



Stress, Task, and Relationship Orientations: Analysis Across Two Culturally Diverse Countries

Arif Sikander^{[a],*}; Bahaudin G. Mujtaba^[b]; Talat Afza^[c]

^[a]PhD, is Lecturer of Management at Murdoch University's Business School in Australia. He is a highly skilled change facilitator, and has extensive international experience in the design, delivery and evaluation of aviation, technology and management programs. His areas of research are aviation science and technology, aviation management, technology and innovation management, strategic management, strategic human resource management, and engineering management.

^[b]D.B.A., PHD, is Professor of Management and Human Resources at Nova Southeastern University's H. Wayne Huizenga School of Business and Entrepreneurship. 3301 College Avenue, Fort Lauderdale, Florida 33314. USA. Bahaudin has served as manager, trainer, and management development specialist in the corporate world as well as a director, department chair and faculty member in academia. His areas of research are leadership, stress, training, and diversity management.

^[c]Ph.D is Professor and Dean, Head of Academics and Research, Faculty of Business Administration at COMSATS Institute of Information Technology, Pakistan. Her areas of research interest include efficiency analysis, Women Entrepreneurships and Business Ethics.

*Corresponding Author

Address: Murdoch Business School, MBS2 Room8, Murdoch University, 90 South Street, Murdoch, Perth, Western Australia 6150.

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Abstract

Stress is a normal part of the workplace and it is perhaps heavily influenced by one's level of task and relationship orientation. To explore the stress and leadership orientation of people in two different cultures, this study focused on the differences of 64 Australian and 155 Pakistani respondents. It appears that they have similar scores on the task orientation and stress perception, but Australians are more relationship-oriented. Overall, both groups reported a moderate level of stress with no statistically significant differences. In this paper, literature on the two cultures is presented along with practical suggestions and implications for future studies regarding leadership and stress management.

Key words: Relationships; Tasks; Culture; Stress; Australia; Pakistan

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INTRODUCTION

Cultural background and context can be an important predictor of behavior (Mujtaba, Afza, & Habib, 2011). For example, there is a distinction in the way of communication between the so-called high-context and low-context cultures (Salleh, 2005). In a high-context culture such as Pakistan, there is a more common understanding of what is being communicated through general context. Low context cultures, such as Australia, put more emphasis on the written or spoken words as communication is more explicit (Mujtaba & Balboa, 2009). Understanding the effect of the differences in context provides a knowledge base and cultural intelligence that can help provide not only strong teams but more over effective business relationships with a firm's vendors and customers (Hall, 1976; Salleh, 2005). The purpose of this study is to analyze the stress orientation as well as the leadership similarities and dissimilarities regarding tasks and relationships between adult Australians and Pakistanis.

1. AUSTRALIA

Australia is the sixth largest country in the world and has the lowest population density per square kilometre. It is made up of six states and two territories. Australia's diverse culture and lifestyle reflect its liberal democratic traditions and values, geographic closeness to the Asia-Pacific region and the social and cultural influences of the millions of migrants who have settled in Australia

since World War II. The country's original inhabitants, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, are the custodians of one of the world's oldest continuing cultural traditions. They have been living in Australia for at least 40,000 years and possibly up to 60,000 years. The rest of Australia's people are migrants or descendants of migrants who have arrived in Australia from about 200 countries since Great Britain established the first European settlement at Sydney Cove in 1788. Today Australia has a population of nearly 23 million people. At 2009, about 25.6 percent of the estimated resident population comprised those born overseas. Migrants have enriched almost every aspect of Australian life, from business to the arts, from cooking to comedy and from science to sport. In most practical ways, Australia is an egalitarian society. More than 75 percent of Australians live a cosmopolitan lifestyle in urban centers, mainly in the capital cities along the coast. Australia is a predominantly Christian country, with around 64 percent of all Australians identifying as Christians (Above Data sourced mainly from DFAT 2012). There are vivid differences in lifestyle and customs among city and country dwellers, people with different occupations and income levels and people whose families migrated to Australia from other countries (Survival Kit, 2008). The changing demographic and economic structure of Australia has substantially altered the composition of the workforce over the past two decades. There has been a large increase in the share of females in the workforce and in the share of part-time relative to full-time employment reflecting, *inter alia*, changes in the industrial structure of the economy as well as changes in labor supply. The strong rise in female employment has been associated with an overall increase in the employment to population ratio since 1980 (Reserve Bank of Australia, 2002). Australian women may seem more independent and self-reliant than those in some other countries. This is a reflection of the relative equality of men and women in Australia compared to many other countries. Women have the same rights, status and opportunities as men. Many women have responsible jobs and it is common for women to continue to work after they are married (Survival Kit, 2008).

Three key factors that impact on economic growth, often referred to as the three P's, are population, participation (or labour supply) and productivity. Due to better participation rates and productivity, Australia has been able to achieve an unemployment rate of a 30 year lows as of 2006. Abhayaratna and Lattimore (2006) report the following data: In 2005, there were 10.5 million Australians of working age (those aged 15 years and over) participating in the workforce. Around 5.8 million or 55 percent were male, while 4.7 million (45 percent) were female. The workforce is characterized by a high prevalence of part-time work. In 2005, an estimated 2.8 million Australians or around 29 percent of the workforce were employed part-time. And, most part-time workers were female — 72 percent in 2005. The most significant increase in the proportion of those

employed working part-time over the last two decades has been for employees who between the ages of 15 to 24 years, increasing from nearly 19 percent in 1985 to 45 percent in 2005. This trend reflects an increasing number of young people delaying the commencement of full-time work in order to study full-time or to combine study and part-time work.

2. PAKISTAN

Pakistan is a country located in South Asia and Southwest Asia, Middle East and converges with Central Asia and the Middle East. It has a 1,046 kilometer (650 miles) coastline along the Arabian Sea and Gulf of Oman in the south, and is bordered by Afghanistan and Iran in the west, India in the east and China in the far northeast. Pakistan is the sixth most populous country in the world and has the second largest Muslim population in the world after Indonesia. It has a population of over 170 million citizens and growing fast (Afza, Mujtaba, and Habib, 2011). Pakistan is a federation of four provinces, a capital territory and federally administered tribal areas. Census data indicates that 97% of the population are Muslims, (nearly 70% are Sunni Muslims and 30% are Shi'a Muslims). Minority religions include Hinduism (1.85%), Christianity (1.6%), as well as much smaller numbers of Sikhs (Around 0.04%), Parsis, Ahmadis, Buddhists, Jews, Bahá'ís, and Animists (mainly the Kalasha of Chitral). Pakistan is the second most populous Muslim-majority country and also has the second largest Shi'a population in the world. Many cultural practices, foods, monuments, and shrines were inherited from the rule of Muslim Mughal and Afghan emperors. Pakistani society is largely multilingual and 96% Muslim, with high regard for traditional family values, although urban families have grown into a nuclear family system due to the socio-economic constraints imposed by the traditional joint family system (Page, 2009).

Pakistan is diverse in terms of population and geography. There are snowcapped mountains in the north, sunny beaches in the south, and a wide variety of geographically and culturally interesting sites elsewhere. An estimated 40 million live in urban areas, with the balance in rural areas. Pakistan is a poor country and its economic outlook is bleak. It relies heavily on foreign loans and grants, and debt obligations take nearly 50 percent of the government's expenditures (Everyculture, 2012). As of 2006, the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) was \$128.8 billion. Agriculture contributed 20.5% of the GDP, industry 26.7%, and services the lion's share of 52.9%. The Pakistani economy's average growth in the period 2003-2007 has been an impressive 7.5% (White 2002).

Pakistani culture is actually a part of the contemporary Islamic civilization which draws its values and traditions

from Islam and rich Islamic history. Pakistani culture is rich in the literatures of Urdu, Punjabi, Sindhi, Pashtu, Baruhi, Baluchi, and Kashmiri languages. Pakistani society is dominated by male members. Each family is headed by the senior most male member who is responsible for arranging the “bread and butter” of the family. Islam is practiced by the majority of Pakistanis and governs their personal, political, economic and legal life. The extended family is the basis of the social structure and individual identity. Pakistan is a hierarchical society. People are respected because of their age and position.

The government’s February 2004 Poverty Education Strategy Paper reports that as much as 63 percent of the population lives only slightly above the poverty line. In 2006, agriculture, industry, and services accounted for 22.0, 26.0, and 52.0 percent of GDP, respectively. Labor force shares, however, have changed, declining in agriculture from 48.4 percent in 2001 to 42.0 percent in 2004 (latest year available). In the same period, the share of the labor force in industry rose from 18.0 percent to 20.0 percent, and in services from 33.5 percent to 38.0 percent. Labor productivity is very low in agriculture, where more than 40 percent of the labor force produce only one-fifth of the economy’s output. The services sector, which employs less than 40 percent of labor, produces more than half of the economy’s output (US Aid, 2007).

Gender equity enables faster economic growth by ensuring that all citizens can develop and apply their full productive capacities. Pakistan’s performance on education, health care, and employment indicators continues to signal disparities between men and women. Women are grossly underrepresented in Pakistan’s workforce. In 2004, the labor force participation rate for men was 89.3 percent but a mere 34.1 percent for women (US Aid, 2007).

3. TASK AND RELATIONSHIP ORIENTATION

Culture influences human behavior, as such contributes to the performance of people at work and home. Adler (1986) argued that national culture has a greater impact on employees than does their organization’s culture. Thus, management must focus on developing appropriate management methods that are relevant to the national culture rather than just optimizing organizational culture (Mujtaba, Afza, & Habib, 2011; Thomas & Au, 1999; Trompenaars, 1993). Managers should also know the dominant personalities and task and relationship orientation of people in the organization (Mujtaba & Alsua, 2011, p. 2). Especially important in collectivistic cultures (Kagitcibasi, 1994; Watkins & Liu, 1996) where the quality of social interactions between individuals depends heavily on whether or not they belong to the same in-group and therefore a relationship orientation is an important aspect of the leader’s role. The study, conducted

by Mujtaba and Alsua (2011), showed that American respondents are more focused on their relationships than their tasks. Furthermore, male and female respondents demonstrated the same pattern of being more oriented toward a relationship orientation. Similar results were found for years of work experience and age factors. So, despite a group’s individualistic orientation in a low-context culture, this research has implied that they can be highly focused on the relationship while completing their tasks (Mujtaba & Alsua, 2011). Cultural context can have significant implications on negotiation processes (Mujtaba, 2010). The Taiwanese are non-confrontational and they often choose to avoid hurting the relationship between negotiators. For people from a low-context culture, such mannerisms are difficult to understand and may cause misunderstandings in the negotiation process. In order to avoid miscommunication and succeed in business transaction, entrepreneurs need to learn, understand, and accommodate cultural differences, especially in the process of negotiation (Mujtaba, 2007). The research has shown that Taiwanese respondents from a high context culture of Taiwan are just as task-oriented as they are relationship-oriented (Mujtaba, 2010, p. 11).

A study conducted by Mujtaba (2008) to compare the task and relationship orientation between high context and low context cultures indicated that While the Thais are often expected to score higher on the relationship orientation than the task orientation, this research has not supported this notion with the business student population. Similarly, while the respondents from the United States are expected to score higher on the task orientation than relationship orientation, this research has demonstrated the opposite with the business student population (Mujtaba, 2008, p. 52). General review of demographic data demonstrates that age seems to be a variable in the high or low orientation scores of respondents since, on the average, the American students were about five years older than their Thai counterparts. As demonstrated by the higher scores of respondents from the United States, one implication is that those who are older tend to put more focus or a higher level of importance on both the task as well as their relationships in the workplace (Mujtaba, 2008, p. 53). It should be noted that management experience also seems to be a factor in higher scores of Americans as more of them reported having one or more years of experience in management or supervisory levels.

4. STRESS OVERLOAD

Stress is a term commonly used to describe feelings of tensions or exhaustion usually associated with work overload or overly demanding work. Stress is natural phenomenon in an individual’s daily life (Iqbal & Kokash 2011, p. 137). Stress not only impacts individuals but also organizational performance (Afza, Mujtaba, & Habib, 2011). Organizational stress has also been

discussed widely and considered one of the criteria of organizational performance effectiveness (Nguyen & Mujtaba 2011, p. 238). Stress and ethical dilemmas are believed to exist simultaneously in organizational settings. Leaders tend to face ethical dilemmas when dealing with stressful situations (p. 238). External threats from competitors, role ambiguity, role conflict, overload, interpersonal problems, stressful and demanding work schedules, family and economic difficulties, are among a few examples of stressors that can put leaders deep into stress which can influence their ethical decision making (Nguyen & Mujtaba 2011, p. 238). Individual differences may cause some to interpret these stressors as positive stress or Eustress (which stimulate them), while other experience negative stress or distress (which detracts from their efforts). Occupational Stress can be described as the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressure or other types of demand on them (Health and Safety Executive, 2005). Similarly, the nature of job itself can determine the type and degree of stress that can be induced. Many jobs can be considered stressful, yet does not necessarily mean that they will impact on an individual's psychological well-being. Police officers, firefighters, disaster workers, medical, ambulance, and voluntary emergency personnel all contend with considerable stress as a result of the nature of their jobs, yet they do not necessarily fall ill (Mathewman et al., 2009).

Occupational stress and its effect have been among the most popular topics in research literature. This is because many researchers believe that stress is becoming a major contributor to absenteeism, low employee morale, high accident and turnover rates (Iqbal & Kokash, 2011, p. 138). Stress is also described as a physiological or psychological reaction to a perceived threat that requires some action or resolution (Kottler & Chen, 2008). Many people think of stress as being a negative term. Eustress can be defined as an experience that is pleasurable, satisfying, heightens awareness, increases mental alertness and promotes cognitive and behavioral performance, while distress is defined as an experience that is unpleasant, negative and painful that may cause anxiety, fear, worry or agitation and lead to a loss of productivity or health problems (Rice, 1992).

Stress can also be broken down into two main categories, short term (acute) and long term (chronic) stress. Short term stress is activated by a sudden threat or danger (Kottler & Chen, 2008). Short term stress does not usually cause any long term physical or psychological problems; often it is necessary to keep the body and mind in good working order (Kottler & Chen, 2008). Long term stress, however, could cause the mind and body to break down over time. Long term stress would occur if a perceived threat or danger occurred over a longer period of time. An example of long term stress could sometimes be associated with a major life change such as changing of a major, new job or dealing with medical problems (Kottler & Chen, 2008).

Stress among college students has been a subject of interest for many years. Every student experiences stress throughout the course of a semester (Robertson & Ruiz 2010, p. 115). Studies have identified sources of stress for college students and these stressors include but are not limited to academic work load, scholastic achievement, financial pressures, employment needs, time management and social readjustment as they transition to college life (Robertson & Ruiz, 2010, p. 115). A study carried out by Nguyen and Mujtaba found that Vietnamese report a high level of work overload stress (2011, p. 242) and those with higher education did not have similar scores for work overload stress as those with less years of education.

Stress impacts men and women as well as young people and older individuals in the society without necessarily discriminating toward any specific groups (Huang & Mujtaba 2010, p. 4). To lead a decent life, Taiwanese people have to work more diligently and compete with both their fellow citizens and multinational entrepreneurs (Huang & Mujtaba 2010, p. 3). As a result, the Taiwanese usually feel under stress from their jobs because they have to get their tasks accomplished most efficiently in terms of time and motion (Siu et al., 1999). In Taiwan, males and females play different roles in the family and suffer stress from different sources. The major stress for female Taiwanese comes from within the family. Hart (2007) listed the seven leading causes of stress in today's society which are: finances, work, family, personal concerns, personal health and safety, personal relationships, and death. Overall, according to Nichols (2008), Selye (1956) and others, the impact of stress can be physical, emotional, mental, and behavioral. Overall, in any given situation, a person's level of stress can be ranked as low, moderate, high, and severe. In either case, one should be very careful and understand that consistently overloading oneself can be problematic (Selye, 1956, 1974; Mujtaba & McCartney, 2007). Overload can decrease motivation toward learning / work Performance (Huang and Mujtaba 2010, P. 4). The Overload Stress Inventory, adapted from Hyde and Allen's conceptual analysis of overload (1996, pp. 29-30), can be used to assess the stress perception of respondents. This inventory has ten statements, and for each statement the respondent indicates the degree to which he or she (or the person being evaluated) engages in the stated behavior.

Research has shown that the type of leadership style has been recognized as a determinant of role stress (Babin & Boles, 1996). The role of leadership, whether formal or informal, can increase one's obligations for each situation. One dimension of each person's leadership style is the extent to which he or she is people-oriented or task-oriented. It has been said that since Americans many work hours on their jobs, they are considered to be more task-oriented (Mujtaba & Balboa, 2009). High task orientation coupled with a Type-A personality can cause more stress for people who do not have a good balance of their personal and professional activities (Mujtaba, 2008).

While there are many variables that impact a person's level of stress that can lead to health problems, this study is designed to assess whether Australians respondents report low, moderate, high, or severe levels of stress associated with task overload.

5. STUDY METHODOLOGY

This research attempts to clarify whether Australians are more relationship oriented or more task-oriented. It further attempts to determine their level of stress.

Peter G. Northouse's (2007) Style Questionnaire was given to respondents for the determination of their task and relationship orientation. For each statement, the person indicates the degree to which he or she (or the person being evaluated) engages in the stated behavior. A rating of 1 means "Never" and a rating of 5 means "Always" with the person demonstrating the specific behavior. To determine one's scores for the leadership styles questionnaire, one can add the responses for the odd numbered items to determine the score for task-orientation behaviors, and add the responses for the even numbered items to determine the score for relationship-orientation behaviors. The scoring interpretation for the survey is as follows:

SCORES	DESCRIPTIONS
• 45-50	Very high range
• 40-44	High range
• 35-39	Moderately high range
• 30-34	Moderately low range
• 25-29	Low range
• 10-24	Very low range

The Overload Stress Inventory, adapted from Hyde and Allen's conceptual analysis of overload (1996, pp. 29-30), was used in this study. This survey has ten statements, and for each statement the respondent indicates the degree to which he or she (or the person being evaluated) engages in the stated behavior. A rating of 1 means "Never" and a rating of 5 means "Always" with the person demonstrating the specific behavior. The responses are assessed according to the following general criteria (adapted from Hyde & Allen's 1996 book):

- Scores in the range of 40 – 50 tend to mean severe stress from overload.
- Scores in the range of 30 – 39 tend to mean high stress from overload.
- Scores in the range of 20 – 29 tend to mean moderate stress from overload.
- Scores in the range of 19 and below tend to mean low stress from overload.

The research question for this study was to determine whether adult Australians are highly or moderately

stressed and whether they have a higher average score on the relationship orientation or task orientation. Another aspect of this study was to determine whether high-context culture male Australians have a higher or lower average scores on the relationship orientation or task orientation when compared with their high-context female counterparts. The specific hypotheses for this study are as follows:

- (1) *Hypothesis 1:* Australians will have similar scores for relationship and task orientations.
- (2) *Hypothesis 2:* Australians respondents will have similar scores for task orientation as Pakistanis.
- (3) *Hypothesis 3:* Australians respondents will have similar scores for relationship orientation as Pakistanis.
- (4) *Hypothesis 4:* Australians will have similar scores for work overload stress perception as Pakistanis.

For the purpose of this study, after seeking ethics approval, the questionnaires were distributed to people in Australia via face-to-face means as well as online and 64 returned surveys were fully completed and used for this study. The respondents were students, academic and admin staff at Murdoch University. Some of these respondents do full-time and part-time work also outside the university. A good portion of the population was made up of the mature age students. It was decided to use the entire population but some Deans were reluctant to administer it within their schools due to reasons unknown. As such the questionnaire was sent to those schools which agreed to participate. The sample size was 150, thus a response rate of 42.6%. There were 54% male respondents and 46% females that successfully completed the surveys for the study.

This study also targeted Pakistani citizens, workers and managers in Lahore, Islamabad, Sahiwal, and Wah. The responses of citizens, managers, employees and businesspeople were collected and recorded. For this study, 300 questionnaires were sent to the respondents. The respondents were asked to voluntarily complete the questionnaire and return it to the specified researcher in-person or by company mail. Out of total surveys distributed in Pakistan, a total of 155 usable surveys, comprising a response rate of 51%, were used for analysis in this study. Of the subjects, 30% are female respondents and 70% are males.

6. TASK AND RELATIONSHIP RESULTS

The average scores of Australians respondents for task orientation falls in "moderately high range," and their relationship orientation average falls in "high range." Similarly, the average score of Australians respondents for stress perception score (29.28) falls in the "moderate" range..

Table 1
Task and Relationship of Australians

Group	No.	Mean	St. Dev.
Task	64	39.76	0.334
Relationship	64	42.34	0.217

$t = -51.85$; $p < 0.00$; reject.

The hypothesis “*Australians respondents will have similar scores for relationship and task orientations*” is rejected as the mean relationship orientation score is significantly higher than their task orientation (see Table 1). As such, Australians appear to be more focused on their relationships.

The hypothesis stating that “*Australians respondents will have similar scores for task orientation as Pakistanis*” cannot be rejected as no significant differences were found in the responses between the two cultures (see Table 2).

Table 2
Task Scores of Australians and Pakistanis

Group	No.	Mean	St. Dev.
Australians	64	39.76	0.334
Pakistanis	155	39.46	6.76

$t = 0.35$; $p = 0.7234$; cannot reject.

The hypothesis stating that “*Australians respondents will have similar scores for relationship orientation as Pakistanis*” is rejected as there are statistically significant differences in the responses between the two cultures (see Table 3). Australians appear to be more focused on their relationship orientation than Pakistani respondents in this study.

Table 3
Relationship Scores of Australians and Pakistanis

Group	No.	Mean	St. Dev.
Australians	64	42.34	0.217
Pakistanis	155	37.88	6.53

$t = -5.46$; $p = 0.000000133$; reject.

The hypothesis stating that “*Australians will have similar scores for work overload stress perception as Pakistanis*” is supported since the mean score of these Australians and Pakistani respondents for stress perceptions appear to be similar (see Table 4). Both groups reported a moderate level of stress in this study.

Table 4
Stress Perceptions of Australians and Pakistanis

Group	No.	Mean	St. Dev.
Australians	64	29.28	0.539
Pakistanis	155	28.35	7.87

$t = -0.9432$; $p = 0.3466$; cannot reject.

It was hypothesized that Australians respondents will have similar scores for relationship orientations and task orientations, and the current study did not support this hypothesis as the Australians are more relationship-oriented. As a matter-of-fact, compared to Pakistani respondents, Australians are more relationship-oriented. Both Australian and Pakistani groups appear to be in the moderately high range on their task orientations with no significant differences among the two cultures. Furthermore, Australians and Pakistanis reported a moderate level of stress with no significant differences between the two groups.

7. IMPLICATIONS AND LIMITATIONS

This research demonstrated that Australians are more focused on both their relationships than their tasks. Pakistan is a high context culture where the relationship between the employee and employers carries much weight. In fact, at some places the relationship outweighs the task orientation. This relationship also influences the other relationships on task. The pressure due to this relationship normally weakens the task orientation of employees as they are not challenged by the superiors to avoid bad feelings. This type of practice is most common in the Asian countries. On the other hand, Australia being a low-context culture, it was expected that task relationship will overshadow the relationship orientation. Contrary to these perceptions, this study shows that Australian respondents are more relationship oriented than the Pakistani counterparts. However, it supports the study where Americans focused more on the relationship orientation than their Thai counterparts (Mujtaba, 2008). The findings of these studies should raise questions on the general perception and discussion in literature about the relationships in high and low context cultures and would need to be revisited. However, it could be possible that these results only support the population which was studied and in both these studies the common factor was that they were from the higher education sector. We could also conclude that the Australians while working on tasks also consider their relationship with supervisors as very important – what is the reason behind this again needs to be explored in future studies. It could be due to the type of relationship which contributes to the measure of performance of each side, the manager being evaluated how good they deal with employees and how well employees connect with their supervisors. It could be assumed that multi-culturism (cultural shift) and globalization of workforce might have played a role in these results. The mix of people in the workforce in a low-context culture might have imported the relationship aspect from the traditionally high-context cultures. This is a wonderful area to explore.

Both Australian and Pakistani respondents reported a moderate level of stress which is also unusual. It was expected that Australian would have high level of stress while at work, again based on the way the tasks are done and completed in the two cultures. The work environment in the West is very demanding since many performance measures are in place and thus there is less chance to avoid or delay work. On the other hand, work can be dragged and delayed based on the relationships with the superiors in a high-context culture.

Like most other studies, this research is limited in terms of several issues. One limitation is the fact that this study was conducted with a convenient adult population from different sectors and industries in Australia and Pakistan. Future studies can compare populations with similar working backgrounds and demographic variables such as comparing government employees with the private sector. Another limitation is the small number of respondents in each group. The time when the survey was done could also have influenced the results as it was done when both students and staff were busy in the middle of the semester. Therefore, the level of stress at that moment of time could have been higher than usual which might be reflected in the survey. Another limitation was that there could have been some students whose first language is not English though they are residents of Australia. The survey in future could have two or three version so that the respondents can select the one they easily understand.

CONCLUSION

After reflecting on the behaviors of people from Australia and Pakistan, we can say for certain that Australians are highly relationship oriented. Australians and Pakistanis reported a moderate and manageable level of stress perceptions from work overload. The study should provide a better understanding of the Australian and Pakistani cultures and how it is reflected in the perception about relationships, tasks and stress amongst the students and staff in higher learning institutions. Contrary to the popular belief that low-context cultures have weak relationships between the employees and their superiors, this study highlights that Australians pay more importance to this relationship compared to their Pakistani counterparts. Since Australia is one of the richest multicultural societies, this study suggests that cultural shifts due to migration has influenced the work behavior of individuals and even in low context societies one could find a heavy focus both on task and relationship orientations.

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