

STAR report

I journeyed to wonderful Galway to attend two days of the Stress and Anxiety Research (STAR) 2010 conference. The conference was hosted by the Centre for Occupational and Life Stress (CROLS) at NUI Galway. Dr Brian Hughes was the Chair of the organising committee for STAR. Brian was also the founding Chair of the Division of Health Psychology, and will be well known to PSI members. The headlined themes for the conference were 'Psychological stress and physical illness', 'Physiological consequences of stress and anxiety', and 'Social networks, social support and loneliness'. The programme contained many talks which reflected these themes, and the keynote lectures provided a focus for many contemporary issues in these areas.

The opening ceremony was followed by the President's address. Professor Kate Moore (Charles Darwin University) provided a thoughtful exploration of issues around informed consent, and how this is interpreted or applied in cultures very different from our own. Even when research studies are conducted with indigenous populations, ownership of data, and what can be done with this data, may be understood very differently from our 'Westernised' viewpoints. This highlighted the difficulty of conducting cross-cultural research, and questioned whether the principals of informed consent, as we understand them, still apply?

A packed programme then kicked off with parallel sessions, and I attended the symposium on "Dyadic coping and adaptation in times of distress". Although the research findings are too numerous to mention, I was especially intrigued to discover gender differences in endocrine responses to social support, and to what extent relationships – good and bad! – can affect our physiological reactions.

The first keynote, the Early Career Award address, was provided by Dr Jian Li, who outlined the impact of psychosocial factors on work in China. He demonstrated the links between psychosocial stressors and cardiovascular disease, reproductive dysfunction, musculoskeletal disorders and mental health in 15 years of research in this dramatically changing country. This provided much food for the Irish situation thought given the anecdotal evidence of longer working hours during these (I refuse to say the R-word!) economically challenging times.

A theme of intervention studies formed the next session I attended. It was remarkable to see the effect sizes of mindfulness interventions for depression in people with mental disorders presented in a systematic review by Dr Piyanee Klainin.

The final keynote of the day was by Professor Daniel Russell, who highlighted the importance of neighbourhood contexts, such as social disorder and racism, and even moving home, for mental health. It seems that moving to 'better' locations is not always good for mental health, as you can lose much social support – even if the original area had social disorder. This talk

highlighted the need for further longitudinal studies in the area of stress.

Professor Michael Eysenck kicked off the second day of the conference with the Distinguished Spielberger Address. He provided a very thought-provoking discussion on a new theory of how anxiety affects cognition – with anxiety thought to impair attentional control, with anxious individuals more susceptible to intrusive task-irrelevant thoughts. Perhaps a lesson for all of us when we get too busy!

It was a pleasure to attend the renowned Professor Charles Spielberger's keynote address, where he provided some history and reflections on the development of his famous State-Trait Anxiety Inventory, along with other scales. Unfortunately, he ran out of time to tell us more about his latest research and scale in development – and I began to feel that we could have perhaps cancelled all other talks to hear more from this legend (unless I was presenting, of course!).

Just as well that Brian and his team did not have my attitude, as I attended varying stimulating presentations in the following parallel sessions. The delegates later attended the conference dinner, where it was a pleasure to mingle with the STAR 'family', and discuss stress while de-stressing (Irish-style!).

Unfortunately I had to leave early on Friday, so I was unable to attend the final two keynote lectures, provided by Professor Jack James, from NUI Galway, who spoke on "Hemodynamic profile as a method to characterise blood pressure responses to stress", and Professor Doug Carroll on "Chronic and acute stress: their varying effects on inflammatory and infectious disease".

Overall the conference was stimulating and entertaining, and as usual our colleagues in Galway were excellent hosts. It was also heartening to see such a large representation of Irish-based speakers throughout the programme, indicating how psychology is thriving here, in the context of international research.

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