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Accepted author version posted online: 26 May 2016.
Published online: 26 May 2016.

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Abstract

To date, research that has drawn upon Meyer's (2003) minority stress model has largely taken for granted the premises underpinning it. In this paper we provide a close reading of how 'stress' is conceptualised in the model, and suggest that aspects of the model do not attend to the institutionalised nature of stressors experienced by people with marginalised identities, particularly lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender individuals. As a counter to this, we highlight the importance of a focus on the effects of ideology and social norms in terms of stress, and we argue why an intersectional approach is necessary in order to ensure recognition of multiple axes of marginalisation and privilege. The paper then outlines the concept of decompensation and suggests that it may offer one way to reconsider the effects of ideology and social norms. The

1

decompensation approach centres on the need for social change, rather than solely relying upon individuals to be resilient.

Introduction

More than 20 years ago, Meyer (1994) published his first account of a theory of minority stress as it applies to gay men. Drawing on his PhD research, this account reported the finding that "internalised homophobia, expectations of rejection and discrimination (stigma), and actual events of discrimination and violence (prejudice)… predict psychological distress in gay men" (p. 51). This finding was important, Meyer argued, because it countered previous research which had minimised the impact of stress upon marginalised groups. Whilst these findings were limited to gay men, a decade later Meyer (2003) then published an expanded account of minority stress as applied to lesbian, gay and bisexual people. This expanded account also included an additional focus on the effects of hiding or concealing one's sexual orientation, in addition to the role that coping processes may play in combatting the impact of stress on mental health.

As with any theoretical account, and particularly one aimed at addressing the needs of those marginalised by social norms, it is important that it is continually revisited, both to revise and or to bolster it through additional findings, but also to think critically about the application and implications of the theory. From a critical psychological perspective, as adopted in this paper, it is further important to examine the assumptions that underpin any given theory. Whilst in the increasingly large body of research that utilises the minority stress framework the assumptions inherent to it are largely left unchallenged, it is important to consider what precisely the concept

2

of 'minority stress' actually addresses, and whether the parameters of the concept are perhaps inadequate to the task of contributing to a liberatory psychology that has as its aim the dismantling of social norms (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2010).

With the above points in mind, in this paper we engage in a close reading of Meyer's account of minority stress, specifically as outlined in his 2003 paper. In so doing, we focus on 1) how stress is conceptualised, 2) where stress is located, and 3) how social norms are accounted for. Importantly, however, the point of the present paper is not to critique simply for the sake of critique. Rather, it is to identify the theoretical blindspots and limitations of applications of the theory of minority stress, and to suggest another account that may sit alongside or further expand upon Meyer's work.

As we know from the sociology of scientific knowledge, epistemological claims are not purely episodic: they are not comprised of entirely discrete entities. Rather, how we come to know about the world occurs in waves, with each washing over one another and intermingling even if then leading to distinct paradigm shifts (Kuhn, 1962). As such, the account we provide in this paper both builds on, but also introduces novel strands into, the work of Meyer. This account, which we describe using the language of decompensation, offers another way of thinking about the impact of ideology and social norms, and how they shape the lives of those marginalised by them.

3

Meyer's Account of Minority Stress

As noted in the introduction above, clearly those who apply Meyer's account of minority stress believe that it offers them considerable explanatory power. For example, Szymanski and Balsam (2011) applied the minority stress model in their survey of 247 lesbian women from across the US. They found that being the victim of a hate crime or experiencing higher levels of discrimination was related to lower mental well-being, and self-esteem acted as a partial mediator. The minority stress model has also been extended to address the experiences of transgender and gender non-conforming individuals (Hendricks & Testa, 2012), although often in combination with other groups. For example, McCarthy, Fisher, Irwin, Coleman, and Pelster (2014) surveyed 770 individuals self-identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender from Nebraska of whom 3 (0.4%) listed their gender as intersex and 22 (2.9%) as an identity other than intersex, female or male. As in Szymanski and Balsam's study, mental well-being was lower among participants who had experienced more discrimination or who had lower "self-acceptance", and these effects accounted for the lower levels of mental well-being among transgender participants specifically.

Yet despite the apparent utility of these findings (as but three examples of what is now an extensive literature utilizing the minority stress model), in this section we question whether the terms upon which previous findings rely accurately describe the phenomena under examination. In raising this question we take as a given the idea that the words we use to describe phenomena have rhetorical and literal effects: they put into play particular ways of understanding the world around us, and indeed construct a particular world for us to inhabit. As such, the words we use to

4

provide an account of the world are in fact *world making*. Words are not simply descriptors of things that objectively *are* in the world. Rather, they bring into being particular objects and ways of being (Burr, 2015). In turning now to explore Meyer's (2003) account of minority stress as a form of worlding, then, our focus is not on Meyer's own intent, or his beliefs about what his account should or should not do; what it can or cannot achieve. Rather, it is on the implications of the specific language used throughout Meyer's account of minority stress.

Whilst, as we noted in the opening of our introduction, Meyer first published an account of minority stress in 1994, in this section we focus solely on his most well known account, published in 2003. Our first point of critique with regard to this account relates to how stress is conceptualised. In outlining "the stress concept" (p. 675), Meyer makes reference to "an engineering analogy", in which "stress can be assessed as a load relative to a supportive surface". Having made this analogy, however, Meyer then goes on to introduce the idea of "social stress", referring to the "excess stress to which individuals from stigmatised social categories are exposed as a result of their social, often a minority, position". This shift from an engineering analogy to an account of social stress is, we would suggest, problematic.

The shift from stress as an external force to stress as social implicitly suggests that the latter is different or additional to the former. By contrast, we would suggest that the engineering analogy does not require the addition of the "social" in order to be applied to people. If we consider the engineering analogy, the "load" is the social, and the "surface" is the point on which the load is exerted (i.e., the individual). The stress is thus always already social: It is always already produced in a context where power can be exerted over an individual. As such, the idea of

5

'minority stress', within this understanding of stress as always already social, becomes problematic, given that what is being referred to is more correctly a 'stressed minority' (i.e., the impact of stress upon an individual leaves them stressed, as would be the case in the context of engineering).

Such an understanding – of a 'stressed minority' – provides a corrective to Meyer's account of minority stress as something that Meyer suggests arises from "*their* social, often a minority, position" (p. 675, our emphasis). By our account above – which maintains the utility of the engineering analogy – stress does not arise from an individual person's social position. Viewing stress as the product of *their* social position is to implicitly accept that it is the "minority position" that is the cause of stress. Rather, being stressed arises from the force of stress itself, which as we elaborated above, is entirely structural; is entirely social. To reframe Meyer, then, we may suggest that 'minority stress' refers to how marginalised individuals are stressed by ideologies and social norms which accord them a minority position.

The difference between the account of 'stressed minorities' that we outline above, and the account provided by Meyer (2003) becomes clearer as the latter's account develops. Having suggested that 'minority stress' is a product of an individual's 'social position', Meyer then draws upon the work of Allport (1954) to emphasise the impact of "negative regard from others… [upon] minority person[s]" (Meyer, p. 676). Here stress is caused by the impact of one person's negative regard upon another. Thus despite Meyer's claim to 'minority stress' being 'social stress', stress is here reduced to individuals, largely devoid of an account of the role of social norms in shaping how particular individuals may be rendered legitimate targets of

6

negative regard. This individualistic account of stress is then reinforced when Meyer draws on previous research on stress to suggest that it arises from a "mismatch" or "disharmony" (p. 676) between an individual and their environment. Moving from the implicit to the explicit, then, Meyer's account positions the 'mismatched' or 'disharmonious' individual as the locus of the stress, rather than seeing the stressed individual as the product of institutionalised stressors.

The leap described above – from stress as external, to stress as a characteristic of an individual – is solidified when Meyer (2003) outlines his account of minority stress as applied to lesbian, gay and bisexual people. In a section specifically on 'Minority Stress Processes in LGB Populations', Meyer introduces a distinction between distal (i.e., external) sources of stress and proximal appraisals of stress. Most importantly for our argument here, Meyer positions distal stressors as objective, and proximal appraisals as subjective. In so doing, what becomes central to Meyer's account is whether or not sources of stress are made to matter by individuals. This account, then, removes itself entirely from the realms of the engineering analogy (in which a surface that is subject to stress has no choice as to whether it is stressed or not), and instead locates stress primarily within individuals and their decisions about how they respond to the world around them.

It is not until the final pages of Meyer's (2003) account that we come to see why this particular framing of stress is perceived as beneficial by Meyer. In his discussion, Meyer draws attention to a distinction between objective and subjective accounts of stress. The former, he suggests, positions stress via the engineering analogy, thus treating it as inviolable by the individual or surface experiencing the stressor. As we shall see below, this is closely aligned with the position

7

that we adopt. Meyer, by contrast, is keen to position stress as subjective, as this then opens up the possibility for "resilient actors" and "coping abilities" (p. 691). Interestingly, the two concepts of resilience and coping feature in two alternative framings of minority stress (Kwon, 2013, and Hatzenbuehler, 2009, respectively), although these are not the focus of this paper. Our concern with the minority stress approach, however laudable in its liberatory intentions, is with what disappears via a focus on stress as subjective. What disappears, and as we now explore in more detail, is the institutionalised nature of stress.

Stress as Ideology and Framework of Intelligibility

In the previous section we outlined our concerns with Meyer's (2003) model of minority stress, focusing on how the account is to a degree asocial, focused instead on individuals and their actions and perceptions. In this section we introduce three points intended as a counter to these concerns. The first involves a focus on ideology, and how it produces stress. The second is the importance of an intersectional focus when it comes to thinking about the effects of stress. Finally, we focus on the operations of privilege, and how for some people it may serve to mitigate minority stress, and indeed all stressors.

In terms of ideology, we use this as a framework rather than other possible frameworks such as attitudes or actions, given these bring with them individualised accounts of marginalisation. Ideology, by comparison, focuses on institutionalised social norms, which are formative of what counts as an 'individual'. In other words, ideologies shape what it means to be intelligible: what it means to be classed as fully human, thus defining those who are constituted as outside the realms

8

of human personhood proper. Understood in this way, ideology is productive of stress. To be rendered unintelligible, or to be positioned as a justified target of discrimination, is to be the surface, in the engineering analogy, that is subjected to stress. The stressed person, then, is someone who is excluded on the basis of any given ideology.

In regards to the ideologies of interest here, we are specifically focused upon those that institutionalise particular norms in relation to identity categories. Ideologies of race, sex, gender, sexuality, class and ability enshrine particular bodies or identities as the norm, against which all others are compared. So for example, racism denies the humanity of people racialised as non-white. Sexism delegitimises women's worldviews, positioning them as inferior to men's worldviews. Cisgenderism delegitimises people's own accounts of their bodies and gender, instead insisting upon a binary account of sex and gender, where assigned sex is believed to determine gender (Riggs, Ansara & Treharne, 2015).

Importantly, however, whilst above we provide a list of ideologies, none stand alone. As people, we do not experience our identities as individual categories, each mutually exclusive. Rather, all of the ideologies we mention above work in concert with one another to produce specific forms of intelligibility as compared to a taken for granted norm. This is why we now highlight the importance of an intersectional account when it comes to understanding stress. Intersectionality, as first outlined by Crenshaw (1991), emphasises the imbrication of identity categories, such that there can be little utility in focusing solely on one identity category without taking into account how they are mutually shaped with other identity categories in a broader context of multiple, overlapping ideologies. For example, it does not suffice to say that a woman may experience

9

stress on the basis of sexist ideology. A white cisgender heterosexual woman will likely have considerably different experiences of stress than will a black transgender heterosexual woman. Importantly, the intent of an intersectional approach is not to rank oppressions. Rather, it is to recognise how ideologies differentially shape our experiences.

In the context of Meyer's (2003) minority stress model, whilst his elaboration of the model conceded that multiple factors will impact upon an individual's experiences of stress, his focus was solely on sexual orientation, as can be seen in the following quote: "Applied to lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals, a minority stress model posits that sexual prejudice is stressful and may lead to adverse mental health outcomes" (p. 676). What we must ask, however, is 'which lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals'? Are the effects of sexual prejudice, using Meyer's term, uniform across all lesbian, gay and bisexual people?

The need to address multiple identity categories has led to more and more complex applications of the minority stress model. The notion of 'double jeopardy' or 'dual minority stress' has been used to describe the lives of older African Americans (Ferraro & Farmer, 1996), Asian American gay men (Chen & Shick Tryon, 2012), or lesbian, gay or bisexual people of "racial/ethnic minority" groups in the US (Hayes, Chun-Kennedy, Edens, & Locke, 2011, p. 120). Similarly, the term 'triple jeopardy' has been to describe the lives of black lesbians (Bowleg, Huang, Brooks, Black, & Burkholder, 2003; though note that Bowleg, 2008, herself has moved away from this account and towards one premised on intersectionality). These examples demonstrate how the concept of 'minority stress' in relation to lesbians, gay men, and bisexual people has typically been conceptualised as minority stress for *white* lesbians, gay men, and bisexual people

10

(see Riggs, 2007, for more on this). In using terms like double and triple jeopardy, researchers have attempted to move beyond this norm of whiteness in research on minority stress, but the norm has continued to assert itself as a 'problem of addition' (Barnard, 2003), where issues of marginalisation on the basis of gender or race (for example) are treated as factors to be added into the equation of minority stress.

One particular tool of use to intersectional accounts of stress is the concept of privilege. As developed by researchers in the area of critical race and whiteness studies (e.g., McIntosh, 1989), privilege refers to how individuals who are positioned, typically from birth, as members of dominant social groups accrue benefits automatically on the basis of their group membership. The concept of privilege thus challenges assumptions of liberal meritocracy (Clarke et al., 2010), and instead suggests that individuals who are members of dominant groups benefit from their automatic membership, and that this comes at the expense of those who are not members of the dominant group (Riggs, 2010). This understanding of privilege has been increasingly applied to individuals who may not entirely conform to the norms of the dominant group (e.g., white middle-class gay men), but who nonetheless experience considerable privilege (see Riggs, 2006; 2010; see also Chae et al., 2010; McDermott, 2006).

The concept of privilege is of interest to an account of stress arising from living in societies shaped by ideologies about sex, gender, sexuality, race, class and so forth for at least two reasons. First, social norms in any form operate by establishing an ideal to which all are directed to aspire (Butler, 1990, 2004; Clarke et al., 2010; Riggs, 2010; Treharne, 2011). Whilst this is most problematic and exclusionary for those who cannot approximate a given norm, it is also

11

problematic for those who *do* in some way approximate that norm. In terms of heterosexuality as a norm, then, and following Dean (2006), we might suggest that there are people who are not heterosexual, and then there are those who are *not* not heterosexual. In other words, if we understand heterosexuality as a 'fantasy' (Butler, 1990, 2004), then it is not a position that can actually be occupied by any individual. Whilst being in an impossible relationship to heterosexuality (i.e., for someone who identifies as homosexual) creates an arguably more stress-inducing relationship to this norm, this does not mean that those who can approximate heterosexuality (i.e., those who identify as heterosexual) are free from stress. Instead, the threat of failing to approximate the norm is omnipresent and in part defines and is defined by how marginalised groups are treated.

Having made this point about privilege always being dependent on an illusory norm, it is nonetheless important to emphasise that privilege has very real effects. As we noted above, Meyer's (2003) account of minority stress does not attend to the potentially normative assumptions inherent to it (given it relies upon the figure of a lesbian, gay, or bisexual person largely abstracted from other identity categories). In so doing, it does not attend to the privilege accrued to white middle-class cisgender lesbians, gay men, and bisexual people. In other words, whilst Meyer encourages a focus on stress as subjective so as to emphasise the protective factors that might build resilience amongst lesbians, gay men and bisexual people in the face of stress, little attention is paid to how whiteness or middle-classness are themselves protective factors. Research on 'triple jeopardy' (for example) examines how racism exacerbates marginalisation on the basis of sexual orientation and gender, but research to date has failed to examine how racial

12

(and gender) privilege may mitigate marginalisation on the basis of sexual orientation amongst white middle-class lesbians and gay men (see Riggs, 2010, for more on this).

To summarise our argument in this section: the engineering analogy would suggest that stress is a force that acts upon individuals, and that stress is not external to individuals, just as individuals are not distinct from social forces. Rather, as individuals we are rendered intelligible (or otherwise) through social norms that are formed through a range of ideologies that determine what counts as human personhood proper, and what does not. To understand the effects of such norms, then, we must focus intersectionally on the effects of ideology, which includes focusing on how ideologies do not simply marginalise, they also serve to privilege particular people. In the following section we take these points up in outlining an approach to understanding stress that both builds upon, but nonetheless differs from, that provide by Meyer (2003).

Decompensation as a Novel Framework for Understanding Stress

As we suggested above, to a degree our proposed framework builds on the work of Meyer (2003). Importantly, this is not simply because our framework is based on a critique of Meyer's account of minority stress. It is also because much of Meyer's account provides a scaffolding for the framework that we present below. Whilst Meyer does not use the previous research he summarises on stress – and specifically with regard to the engineering analogy – in the same way that we do, his focus on stress and its impact upon well-being nonetheless provides many of the coordinates that we now take up.

13

In terms of the specific language that we use, we must acknowledge that the language of decompensation may at first glance appear problematic. Certainly in the context of psychiatry, the term is used in ways that may be considered pathologising (i.e., as a 'failure' of coping). When applying the term to people who are marginalised on the basis of particular social norms, it may thus seem questionable to use the language of decompensation. Yet as Meyer (2003) himself suggests, there is a difference between acknowledging that groups who experience social marginalisation may experience reduced well-being due to the effects of stress, and suggesting that this implies that such groups are disordered. Rather, our suggestion is that decompensation is not a failure in the sense of an individual failing. Rather, it is a product of the force of social norms, and hence the failing (if we want to think of it in this way) is the failure of multiple ideologies to offer protection and inclusion. To again use the engineering analogy, at a certain point, when an object is subjected to stress beyond its capacity, it will become stressed and hence susceptible to breaking. The point of concern or pathology here is not the object, but rather the source of stress. When applied to people the same is true.

Having addressed potential concerns with the term, we can now turn to explore it in more detail. To compensate is, by definition, to make up for or counteract a wrongdoing, an injury, or a harm caused. When living in a society where particular ideologies serve to marginalise certain groups of people, such groups are continually required to compensate for the wrongdoings, injuries, or harms enacted against them. When discrimination is enshrined in public institutions, thus authorising the actions of individuals, for many people finding ways to compensate for discrimination is a daily requirement – as one of Singh's (2011) participants, an African American trans woman noted: "Just getting out of bed is a revolutionary act". It thus follows

14

that not all people will be able to meet the requirement of compensation. Ideologies are powerful forces, always finding news ways to incorporate the new into the pre-existing (consider the term homonormativity, for example, which refers to how primarily white middle-class lesbians and gay men are inculcated into neoliberal regimes in ways that minimises their difference from a white heterosexual norm, see Duggan, 2003). Humans, however, are by and large not unlimited forces. We face many challenges, and for some of us the point may come where those challenges become too much.

To decompensate, then, is to cease being able to compensate. To cease being able to make up for the daily discrimination; to cease being able to prop oneself up in the face of ideologies that render one's existence unintelligible. To decompensate is thus not to have failed. Rather, it is to have been inadequately resourced and supported, and to have experienced considerable and repeated marginalisation, so much so that one's protective resources no longer work. To a degree, then, the concept of decompensation is a theorising of the adage 'the straw the broke the camel's back'. It is not necessarily that any one experience leads an individual to experience reduced well-being. Rather it is that, cumulatively, stress resulting from the impact of ideology and social norms reduces one's well-being.

We have found support for this framework in our research with transgender Australians (Riggs, Ansara & Treharne, 2015). Specifically, our findings provided support for a model wherein 1) discriminatory ideologies shape how people experience their bodies and whether or not their needs are met by the health professionals they interact with, 2) the traction that such ideologies gain on an individual (and thus how much they are required to compensate) depends on

15

individual social locations (e.g., with regard to race, class, age, ability), 3) an individual's social supports may provide protection against both discrimination and decompensation, and 4) that if experiences of discrimination are high, and an individual occupies multiple marginalised social locations, and their support networks are reduced, then they are likely to experience decompensation. Specifically, decompensation was operationalised as reduced physical or mental health, though certainly it may not be limited to these areas.

Further evidence in support of our decompensation framework is provided in research on post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) amongst people marginalised by ideologies related to gender and sexuality. For example, D'Augelli, Pilkington, and Hershberger (2002) examined symptoms of PTSD amongst a primarily US sample of 350 lesbian, gay, or bisexual youth. PTSD symptoms were higher among lesbian and bisexual female participants, those who had experienced more verbal discrimination during school, and those who reported higher rates of what was termed "personal homonegativity". Further analysis of the same data revealed that PTSD symptoms were correlated with general stressful life events, verbal victimisation, and internalised homophobia (Dragowski et al., 2011). As we suggested above, it is plausible that the stressful effects of discrimination render some people vulnerable to decompensation, which in turn leads to negative self-evaluations and self-blame that are *part of* rather than *causal of* negative mental health outcomes.

Two other important studies that have investigated the effects of stress upon people marginalised by ideologies of gender and sexuality also suggest that the key issue at stake is the effects of social norms and their role in decompensation, rather than the role of subjective appraisals. The

16

first study, conducted by Toomey, Ryan, Diaz, and Card (2000) with a sample of 254 US gender non-conforming youth aged 21-25, found that the degree of victimisation arising from other's perceptions of their gender non-conformity that participants reported fully mediated the relationship between their gender non-conformity and their mental well-being. In other words, the more stress participants experienced, the more their well-being was reduced.

The second study, conducted by Pachankis and Bernstein (2012), makes a similar point in regards to findings with a sample of 192 gay and heterosexual men's accounts of their boyhood gender non-conformity and levels of anxiety in their adult life. Pachankis and Bernstein found a relationship between experiences of parental disapproval of gender non-conformity in childhood and anxiety in adulthood amongst the gay men in the sample, and that this relationship was mediated by both increased daily awareness of other people's potential judgments about their sexual orientation and attempts at hiding their sexual orientation. Importantly, Pachankis and Bernstein suggest that such hypervigilance "depletes one's capacity to focus on self-enhancing pursuits and may ultimately contribute to poor mental health" (p. 117). This, we would suggest, is an example of decompensation at work, where gay men who feel it necessary to monitor social situations for possible discrimination are at risk of anxiety.

Lacking to a certain degree from both our research and that conducted by other people, however, has been an intersectional focus, exploring how multiple stressors impact upon well-being. Whilst we explored how age was a key factor in determining decompensation, other identity categories must be attended to. This will be an important task for future research. Similarly, it will be important that future research considers how privilege may mitigate stress. Finally, and

17

whilst we have insisted upon the unilateral effects of ideology and social norms, it nonetheless is likely the case that people resist the impact of these upon their lives. Researchers such as Singh (2011) have already begun this work of exploring how people resist dominant ideologies and social norms so as to reduce the risk of decompensation.

Conclusion

The understanding of decompensation outlined in this paper offers the scope for both identifying the effects of ideology and social norms, as well as addressing how these play out in individual people's lives according to their specific identity configurations. Firstly, it allows us to understand stress as fundamental to personhood in the context of societies where particular ideologies hold sway, and where certain identities are privileged over others. As such, our account differs to Meyer's minority stress model in that it does not emphasise subjective interpretations of stressors, whilst it nonetheless builds upon some of the key points that Meyer makes in his account of minority stress.

Second, and despite potentially appearing deterministic in its account of the unilateral effects of ideology and social norms, it still allows the space for researchers to identify both the push and pull factors in an individual's life (i.e., those things that they are compensating for, but also those that promote well-being). Importantly, this approach again differs from that advocated for by Meyer, in that it doesn't rely upon individuals to be resilient (i.e., compensate). Rather, it emphasises the need to challenge ideology and social norms so as to improve well-being. That social change is the necessary component – rather than promoting resilience *per se* – highlights

18

the importance of a liberatory critical psychology to understanding the utility of decompensation as a concept.

As such, the decompensation framework as outlined in this paper concurs with Herek's (2010) argument that "psychology still has an important role to play in challenging the differences-as-deficits model" (p. 693). Importantly, and as we noted above, our conceptualisation of compensation and decompensation is not intended to be read as pathologising. Rather, the decompensation approach to understanding the stressful effects of ideology and social norms identifies how such stress produces vulnerabilities that are differentially distributed across multiple axes of difference. Importantly, such an account offers opportunities for both reactive and proactive approaches to dealing with the effects of marginalisation. Within the account it is recognised that social norms are foundational to any individual's subjectivity, whilst also offering the potential to challenge such norms. In developing this account of decompensation, the next step will be to further elaborate and empirically assess how the concept might be used both in research and in clinical practice to identify and work with stress related to social norms.

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22

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