A Theory of the Gates of Stress in Everyday Life: A Challenge to Eurocentrism

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Abstract

Although psychologists in Africa, particularly those from the West and East African sub-regions have continued to rely on the Western perspectives on stress as a guide for their work, yet it is constantly being realized by these same psychologists that the Western models of stress, while not to be ignored, are partial and Eurocentric in content and perspective, and insufficiently useful as sole maps for action in the face of some peculiar sources of stress in ordinary life in Africa and the wider world. This recognition generates the need for the evolution and entrenchment of the spirit of pluralism in the crafting of epistemologies and theories of stress for use in Africa. Against this background, the present article explores the need to understand alternative perspectives on stress that can be resorted to, to complement the western theories of stress that have so far been dominating the centres of psychological training in Universities in Africa. Consequently, this paper is an attempt to present an alternative model of stress that practitioners of psychological therapies in Africa can work with for understanding some aspects of stress provocation in ordinary life in many parts of the world. Engaging in this process is useful to draw attention to the existence of some gates of stress among people that should be recognized by psychological practitioners in Africa and other parts of the world. It is expected that the result will serve as an important addition to the hitherto one-sided (Western) and elitist vocabulary of stress that is dominating the literature on stress in international psychology. The alternative approach to theorizing on stress undertaken in this paper places emphasis on the socio-cultural context of stress formation in human societies.

Keywords: Theory, Stress, Body, Embodied Gates, Africa.

Background

From the point of view of mainstream (western) psychology, there are not less than five major theories of stress available in the literature as summarized by Rice (1998). These are: the idea of stress as external pressure or the so-called physical pressure perspective (Rice, 1998); the concept of stress as internal tension or the psychological approach (Rice 1998); the idea of stress as physiological arousal or the physiological model credited to Selye, (1956, 1974); the model of stress as transaction, or the now very popular cognitive model of stress propagated by Lazarus and Launier (1978), Lazarus (1991a, 1993), and Lazarus and Folkman, (1984), and the notion of stress as proposed by Hobfoll (1988, 1989, 1998, 2002) which sees stress as a product of loss of valued assets/resources in the context of traumatic events.

The model of stress as external pressure takes its explanatory analogy from the engineering fields. "It suggests that stress exists as a property of an external event" (Price, 1998, p. 174), just like it happens in the world of physical objects and events. In constructing bridges, according to this model of stress, engineers try to calculate the load or force a bridge must endure and then build it to resist that force. In this perspective, therefore, bridge stress would be said to occur where it cracks or breaks down under a load that puts greater pressure on it

than it is built to endure. Human stress, according to this model, arises when people, individually or collectively are confronted by external pressures (challenges and tasks) that appear beyond their control. This model, in other words, presents humans as essentially passive absorbers of stress, which they have little control over but can only try to withstand it in order to survive. In this view, humans are conceived as largely mere victims, not architects of their own stress. Yet, the alternative perspective on stress to be presented later on in this paper sees human beings as, at times, engaging in behaviours that generate stress in their lives. In other words, in this alternative model, people often can be perceived not as victims but architects of their own stress.

The model of stress as internal tension conceives of stress as "an inner state of psychic struggle, tension, anxiety, perhaps even panic that involves a perception of threat or harm" (Price, 1998, p.174) in a given individual. In this model, stress can be conceived of as the internal war inside humans when they are confronted with a challenge or approach/avoid tasks that seem catastrophic or overwhelming whichever way one wants to resolve the equation. In this model, too, psychic struggle is believed to take time and energy to resolve and should the struggle continue over a long time, with little or no end in sight, the result can be disastrous. In my view, the limitation of this model when seen from the point of view of African perspective is that it construes stress as a product of interiority; that is, as something that is brewed inside an individual in the face of a problem to be addressed. This means that it is not seen as a product of panic instigated by the presence or negative actions of others with whom we live and work. Yet as understood in Africa certain aspects of social stress or panic are instigated not primarily from within but from the destructive actions of others with whom we have either a psychological or spiritual contact.

The model of stress as body arousal was credited to Selye, who in 1956, suggested that stress is "the nonspecific response of the body to any demand made upon it" (Seyle, 1974, p.72). In this model, stress is defined in terms of the demand itself, rather than as a response to it. However, it also implies that to meet the demand, the body usually reacts with a higher arousal level and expends more energy in doing so. In this model, therefore, it is the state of body arousal and energy expenditure that constitute the stress impact on humans. Again, in this model, like in the earlier models above mentioned, the socio-cultural context of behaviour (encompassing the ordinary people's recognition of the influence of the unseen forces in human life) that is emphasized in the African perspective is not placed in focus. Thus, according to Okpewho, "for many communities in Africa, when a person dies, he is simply assumed to have departed physically from this world but to have joined the company of ancestors who have gone before. Between these ancestors and the living there is an unbroken line of communication and contact" (Okpewho, 1992, p.158-9), by means of which members from both sides can influence one another.

The concept of stress as transaction (Lazarus & Launier 1978; Lazarus, 1991a, 1993; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), is among the most popular perspectives on stress in Western literature. It is an integrative model (Rice, 1998) that tries to connect and build on the important components of the earlier three. A basic definition of stress under this model is that stress is neither an environmental stimulus, nor a characteristic of the person, nor a response but a relationship between stress demands and the power to deal with them without unreasonable or destructive costs (Coyne & Holroyd, 1982). Put, in other words, the transactional model believes that

> "stress exists only when environmental demands exceed the person's ability to cope. If the person's coping resources are adequate, no stress occurs, even if an outsider might

view the demand as extreme. Conversely, if the person's coping skills are weak and ineffective, stress may occur, even though to an outsider, the demand may appear slight" (Rice, 1998, p.76).

One essential implication of this model is that people differ in how they perceive and respond to stress. Of course there is reasonable application of this notion of stress in some contexts in Africa. The main contention, however, is that it is not always the case that we encounter stress as a type of demand imposed on us from the environment. For often, people (both here in Africa and in the wider world) tend to engage in behaviours that embarrass and cause them stress.

The fifth model of stress, the one credited to Hobfoll (1988, 1989, 1998, 2002) appears to depart from the individuo-centric emphases of the earlier four above highlighted. It also seems to address particularly the stress of the executive or leaders of business organizations, both young and old, in any setting. That fifth model, known as the *Conservation of Resources Theory* (COR theory) of stress was first presented by Hobfoll in 1989 and reissued in 1998. Hobfoll's theory focuses on loss of resources as a major factor to understand human stress. The central tenet of COR theory is that people strive to obtain, retain and protect that which they value and that they try to avoid losses in relation to these things. Hobfoll (1989) views that which people value as resources. He defines resources as those things that people value or that which people value. In his theory, he divides the resources which people value and try avoid loss of, into four categories: *Object resources, Condition resources, Personal resources and Energy resources.* As seen by Hobfoll's theor*y,* object resources include resources that have a physical presence, such as a home or house, clothes, land or a car, each of which is stressful when lost. Condition resources refer to those that give people the foundation and the opportunity for access to other resources. They include such things as having employment, having an elevated social role, being married, being healthy or attaining seniority. Again, losing any of these valued resources produces stress in those affected. Personal resources on the other hand include both skills and personal traits such as social aplomb, self-efficacy, self-esteem, optimism or hope; and energy resources derive their value from their ability to be exchanged for resources in the other three categories. Hence, they include money, knowledge or time. According of Hobfoll, stress occurs when resources of the individual or his family in any of the four categories are threatened with or subjected to a loss. In line with Hobfoll's theory, just highlighted, one can say that in the African context stress results through loss of one's home to fire or flood, loss of an only child to death as well as loss of one's marriage or source of income to factors beyond one's control. But the main contention of this paper is that in many parts of Africa people encounter stress not only in conditions of loss of valued objects or resources, but also through engagement in some negative life style practices that come with stress. Thus in ordinary life in Africa one can speculate on the presence and influence of gates of stress in people's lives.

Stress in African Perspective

The above observation means that although most of the above mentioned theories of stress, like the last one can be said to be up to a point universalizable and applicable to the understanding of stress in all cultures, including those we have in Africa, there are a number of limitations of some of them when perceived from the point of view of what generates stress among ordinary people in face-to-face communities such as we have here in Africa south of the Sahara. Among such limitations is their overreliance on the individuo-centric perspective or on what happens within or around the individual in the generation of stress. In so doing

these theories outlined above end up giving little or no attention to exploring how 'the presence of others' (including those of the ancestors), in our lives can instigate the initiation of stress. Yet, a realistic theory of stress, at least, as understood in Africa must give recognition to the fact that people in face-to-face communities often affect each other's lives both directly and negatively through their strained and conflicted interactions with one another (Magesa, 2002).

Another limitation of some of the Western stress theories is their overemphasis on the role of the mind rather than the body/people's spiritual perspective in the etiology of stress. Through such limitation the five major theories of stress in Western or Euro-American psychology as noted earlier, fail to give attention to aspects of stress formation that are more relevant for understanding the sources of stress in ordinary life.

Thus, in this article, what is argued is not that those (Western) theories of stress as earlier highlighted in this article are wrong or that they should be replaced by the African approach to stress. What is contended is rather that they are partial and unable to take into account other gates (defined in this paper as avenues, or pathways or contact zones) of stress (to be clarified below) more familiar to people in non-industrial settings like we have in Africa. Consequently, the major contention of the present writer is for the need to develop more down-to-earth theories of stress, the type that although may not be uniquely African, but can help to introduce an alternative theory of stress that can close the gap on knowledge of the gates of stress among ordinary people in Africa and other parts of the world. The present article is an attempt to formulate one such theory, offered from the vantage point of a critical psychology of the phenomenon of stress in the African context. In pursuing this goal, it places emphasis on the metaphor of the gates of stress, giving recognition to the determining role of the body, including human memory and imagination and the spiritual view of the people in stress-related illnesses in human beings, such as we have here in Africa.

The Six Gates of Stress

The idea of the theory of gates of stress expounded in this article emerged from my years of clinical experience in two regions of Africa (particularly Kenya and Tanzania in East Africa and Nigeria in West Africa) as well as from pertinent documentary sources through which I came to the recognition that the stories of stress of the average African individual client that present for counseling attention, often implicate the body and its gates or contact zones to the world (the mouth, the eyes, the ears, the genitals, etc) in stress formation and escalation. The same trend similarly suggests the impact of the behaviour of others, including beings in the spiritual realm such as the ancestors, in stress provocation. In listening to such stories, for instance, one comes to the conclusion that there are not less than six gates or zones or sources of stress in human beings. These include: the mouth gate, the eye gate, the genital gate, the ear gate, and the abstract gates such as those of human memory and imagination.

This paper argues that the stress-related complaints of ordinary human beings, such as those of urban and rural Africa often, though not always, originate from the irresponsible management of any one or more of these gates, most of them constitutive of the strategic regions of the human body. The details of the causative role of these regions of the human being in stress provocation in the Africa context (without prejudice to its possible application in other parts of the world) are highlighted below as a means of initiating a discussion on the view that apart from the perspective on stress formation recognized in mainstream psychology, there are other ways of conceiving sources of stress in human beings that are

relevant for effective psychological practice in Africa. In developing this alternative explanation of stress as planned in this paper, the discussion will begin with the stress of the mouth gate.

(a) The Stress of the Mouth Gate

Under this theme, the first comment to make is that one instigative aspect of the mouth gate as a source of stress in human beings is linked with what is known in most parts of Africa as 'the problem of the tongue'. This entails how people use language and communicates in face-to-face communities; specifically, it originates from people's bad use of words against one another (Magesa, 2002). Here the stress generated arises from the unfavourable and damaging/destructive elements in the words exchanged. One illustrative account of the poisonous nature of irresponsible use of the tongue in this context is that presented by Presby (1999). That account shows that in an interview study conducted by Presby (1999) on what causes stress-related disputes among people of Western Kenya, (East Africa) Saulo Namianya Manyonge who had worked for the Government Lands Office beginning in 1969 to settle disputes arising with land allocation, pointed out, that:

> What causes misunderstanding and conflict in society is the tongue (i.e. the way people talk about and against each other) and certain evil things inherent in society (*shetani*). I therefore see my role as *facilitating the leveling of tongues* (my italics) among people so as to eliminate misunderstanding and the conflicts (stress) that go with it. Once the tongues are leveled, they live in harmony and peace with each other, as they are now more amenable to listen to peace counseling (Presby, 1999, p. 12)

Hence, drawing from the accounts volunteered by some of my African clients in conflict with one another, it is often discovered that the kind of bad use of the tongue that generates stress in human communities is the type that involves and implicates the use of malicious, slanderous and demeaning language or the practice of false witnessing against fellow members of the family, the work-place or society.

However, it needs to be mentioned that in more instances than one, the problem of the tongue as a source of stress in people's day-to-day interactions with one another do not often derive so much from *what is said* than in the pain of what is withheld or *what is not said*. Here, what is emphasized is the potential destructive element in the *wrong use of silence* in relating with others that is often noted in the African context. The crisis of wrong use of silence in this regard is said to be most devastating and stressful within the family setting as well as in the larger community of friends and extended kin group in times when people fail to speak out against an injustice when they ought to do so. In that way, the error of keeping quiet when one ought to speak out is the crisis of ambiguity and misunderstanding that such a stance sets into motion with attendant stressful consequences for the victims concerned. In that case, interpersonal conflicts and strains become the result because witnesses deliberately held their speech in the face of an injustice.

Another dimension of stress that derives from the wrong or irresponsible management of the mouth gate emanates from the mouth's role as an organ of ingestion for a number of things that cause stress to personal health. The stress of the mouth gate in this context arises, particularly for most slum dwellers in big cities in many parts of the world, but particularly here in Africa, from the crises of indulgence in illicit drug taking, smoking, and excessive alcoholic consumption such as *Kumi-kumi* in Kenya (Ngolyo (2000), and *Burukutu, Palmwine, Kai-Kai, and illicit gin* in Nigeria, and for the well to do members of the population, over-eating, or eating to impress. In some places like Tanzania, the reckless use of

the mouth gate can arise in the smoking of *bhang*, an illicit drug that has given rise to many young people showing some psychiatric symptoms of what is now known in African psychiatric diagnosis as *bhang psychosis* (Thacore, 1973).

With particular reference to people in Africa and other related places in the wider world, the major stress that comes with addiction and misuse of substances is not only the health-related problems that such habit can generate for defaulters but also from the secondary social stress that could follow from them: job dismissals, pennilessness or financial bankruptcy, family violence, and marital instability. In this way, almost, in all cases, families of alcoholics are often in debt. Spouses of chain smokers and drug addicts in Africa, as it also occurs in the West, usually fall out with their mates on account of their dangerous bad habits channeled through the mouth gate. A similar situation is reflected in the problem of excessive gossiping often engineered by the modern media and intensified by the irresponsible use of the mobile phone.

It is in the light of such considerations as the above, that the mouth gate must therefore be accepted as one of the key sources of interpersonal headaches in all human societies. Such recognition of the causative role of the mouth-gate in stress promotion emerged with greater vigour within the current age of globalization and the media promotion of consumerism that has intensified its continued onslaught on the unsuspecting members of the well-to-do urban residents.

(b) The stress of the eye gate

Under this theme, the notion of the eye gate as a significant source of stress in human communities arises from what is often referred to in African villages as the problem of the 'evil eye' (Magesa, 2002). This is a critical source of stress that is very popular among communities in Western Kenya (Presby, 1999) and some parts of Uganda (Whyte, 1997). In both cultural groups the problem of the evil eye is said to come as a product of greed (*anya ukwu,* in Igbo language of Nigeria) which generates negative envy among some members of the community. The main sting of its stress comes from people who are "not happy with others' wealth and successful children and those who are strong in farm work" (Presby, 1999). In this context there is a strong link between the view of Lazarus and Lazarus (1994) on the notion of envy and jealousy as nasty emotions in human life. Thus one of the major instigators of the stress of the eye gate in the African context is the problem of pathological jealousy (or *anya oku*, among the Igbo of Nigeria). In this regard, people who are not happy with the success of others become threatened when they see others making more progress in farm work, in family life, and in academic and other areas of life more than they themselves are doing. In that way, they are believed to try to correct the imbalance by resorting to the use of magical charms or poisons to intimidate and halt the progress of their (successful) compatriots.

Therefore, the role of the eye gate in stress provocation in Africa can be illustrated by the fact that even the phenomenon of revenge instituted through the agency of witchcraft, as Magesa (2002) observes, cannot have any impact among people in the villages unless the eye has been able to see the charm or medicine placed on one's way, home or farm. And the person so confronted, influenced by the spiritual view of the people (affirming the intermingling of forces in the universe), reads a personal meaning of danger or threat to the self in the transaction. Consequently, the stress of the eye gate arises from the role of the eye as a means of surveillance of our physical, social and spiritual environment. Hence the view by Presby

that "some persons move away from areas at which charms keep reappearing" (Presby, 1999:12) can only become explainable in the context of the eye's contribution in stress generation. For, unless intended victims have first *seen* the charms and are overtaken by panic of the charm's presence, they would not be compelled to take a withdrawal action from the place where 'charms keep reappearing'. As a further illustration to this point, the following anecdote reported by Presby (1999) from her fieldwork in Western Kenya on the subject of "coping with witchcraft and jealousy" appears very germane. In that episode, one of Presby's informants told the following story:

> Upcoming young people, like young men who work in Nairobi, may want to initiate a development project in his village like putting up a shop in one of the local trading centres, or may want to put up a permanent house in their home. After getting some money, he buys the building materials, brings them home, the foundation is laid, and when the day for putting up the building comes and the man comes with the builders, he sometimes finds a chicken and a snake whose necks have been cut and thrown where a foundation had been built. Such a person either goes back to Nairobi abandoning the project or he goes and looks for another medicine person to protect him (p.12).

When Presby (1999) sought to know what the informant thinks as regards what can make someone to try to derail someone else's project by throwing in herbs, or dead animals, especially to anonymous people they do not even know? The informant's answer is that "'this comes about due to rivalry caused by jealousy, even within a family.' One of the family members may say, 'this our kinsman is now more educated than me, he will prosper more than me, therefore let us do to him certain things that will create panic in him'. Sometimes the rivalry is over certain employment opportunity and one feels that it is his/her son or daughter who should get that employment'" (Presby, 1999, p.12).

A similar incident to the above is reflected in the popular story often used in Northern Nigeria to teach people what jealousy and envy can do, which illustrates clearly that among the major aspects of the stress of the eye gate is the problem of negative envy fermented by 'the problem of difference' that arises from an individual's calculation of a negative difference that exists between his/her prospects in life and those of others. In the story under reference, it was said that out of jealousy, a neighbor deliberately allowed his cattle into a prosperous sugarcane plantation of a fellow villager and the result was the emergence of animosity and misunderstanding and therefore social stress among these co-villagers. The problem of the evil eye coupled with a misguided personal conclusion which an individual makes regarding the negative meaning of a given action or object to one's health or success is thus a key instigator of social stress and interpersonal wrangling among people in Africa and other parts of the world.

Indeed, another key aspect of the stress of the eye gate in human beings is the eyes' tendency to focus on appearance rather than reality. In this context, most stress of marital conflicts can be traced to the problem of the mates choosing each other on the grounds of appearance rather than on) basis of a true knowledge of what each intending mate is made of (Nwoye, 1985). Even political decisions that are based on the external appearance of competing candidates are among the great sources of leadership crisis and stresses in today's Africa. And so a lot of stress problems in Africa presently can be traced to the crisis of the provocation or deceit of the eye gate.

(c) The stress of the ear gate

In ordinary African life, the stress of the ear gate arises most often from the phenomenon of "2-minus-1-ear syndrome". This is the situation where an individual takes in information (e.g. authoritative warnings, regulations, important advice, and vital suggestions) from one ear and allows the same information to escape unheeded through the other ear. In that way, the individual concerned gets into trouble very often in life with the ultimate price being the crisis of personal stress. Typical examples of how this kind of stress can come about in people's lives in the Africa context often include the following: First, the problem of road accidents that is becoming very rampant in most African countries such as Egypt and Kenya. Eye witness accounts usually suggest that most of such accidents are caused by lack of attention by drivers to road signs and regulations. In Kenya, for example, a lot of such road accidents take place frequently (Odero, Khayesi, & Heda, 2003), often due to inattention to road signs and driving regulations, such as speed limits.

But, perhaps, a more critical example of the stress-inducing character of the obstinacy of the ear gate is the crisis of those who refuse to listen to the warnings against the hazards of excessive smoking, or drinking, or who indulge in unprotected sex with questionable sex partners, ignoring the dangers, even in this day and age of the AIDS pandemic. The victims of such obstinacy of course often pay dearly by getting infected with dangerous diseases due to their inability to heed attention to educational messages that inform them regarding precautions and which circulate in the community.

In many tertiary institutions, in Africa and other parts of the world (and this is why we have university regulations on many issues), some carefree students may decide, consciously and otherwise, not to take into account the University regulations regarding ethics, on the rules of conduct in halls of residence, and of examinations, or on social etiquette that should prevail in campus. Such students, however, will later pay dearly for their obstinacy when they are faced with dismissal actions for their infractions. This is an undesirable outcome that is accompanied by enormous stress both to themselves and their parents.

Again, a major disturbing aspect of the stress of the ear gate is the tendency to excessive gullibility in human beings. A good number of the African people, for instance, often start to avoid their neighbours and friends immediately after attending one Sunday service or the other in some of the new churches that is now on the increase in modern Africa, where a 'prophet' may carelessly comment that most of our problems are caused by some of our evil-minded neighbours or so-called friends who do not want us to progress (Gifford, 2004). In the same way, some gullible members have emptied their meager personal incomes/resources in these churches in response to the preacher's suggestion that 'we can only get favors from God in comparison to the amount of gifts we have given to God ourselves.'

In much the same way, many people in Africa suffer from the crisis of the wrong use of the ear gate due to their inability to listen to themselves/their intuition, to their spouses, to their parents and to their elders in making decisions whose implementation may cause an untold embarrassment and stress to their lives. This means that apart from the problem of gullibility, another key aspect of the stress of the ear gate, at least, in the African context is the problem of obstinacy (or as understood in Igbo language, *mkpachi-nti*), which comes with overly regrettable consequences on those affected.

(d) The stress of the genital gate

Apart from the problem of the tongue, the evil eye, the overly indulged mouth and the obstinate ear is the ever threat of the genital gate in people's lives. This, in part, derives from the breakdown of traditional mores on morality and sexual etiquette that came with the influence of westernization in many parts of the world. In the past, for instance, the traditional African homestead was constructed in such a way as to promote sexual discipline among members of the family. The aim in particular was to protect children from getting sexually curious so early. In contrast, the contemporary situation, through peer influence, the mass media, improved communication facilities (e.g. the presence of the mobile phones in many people's hands) and the privacy afforded by the bungalow architecture encourages the experience of moral laxity and temptation to sexual promiscuity among the youth and the old alike (Arnett, 2002). In this way the genital gate becomes for people, both young and old, in many parts of the world today, the greatest source of stress. In this way, too, the future of most young people across the contemporary world becomes blocked or suffers from immature closure as a consequence of irresponsible and misguided use of that gate.

Most African novelists (e.g., Meja Mwanje 1992; Ekwensi, 1967) who comment about what goes on in African cities, for example, have shown that the crisis of poor management of the genital gate is the principal cause of a lot of marital conflicts, family violence, child prostitution, and the phenomenon of children bearing children that are now a frequent feature of social evils in Urban Africa. Even the crisis of guilt and shame expressed by young people who present for counseling with stories of having misused their lives in their youth (the so-called Jona Complex clients), such as having failed to take appropriate action when they ought to, or to make use of growth opportunities that life presented to them, are often connected to the stress of wrong management of the genital gate.

Careless management of the genital gate is also now known to be the primary cause of the pain of unplanned parenthood and the stress it comes with for a good number of girls in Universities in Africa and other places. That is also the cause of stress of indulgence in abortion malpractice through the use of quack doctors, among many female students; a practice that often leads to the death of or to an irreparable damage to the reproductive system of those concerned. The genital gate is also the root-cause of emotional restlessness or lack of concentration among many students in Africa and their counterparts in other regions of the world. And most importantly, it is the main channel of risk activity leading to vulnerability to all kinds of sexually transmitted infections such as HIV/AIDS. It is the primary basis for the loss of solvency among flirtatious husbands and the consequent problem of family distress among wage earning couples in Africa and the wider world. A number of social stresses among students also arise from competition for girl/boy friends and from the painful narratives of 'snatching' experiences and 'crossovers' which some university student clients bring up for counseling attention to the university counseling center. The increasing cases of student prostitution and the so-called 'moonlight practitioners' arise, among other reasons, also from the crisis of poor management of the genital gate.

These indications, taken together, firmly demonstrate that the genital gate is for many people all over the world, including students, parents and children, as well as for husbands and wives, the most stress-inducing gate we harbor in ourselves.

(e) The stress of the memory gate

Four prominent aspects of the stress of the memory gate in today's Africa can easily be highlighted. The first is the painful memory of personal involvement in war torture, or victims of war trauma and loss of dear ones due to war like we have had in countries like Rwanda, Sudan, Zimbabwe, Sierra Leone and Liberia. The second is the problem of failure to forgive and to forget about offences leveled against us. The third is the failure by many students in Africa to remember that the facility of a dependable memory cannot be achieved when one indulges in what one Australian learning theorist refers to as the error of cognitive over-loading. And, fourth, the distressful memory of being abused as a child, often, arising from the error of partiality in parenting practices.

The stress of the painful memory of personal involvement in war torture or trauma and losses is more rampant these days in Africa with the current trend of military and armed civil conflicts in many parts of the continent (Nwoye, 2002). This point has been corroborated by studies by Reynolds (1990). In her article entitled *Children of tribulation: The need to heal and the means to heal war trauma,* Reynolds (1990) cites in the appendix section of her work some of the painful memories of War of Liberation in Zimbabwe that had remained, for many children in that country, a stressful experience to remember and to talk about. Reynolds identified three main causes for this anomaly. One was where children witnessed bloodshed and death. Her report showed that *Gushongo* (the medicine man) said that even if a child only witnessed a killing, the *ngozi* (the unsettled spirit of the one killed) might return to trouble the child, causing him or her to relive the visions, and saying, 'You were there, too'. According to Reynolds' report, in this kind of context, evil must be blocked and the cause explained to the parents. Medicine must be given to the child to stop him or her reliving the experience and these cases, healers say, are the easiest to treat.

Another cause of children's traumatic memory according to Reynolds' (1990) report was that, as vulnerable and precious family members, they are often attacked by *ngozi* (spirit of the dead) seeking to revenge wrongful deaths. The child in such cases is a pawn: his or her well-being depends upon the ability of an *n'anga* (traditional medicine man) to reveal the true cause of the child's trouble and upon the willingness of the family to tell the truth, pay compensation or chase the *ngozi* to the killer.

The third cause according to the same report lay in children's wartime activities: a child could cause an adult's death. After the war, children who indulged in such infraction had to live with their consciences, causing most of them untold emotional stress. Reynolds (1990) observes that, "Rituals of purification helped to eliminate some of the defilement of war. Wrongs were straightened out through confession and sometimes compensation. As hosts of the shades, healers have access to privileged knowledge about the thoughts and past deeds of their patients. They examine motives and intention in order to straighten out mystical disorder" (p.17).

In addition to the above, another problem that causes stress of the memory gate in human beings is the crisis of inability to forgive when offended, often reported by a good number of African clients that present for psychological attention. The stress of the memory gate arises in this way in that when the offended individual decides to carry malice for long in memory the said individual ends up causing an emotional barrier to his/her effective commerce with other things that matter in one's life (Nwoye, 2009). Hence, the virtue of forgiveness is an obvious moral asset in individual's life. It goes with the wisdom that one who learns to forgive

becomes able to untie him/herself emotionally in life with others and so learns to live a life of an unburdened spirit in the course of one's earthly existence. But, this facility for most people in many parts of the world does not come easily, due to their ungenerous appropriation of the virtue of forgiveness.

Now, the last key problem that can arise from the stress of the memory gate is the type usually mentioned by clients that were abused as children. Such children complain of tension head-aches and insomnia caused by their painful remembrance of the mal-treatments given to them by their parents, who played a lot of partiality in their way of handling their children (Nwoye, 2006a), favouring one child while disregarding the needs of the other. In such a situation the stress of the neglected child will remain until a redressive action is taken to promote the practice of the virtue of multi-partiality in the parents' repertoire of practices, behaviours, and childrearing techniques. .

(f) The stress of the imagination Gate

The stress of the imagination gate is, in my view, the bane of those African and other clients who:

i. Plan or live above their means despite the distressed economy under which they live and work.

ii. Experience excessive amount of restlessness arising from the thought of imagined enemies, particularly witches and those who are believed can poison others (sorcerers).

iii. Show morbid loyalty to getting the view of ancestors before carrying out any important decision in life, e.g. taking a wife, building a house, and going out on an important journey.

iv. Believe that the best choice of a mate or a job will come when the divine moment for it arrives, with the individual concerned believing that s/he has no personal responsibility or agency for the result.

Now, one important conclusion that suggests itself from the above survey and discussion is the compelling view that much of psychosocial stress is culturally instigated. This is why it is being argued in this paper that reliance only on the Western or Eurocentric models of stress will not be sufficient for effective understanding of the subtle sources of stress among people in Africa.

Critical Implications

Now what implications for critical psychosocial practice can we draw from the theory of the gates of stress as discussed in this article? One straight answer to this question is that in the African context, and perhaps in the West as well, humans tend to harbor in themselves (through, largely, the auspices of their embodiment) the limitations that generate stress in them. The theory of the gates of stress espoused in this paper illustrates that we get stressed in life, at least in the African context, most often, not only as victims of the hostile work environment but also by the ill management of the gates of stress we harbor in ourselves. From the accounts above presented one can see that some people, at least, in the local communities in Africa, become stressed due to their irrational approach to living arising from problems of reckless consumption of food and ideas, inflated ambitions, pathological jealousy, excessive greed, and acidic intolerance of the success of others. This indication suggests that emotionality, feelings, and subjectivity are among the principal commodities that promote stress in Africa and other parts of the contemporary world which the African

clinician needs to recognize and learn to deal with in his or her clinical practice. The present discussion also illustrates that people often become psychologically stressed in Africa and the wider world as a result of their bad use of the tongue, and their habitual inability to listen to well meaning advice from friends and family members and by their excessive indulgence in the call of the genital gate. We have also noted that for some people in Africa, at least, what causes stress is often not something external to themselves, but due to problems that derive from the African notion of the menace of evil eye or the tendency to personal reading of a threat into objectively harmless events in their lives.

The importance of this kind of local knowledge for the psychotherapists in Africa and in the Diaspora is that, first and foremost, it helps the clinician to assess the extent to which a client's claim is true that the source of his/her distress emanates from outside. From the theory just presented one can see that it is not always the case that the source of our distress is outside of us. It depicts how, in the African context, in particular, and in other cultures as well, in more instances than one, we are part of our own downfall (in the sense of a Jonah complex).

Another implication of the kind of critical psychology theory espoused in this paper for improved psychotherapy practice in Africa and in the Diaspora, is the suggestion it makes of the need, to incorporate in our counselor-education programmes of the psychology of personal and communal meaning, or the idea that "understanding the emotional and communal meaning of events and situations from the perspective of the individual experiencing them" (Salkovskis, 1996, p. 536) is crucial before effective intervention can be instituted, and from understanding the intricacies of the African worldview and psychology often sidelined in Western training programmes.

This means that as far as psychological practice in Africa and in the Diaspora is concerned the most acceptable paradigm to work with is that of the quantum or Post-Einsteinian physics. "According to quantum physics, our reality *must* be a projection of higher multidimensional realities" (Edwards, 1994, p. 206). The pragmatic importance of this notion follows from the fact that as the present article tends to show, the African and other similar contexts in the wider world is a place where people tend to go beyond the information given (to use Jerome Bruner's phrase) in their judgment of experience; a world where meaning that is given to events of life is influenced by the context and the grammar of the culture in which the individual is situated; a view that teaches that the African's psychological universe is an interpreted/hermeneutic and a spiritualized/transpersonal universe (Nwoye, 2006b). The present exploration further suggests that counselling and psychotherapy practice in Africa and the Diaspora must involve some practice of ritual that may not be seen as necessary in Western literature (Dawes, 2002) - such as the rituals of purification or cleansing often needed to purge clients with the negative memory of the trauma of war, to help them to achieve psychological relief.

Conclusion

In conclusion, a critical psychology of the theory of the gates of stress in everyday life as expounded in this article suggests that the existing Western theories of stress that hitherto dominate our psychological practice in Africa must be augmented, since in their present frame and coverage, they have failed to reflect some of the practical realities of stress formation in both traditional and modern societies like we have in Africa. In this way, no psychotherapist in Africa can fully succeed in his or her clinical practice if he or she were to continue to insist

on getting bearing on the phenomenon of stress for use in Africa by taking note of only what is understood as sources of stress in Western psychology, to the exclusion of other perspectives on the matter as explicated in this article. In this regard, what is argued is that awareness of the one direction without any awareness of the other is no longer acceptable, as doing so has continued to limit psychology from exploring its full potential in Africa south of the Sahara. To remedy the situation, what is recommended is the immediate inclusion in international psychological literature of the usually excluded (Ruto-Korir, 2006) down-to-earth perspective to stress as delineated in the present article.

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