

## What we can learn from ‘untranslatable’ illnesses

For decades, “untranslatable” disorders — mental illnesses that only exist in certain societies — were studied as mere scientific curiosities. Western mental illnesses, on the other hand, were viewed as universal. But today scientists are increasingly realizing that this is not the case.

In the central plateau region of Haiti, people regularly fall sick with “reflechi twòp”, or “thinking too much”, which involves **ruminating** on your troubles until you can barely leave the house. In South Korea there’s “Hwa-byung” — loosely translated as “rage virus” — which is caused by bottling up your feelings about things you see as unfair, until you **succumb** to some alarming physical symptoms, like a burning sensation in the body. It’s estimated that Hwa-byung affects around 10000 people in South Korea every year — mostly older married women.

ruminate 沉思；反复思考

succumb 屈服；被压垮

The consequences of culture-bound syndromes can be devastating. Those who suffer from reflechi twòp are eight times more likely to have suicidal thoughts, while Hwa-byung has been linked to emotional distress, social isolation, demoralization and depression, physical pain, low self-esteem, and unhappiness.

In an era that’s seeing drastic losses in diversity of virtually every other kind — from species to languages, it’s been suggested that we’re standing on a **precipice**, potentially about to lose our range of mental illnesses too.

precipice 悬崖；险境

In the book “Crazy Like Us”, the author Ethan Watters describes how we’ve spent the last few decades slowly, **insidiously** Americanizing mental illness. In the process, not only do we risk missing out on diagnoses and foregoing the most appropriate treatments, but the opportunity to understand how mental illnesses develop in the first place.

insidiously 潜伏地；暗中为害地