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A cultural mismatch: Independent cultural norms produce greater increases in cortisol and more negative emotions among first-generation college students

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Abstract

American universities increasingly admit first-generation students—students whose parents do not have four-year degrees. Once admitted, these students experience greater challenges adjusting to universities compared to continuing-generation students—students who have at least one parent with a four-year degree. This additional adversity is typically explained in terms of first-generation students' relative lack of economic (e.g., money) or academic (e.g., preparation) resources. We propose that this adversity also stems from a *cultural mismatch* between the mostly middle-

class, *independent* norms institutionalized in American universities and the relatively *interdependent* norms that first-generation students are socialized with in working-class contexts before college. As predicted, an experiment revealed that framing the university culture in terms of *independent* norms (cultural mismatch) led first-generation students to show greater increases in cortisol and less positive/more negative emotions than continuing-generation students while giving a speech. However, reframing the university culture to include *interdependent* norms (cultural match) eliminated this gap.

Highlights

• First-generation students experience a cultural mismatch in university settings. • This mismatch leads to an aversive state that affects biological functioning. • *Independent* norms produced a social class gap in cortisol and negative emotions. • *Interdependent* norms eliminated the social class gap in cortisol and negative emotions.



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Keywords

Culture; Social class; First-generation college students; Cortisol; Inequality; Higher education

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