overlooked.

We build on the social perception literature, and specifically on *social projection* research, which has shown that when people try to evaluate targets' thoughts, feelings, or behaviors, they often project their own corresponding states, thereby arriving at inaccurate social judgments (Ames, 2004; Epley, Keysar, Van Boven, & Gilovich, 2004; Krueger, 2007). Thus, we argue that social perceptions of strain (i.e., perceptions of whether a target is experiencing negative outcomes of stress) may often be biased. Moreover, as a person's perceptions of others shape his or her behaviors towards them (e.g., Chartrand & Bargh, 1999), we posit that the extent to which a person perceives a target as strained (e.g., the extent to which a manager perceives an employee as experiencing burnout) may inform her actions towards that target (e.g., promotion decisions). Notably, to our knowledge, no study to date has assessed perceptions of others' strain,

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and only one study has addressed perceptions of targets' stressors (i.e., work-home conflict; Hoobler, Wayne, & Lemmon, 2009). The latter study found that managers rated their female employees' work-home-conflict levels as higher than those of their male employees, whereas in fact, no gender differences were observed in self-reports of work-home conflict. Importantly, this overestimation of females' work-home conflict led managers to judge their person-job fit, performance, and promotability levels as low. We suspect that these managers' beliefs about their subordinates' stressors (i.e., stress-mindset, see below), may have affected their judgments of the latter's performance and promotability.

### 1.1. Stress-mindset

*Mindsets*—mental frameworks or lenses that help people organize and encode information—shape the ways in which people understand, experience, and act upon their environment (Dweck, 1999). *Stress-mindset*, a recently-introduced concept, is the extent to which individuals hold the mindset that stress has enhancing versus debilitating consequences (Crum, Salovey, & Achor, 2013).

Of course, it is highly common for individuals to hold a “stress-is-debilitating” mindset (Clark, 2003; Kinman & Jones, 2005), as the mass media tend to highlight stress's contribution to negative outcomes such as morbidity and mortality (e.g., Cohen et al., 2007; Melamed, Shirrom, Toker, Berliner, & Shapira, 2006). In fact, the extent to which individuals believe that stress is debilitating has in itself been positively associated with morbidity (Nabi et al., 2013) and mortality rates (Keller et al., 2012). However, recent studies have indicated that stress may also produce favorable outcomes (for reviews see: Podsakoff, LePine, & LePine, 2007; Updegraff & Taylor, 2000), suggesting that a “stress-is-enhancing” mindset is also likely to be viable under certain circumstances. Interestingly, over and above the effects of stress level, induction of a stress-is-enhancing mindset has been shown to improve self-reported health and work performance (Crum et al., 2013), as well as to enhance physiological functioning and performance (e.g., Jamieson, Mendes, Blackstock, & Schmader, 2010; Jamieson, Mendes, & Nock, 2013).

Thus, holding a stress-is-enhancing-mindset seems intra-personally beneficial, but what are its interpersonal effects? Building on the social projection literature (Krueger, 2007), we argue that when a perceiver egocentrically projects his or her stress-is-enhancing mindset onto a target, he or she may produce a biased judgment of the target's experience of strain. For example, a manager holding a stress-is-enhancing mindset rather than a stress-is-debilitating mindset may be less likely to perceive his employees' stressors (e.g., extended work hours) as hazardous and, consequently, may evaluate his employees' strain levels (e.g., somatic symptoms) as low. We further posit that, in addition to influencing individuals' perceptions of others' strain, a perceiver's stress-mindset may also affect important downstream outcomes. For example, a manager may interpret (his perceptions of) an employee's low levels of strain as signaling high levels of person-job fit and job performance, which may positively influence the manager's perceptions of the employee's career prospects (e.g., promotability judgments), yet reduce his willingness to help the employee (e.g., offer mental or instrumental support). Accordingly, we hypothesize that a perceiver who holds a stress-is-enhancing-mindset will judge a target's strain levels as lower than will a perceiver who holds a stress-is-debilitating-mindset and, consequently, will be more likely to judge the target's promotability favorably, and will be less willing to voluntarily help the target.

### 1.2. Overview of the current research

We tested, for the first time, the aforementioned hypothesis that a stress-is-enhancing (as opposed to stress-is-debilitating) mindset reduces the extent to which a perceiver perceives a target as experiencing strain. To operationalize strain, we relied on three widely-used measures of strain—burnout, presenteeism, and somatic symptoms—that

have been shown to be costly for both individuals and organizations. *Burnout*, a negative affective state composed of physical, cognitive, and emotional exhaustion, has been shown to result from chronic exposure to stressors, and to impair physical and emotional well-being (Maslach, 2003; Melamed et al., 2006). *Presenteeism*, another common work-related strain, refers to the loss of work productivity due to illness and stress (Johns, 2010; Turpin et al., 2004). *Somatic symptoms* represent the presence of physical symptoms such as pain or fatigue, which may or may not be associated with a diagnosed medical condition (Gierk et al., 2014).

We conducted four studies in which we used an identical social judgment paradigm: a scenario about a hard-working employee experiencing high workload. After reading this scenario, participants (perceivers) were asked to rate the hard-working employee's strain and promotability levels (Studies 1–3) or their intentions to help this employee (Study 4). Correlational Study 1 examined the link between individual differences in stress-mindset and judgments of a target's burnout, after accounting for perceivers' age, gender, mood and optimism, as well as assessments of the target's workload; the latter control variable was incorporated on the basis of past studies that have observed links between stress-mindset and stress levels (Crum et al., 2013; Nabi et al., 2013). In Studies 2–4, we developed a novel priming manipulation of stress-mindset (i.e., priming either a stress-is-enhancing mindset or a stress-is-debilitating mindset), and tested its effects on perceivers' judgments of a target's presenteeism and somatic symptoms (Study 2), burnout (Study 3), or all three types of strain (Study 4). Furthermore, to demonstrate the effect of stress-mindset on more indirect, downstream consequences of strain judgments, we also tested the indirect effect of perceivers' stress mindset, through perceptions of the target's strain on the target's promotability (Studies 1–3) and on perceivers' intentions to help the target (Study 4). In addition, we addressed potential alternative explanations, including the possibility that any effects of stress-mindset on strain perceptions are simply due to an association between perceivers' (dispositional or manipulated) stress-mindset and their mood, which affects their judgments. All studies were approved by the university's IRB committee. All measures, manipulations, and exclusions in the study are disclosed. Across all studies, data analyses were conducted after data collection concluded. That is, data collection proceeded independently of the results obtained.

## 2. Study 1: individual differences in stress-mindset and judgments of others' burnout and promotability

Study 1 examined the role of individual differences in stress-mindset in perceivers' assessments of a target's strain (burnout) and of the target's promotability; specifically, it tested the hypothesis that individuals who hold a stress-is-enhancing mindset rather than a stress-is-debilitating-mindset tend to evaluate a given target as being less burned-out and, consequently, as more likely to be promoted. Participants (i.e., perceivers) read a scenario about a hard-working employee and rated his levels of burnout and promotability; then, in an ostensibly unrelated questionnaire, participants reported their own stress-mindsets. Study 1 also addressed two possible alternative explanations for the hypothesized link: *negative mood* due to reading a vignette about a stressed person, and *general trait optimism*, which is linked to both stress-mindset and strain (Crum et al., 2013). We expected stress-mindset to have a unique effect on perceivers' judgments of the target's burnout (referred to hereafter as *target's perceived burnout*). We further expected the target's perceived strain to have a mediating effect on the extent to which perceivers evaluated the target as being eligible for promotion (*target's perceived promotability*), over and above any effects of optimism or negative mood.

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