

# Culture, Coping and Resilience to Stress

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## Abstract

Sudden economic change can have devastating effects on the well-being of a country, as witnessed by the dramatic increases in suicide rates in the former Soviet Socialist Republics. However, it is possible to use economic development to promote happiness, if one understands the relationship between culture, coping, and resilience to stress. Cultures shape both normative stressors and individuals' responses to them; individual coping strategies and cultural institutions must change to accommodate new types of stressors induced by economic development. However, strategies such as the promotion of intact social networks and dispersed economic development can mitigate the impact of stress due to economic change on gross national happiness.

Stress - or suffering - is ubiquitous, both in a scientific sense as well as a personal or social one. In terms of science, the past few decades have seen nearly 80,000 papers published on the topic, ranging from the effects of stress on the genome and cellular functioning to its impact on physical and mental health, to the effects of stress on a social and cultural level. In a psychosocial sense, it is also ubiquitous. At some point, all humans will suffer illness, bereavement, and death; most will suffer stress in their family, work, or spiritual lives; some will suffer from poverty, hunger, and torture. In many ways, it is how we cope with stress, or our resilience to it, that determines our level of happiness. Psychologists describe these resilience factors at the individual level, in terms of coping skills, social support, and temperament, but anthropologists remind us that how societies and cultures are organized have a great impact both on the nature and types of stressors individuals must face in their daily lives and on the types of resources they can draw upon. In this paper I will attempt to synthesize these two views, drawing on the work of anthropologist A. F. C. Wallace and psychologist Richard S. Lazarus to outline how stress resilience can be maintained despite cultural change such as economic development.

## Culture, Stress and Coping

On the surface, it would appear that the psychological and anthropological viewpoints are diametrically opposed. After all, the very definition of coping is the study of individual differences in response to stress. If there is a strong cultural component to the process, then would this not by definition negate the emphasis on individual differences? This contradiction is apparent only if one holds a monolithic viewpoint of

culture—namely, that it affects every individual in the culture in the same way. However, several decades ago, the cultural anthropologist A. F. C. Wallace (1966) defined cultures in terms of "mazeways. "A mazeway consists of patterns of beliefs, values, and commitments, as well as expected behaviors, resources, and so forth, that shape individual behavior. There may be different pathways inside the mazeway for different subcultural groups, such as males and females, or for different socioeconomic or ethnic subgroups. Thus, the types of stressors that an individual encounters, and the range of acceptable coping strategies, are determined in large part by an individual's position in the mazeway.

### **Stress and Coping Models**

Before I present a model on how culture can affect the stress and coping process, I will present Lazarus' basic stress and coping model (see Figure 1). For Lazarus, stress is defined as a transaction between the individual and the environment: anything which taxes or exceeds an individual's resources is said to be stressful. Key to this process is the construct of appraisal (see Lazarus & Folkman 1994). For Lazarus, how an individual appraised a situation determined whether or not it is stressful; appraisals are a function of both contextual and personal characteristics. The four basic appraisals include threat, harm or loss, challenge or benign, although I have added three more: worried about others, annoyed, and at a loss for what to do next (see Aldwin, Sutton, & Lachman, 1996). When confronted with a situation a person has appraised as stressful, one must then decide on how to cope with the problem. Secondary appraisal involves examining one's resources, which may affect how stressful a person thinks the situation is. If sufficient resources are available, the problem may seem much easier than originally thought. Conversely, if resources are not sufficient, what the problem may become more serious. As we shall see, economic development need not be unduly stressful if resources are provided to buffer the cultural change.

In Lazarus' model, coping strategies consist of both behaviors and cognitions that are directed at managing the situation and the attendant negative emotions. They are flexible and responsive to situational demands. Thus, new strategies can be learned and old ones modified to deal with changing situations. While many different coping measures exist, the primary ones include problem-focused coping, emotion-focused coping, social support, religious coping, and cognitive reframing. These strategies are not mutually exclusive but can be used either simultaneously or sequentially in any given situation. Finally, the coping process is recursive – the individual is thought to examine the effects of the coping strategies on the outcomes, and modify them as appropriate. Thus, people may end up trying a variety of strategies until they find one that "works" – that is, achieves the desired goal.

Culture can affect the stress and coping process in four ways. First, the cultural context shapes the types of stressors that an individual is likely to experience. Second, culture may also affect the appraisal of the stressfulness of a given event. Third, cultures affect the choice of coping strategies that an individual utilizes in any given situation. Finally, the culture provides different institutional mechanisms by which an individual can cope with stress.

This model is presented in Figure 2. Cultural demands and resources affect both situational demands and individual resources, both of which in turn affect the appraisal of stress. In addition, cultural beliefs and values influence not only individual beliefs and values, but also the reactions of others in the situation, which also affect the appraisal of stress. How an individual copes is affected by four factors: the appraisal of stress, the individual's coping resources, the resources provided by the culture, and the reactions of others.

Further, the outcome of coping not only has psychological and physical outcomes, but also social and cultural outcomes (see Aldwin & Stokols, 1988). How an individual copes affects not only that person but also others in the immediate social environment. Further, to the extent to which an individual (or groups of individuals) modify or create cultural institutions in the process of coping with a problem, they also affect the culture, providing a means of coping for others facing similar problems. Grassroots movements such as Mothers Against Drunk Driving and the development of support groups for different illnesses or bereavement are good examples of this phenomenon. Thus, the sociocultural viewpoint of coping emphasizes that coping behavior nearly always occurs in a social context and is both affected by that context and contributes to its change (Gross, 1970).

### **Culture and Stress**

As mentioned earlier, the patterns of stressors that individuals are likely to face is profoundly affected by their (sub)cultural context. There are two ways in which culture can affect the experience of stress. First, certain stressful life events can be seen as normative— that is, most individuals in a given culture or cultural subgroup will experience a particular event at specified times in their lives. Adolescent puberty rituals are one example of a normative life event, retirement is another.

Second, by differentially allocating social resources, cultures pattern the types and levels of stress that individuals are likely to experience. For example, contrast the types of stressors faced by inner-city children versus those in an affluent suburb in America. While the latter may face achievement-related problems such as the fierce academic competition in top-ranked schools and the anguish of whether they can live up to the achievement expectations of the parents, get into an ivy league college, and

so forth, the former may face more fundamental problems, such as problems in housing, nutrition, and family stability, as well as inadequate and often violent schools, which impair the learning process.

### ***Cultural patterning of normative stress***

While life events can be considered as events that occur somewhat randomly to individuals, closer inspection reveals that whether a particular event occurs and the manner in which it occurs often reflect cultural beliefs and practices. The sanctioning of the occurrence of stressful events for individuals may also be a means for cultures to solve larger problems. These events often denote changes in social status, such as puberty rituals, retirement, or O level examinations. They are often highly stressful, but the distress may be mitigated through other social institutions (e. g. , pensions). The mandating of such events is often a response to other social problems, that is, certain social goals are achieved, consciously or unconsciously, through subjecting certain populations to stress at specific points in the life cycle.

Culturally mandated stressful life events may also occur at irregular intervals, as when the federal government constricts the monetary supply to combat inflation, knowing that such a restriction will inevitably lead to unemployment, temporary or otherwise, on the part of vulnerable populations. This leads us to a discussion of the second way in which cultures can influence the experience of stress: through the allocation of resources.

### ***Resource Allocation***

Arsenian and Arsenian (1948) proposed that cultures can be characterized as "tough" or as "easy". Their basic premise was that individuals can be characterized in terms of goal-driven behavior. Cultures vary in the number and quality of goals aspired to by individuals. However, resources and access to the paths through which one achieves socially sanctioned goals are not distributed equally among individuals or subgroups within the culture. A tough culture is one that provides few valued goals and severely restricts access to the pathways through which that goal may be achieved. In contrast, an easy culture is one that provides multiple valued goals and relatively easy access to at least one of these goals.

Arsenian and Arsenian hypothesized that tough cultures would take their toll on both the mental health of individuals and the social health of the community. In cultures with severely restricted goals and unequal access to paths, individuals are expected to exhibit psychological problems, such as alcoholism, drug abuse, and suicides. Similarly, in tough cultures, crime is expected to flourish, as people pursue goals through illegitimate means.

As tempting as it may be to derive a unidimensional scheme on which to array cultures – from "easy" to "tough" – Wallace's (1966) conception of mazes argues for a more complex perspective. Obviously, cultures in which famine and war are prevalent are objectively more stressful than more prosperous and peaceful societies. However, from a maze perspective, the types of stressors faced by individuals within a culture vary according to gender, socio-economic status, and ethnicity. American culture may be considered a relatively easy culture for affluent white Americans, but a very tough one for inner-city youths.

Further, the importance of the subjectivity of appraisals of stress cannot be overlooked. Thus, even in very prosperous societies by worldwide standards, such as the United States and Japan, the death rate among youths has been increasing. Rather than rank cultures by their degree of stressfulness, it might be useful to examine the cultural patterns in the distribution and appraisal of stressors.

### **Cultural Influences On the Appraisal of Stress**

While some stressors, such as bereavement, may be universal, cultures vary considerably in both their definitions of what is considered to be a stressor and in the degree to which a given event is appraised as stressful. For example, some cultures emphasize individual achievement, whereas in others being special in any way may be considered a threat. A classic example of this is provided by Rubel (1969). In Mexican-American culture, it was thought that children could become ill if someone outside the immediate family praised or admired them (*mal ojo*). Once ill, the child could only become well if the outsider patted the child in such a way as to remove the *mal ojo*. Thus, in close-knit Mexican-American families, praise for a child from an outsider constituted a stressful event, in marked contrast with the pride that a European-American mother may feel when her child is praised.

While anecdotal instances of cultural differences in the perception of what is stressful abound in the anthropological literature, there are very few systematic studies of social differences in the appraisal of stress. However, a few studies are suggestive. One study tried to measure stress by using Holmes and Rahe's (1967) stressful life event measure in South Africa, and found that it correlated very little with standard measures of psychological distress (Swartz, Elk, & Teggin, 1983); instead, problems such as breaking of taboos were more likely to be considered stressful. This suggests that a stress measure standardized in one culture may not be very useful in another, if that other culture has radically different views of what is considered stressful.

### **Cultural Influences on Coping**

Mechanic (1974) argued that the ability of individuals to acquire coping skills and their success depends upon the efficacy of the solutions that the culture provides and the adequacy of the institutions that teach them. Further, Antonovsky (1979) stated that "Culture . . . give[s] us an extraordinarily wide range of answers to demands. The demands and answers are routinized: from the psychological point of view, they are internalized; from the sociological point of view, they are institutionalized. . . . A culture provides . . . ready answers . . . with keening for a death, an explanation for pain, a ceremony for crop failure, and a form for disposition and accession of leaders" (pp. 117-118). Culture can also provide a means of coping with economic development.

Cultures may differ in both their preferred means of emotion-focused coping as well as problem-focused coping, such as preferences for external or internal control and direct versus indirect approaches to mastery. Shek and Cheung (1990) have argued that cultures may be divided into those that place greater reliance on the self (internal locus of coping) and those that rely more on others (external locus of coping). Differences in emotion-focused coping center around issues of emotional control versus emotional expression, as well as patterning of emotional expression.

Coping in a nonculturally prescribed manner may result in greater stress. Hwang (1979) examined how men cope with residential crowding in Taiwan. Men who used coping styles that emphasized traditional cultural values and interpersonal cooperation experienced less interpersonal stress and lower symptom levels. Coping styles that emphasized self-assertion and achievement enhancement, however, were associated with more interpersonal stress, psychosomatic disorders, and depression.

Bicultural individuals may develop two separate coping repertoires, depending upon the cultural context. Kiefer (1974) found that Nissei, second-generation Japanese-Americans, appeared to have different rules of behavior depending upon whether the problematic situations involved other Japanese-Americans or individuals outside their cultural group. Aboriginal adolescents in Australia also appear to use different strategies in coping with conflicts arising from demands made by parents and/or the traditional culture and those made by Western-style teachers in the mission school (Davidson, Nurcombe, Kearney, & Davis, 1978). Bicultural competence refers to the ability to manage the rules and requirements of both cultures (cf. , LaFramboise, Coleman, & Gerton (1995).

In summary, sociocultural groups appear to generate not only consensual belief systems concerning the origin and meaning of stressors but also beliefs concerning the most appropriate means of both emotion-and problem-focused coping. Further, trying to cope in ways that run contrary to the general cultural ethos may increase stress, even though those same strategies used by members of a different culture may be efficacious in

reducing emotional distress. Even more rarely examined, however, are the more generalized institutions that cultures provide to individuals in order to help them cope with problems.

### **Institutions As Coping Mechanisms**

Mechanic (1974) argued that the efficacy of an individual's coping is dependent upon how well the culture provides a range of coping resources and transmits coping skills. Thus, coping strategies are influenced not only by cultural beliefs concerning the most appropriate means of handling specific types of problems, but also by social and cultural institutions for problem-solving and tension reduction (Mechanic, 1978). Some examples of institutionalized assistance in coping are obvious. The legal system is the formal means of conflict resolution, and a cross-cultural comparison of legal systems might provide interesting insights into the cultural beliefs that govern those processes. For example, it is interesting that in Euro-American cultures, with all their emphasis on personal control, relatively little individual control can be exercised in the court system, where decisions are made primarily by lawyers and judges. In other cultures such as Mexico and Saudi Arabia where seemingly less emphasis is placed on personal control, plaintiffs may have much more influence over the amount and type of punishment meted out to the perpetrator (Nader, 1985).

In addition to formal systems for conflict resolution, all cultures provide some form of ritualized advice that may consist of religious counselors, professional ones (e. g. , psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, etc. ) or quasi-formal support groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous. Tseng (1978) argued strongly that fortune-telling may be a sort of folk-counseling service. Clients typically present a wide variety of problems concerning health, business, academic examinations, marriage, and so forth, and receive not only interpretations as to the causes of their problems, but also specific suggestions as to how to cope. Hsu (1976) found that advice provided by Taiwanese diviners was usually culturally conservative—that is, individuals were advised not to be too aggressive or ambitious and to behave in ways that were appropriate for their social role and status.

Finally, rituals of various sorts may also be viewed as cultural mechanisms that aid individuals in both emotion- and problem-focused coping. Through their symbolic ability to transform personal and situational states, rituals provide an opportunity for individuals and social networks to cope with various stresses. Funeral rituals help to serve these functions for the bereaved, marriage rituals for newly weds, and rites of passage for individuals undergoing status transitions. Among other things, rituals focus social support on individuals who are undergoing a transition, and in general they provide a sense of closure for one part of an individual's life, that allowing him or her to make the transition to a new life

(Constantinides, 1977). The challenge is to modify culture institutions to promote new coping strategies which mitigate the stress brought about by social changes due to economic development.

### **Developing Resilience to Economic Developing**

As part of his maze theory, Wallace (1966) hypothesized that there exists a dynamic balance between the types of stressors typically faced by individuals in a culture and culturally-sanctioned means of coping with them. However, severe stress arises when there is a mismatch between culturally patterned stressors and coping responses. If the pattern of stressors changes due to cross-cultural contact, technological or social change, natural disasters, famine, war, and so forth, then the typical means of coping with problems may no longer "work," and there may be an increase in social problems such as alcoholism, divorce, child abuse, and psychiatric problems.

At that point, it is incumbent upon individuals within a culture to derive new patterns of problem solving. This often occurs through what Wallace termed "revitalization movements," usually religious in nature, which establish new patterns of beliefs, values, and adaptive behaviors. Revitalization movements are often characterized by a desire to return to traditional values, such as the Islamic Revolution in Iran, or, conversely, to develop a new Utopian society, such as the Transcendentalist Movement in 19<sup>th</sup> century US. Through a series of case studies, Wallace cautioned that failure on the part of revitalization movements (usually through inflexibility or an inability to accommodate to the powers that be), or an inability to invent new adaptational patterns, can ultimately result in the death of the culture.

Wallace's theory can easily be applied to economic development. When there is rapid cultural change due to economic development, the pattern of stressors changes, and thus individuals and the culture as a whole may experience considerable stress until new coping strategies and institutions are developed. A good example is the recent international data on suicide rates published by the United Nations. As can be seen in Figure 3, 7 of the 10 countries with the world's highest suicide rates are the former republics of the USSR. However, understanding how culture can contribute to resilience to stress on the part of individuals can mitigate the adverse impact of economic development on Gross National Happiness.

I am proposing three principles to mitigate these effects.

(1) Social networks should remain intact. Social networks are perhaps an individual's greatest coping resource. Communities which have intact social networks are much more likely to survive stressful times than those in which the networks have become disrupted (Erikson, 1973).

Economic development should be decentralized. Concentrating economic development only in urban areas in the name of greater economic



efficiency leads to severe disruptions in social networks. Young people are more likely to migrate, leaving elders behind in rural areas. Providing small scale economic development throughout the country allows social networks to remain intact, thus mitigating the stress of social change.

If migration is necessary for economic reasons, efforts should be made to provide housing which is sufficient for whole families to migrate.

Maintaining intact social networks should decrease the tendency of urban youths to experiment with alcohol and drugs.

Maintaining social networks should prevent the increases in suicide rates among elders left behind in rural areas, as is currently the case in China.

(2) Education levels should be enhanced. The more educated a person is, the greater his or her resilience to stress, and the stronger the community can be. Even one to two years of education for women lowers infant mortality rates. Providing more educational opportunities for women also lowers the birth rate.

Education at the primary and secondary levels should also be decentralized, in order to allow students to remain with their families. Bhutan could take advantage of development in telecommunications technology to provide primary and secondary education in local areas.

Education should not be opposed to traditional beliefs and values, but rather should enhance them. Maintaining one's sense of meaning and a sense of purpose is perhaps the most important component to resilience to stress. All too often Western education is disrespectful of traditional beliefs and values and young people can become ashamed of their culture. Instead, bicultural competence should be emphasized, that is, young people could be taught to be competent in both cultures. For example, traditional stories could be used to teach literacy; Buddhist psychology can be taught alongside of Western psychology.

Obviously, the healthier the population, the more likely it is to be able to resist stress. However, all too often Western health care is focused on treating acute illnesses rather than focusing on primary prevention in order to maintain health. Immunization to prevent disease and adequate nutrition, including micronutrients, are necessary to promote stress resilience, especially in children.

Cultural factors can also affect the appraisal of stress. In some ways, poverty is in the eye of the beholder. While there is a gradient between SES and health, various studies have shown that it is the size of discrepancy in wealth between the richest and poorest which is most destructive to health. Rather than developing a system in which the concentration of capital is primary, as the US did in the former Soviet Socialist Republics, small scale entrepreneurship should be emphasized.

Thus, the stressfulness of economic development in Bhutan may be decreased if individuals are provided with the social and cultural resources

to develop new means of coping with social change. Thus, it should be possible to increase economic development and Gross National Happiness.

*Table 1: Highest Suicide Rates by Country (UN Data, May 2003)*

Country	Year	Males	Females
LITHUANIA	2000	75.6	16.1
RUSSIAN FEDERATION	2000	70.6	11.9
BELARUS	2000	63.6	9.5
LATVIA	2000	56.6	11.9
UKRAINE	2000	52.1	10
SLOVENIA	1999	47.3	13.4
HUNGARY	2001	47.1	13
KAZAKHSTAN	1999	46.4	8.6
ESTONIA	2000	45.8	11.9
SRI LANKA	1991	44.6	16.8

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