Chapter 23

A Proposed Enquiry Into the Effect of Sociocultural Changes on Well-Being

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Theoretical Aspects

The definition of Sociocultural Change

One of the origins of the modern study of social change can be located in the ideas of *progress* and *cultural evolution* introduced by Comte's positivism and Hegelian dialectics, which would eventually give rise to *functionalist* perspectives. The latter were greatly influenced by evolutionism and are characterized by the need to give consistent and complementary functions to the various components of society, which is understood as a logical entity undergoing continuous improvement. Against this linear view of history, proponents of *critical theory*, influenced by Max Weber and other postmodernist views, have opted for terms that make more reference to discontinuous change than to evolution. Today, many different terms and concepts are used to refer to changes in political, social, and cultural dynamics. For this reason, especially in psychology, there is little consensus on the use of terms referring to changes at the macro level. Although there is a body of psychological research that has been explicitly carried out in different contexts of social (financial crises, political transitions, contexts of political violence and/or armed conflict, etc.) and cultural (migration from rural to urban areas or between countries, generational changes, globalization, introduction of new communication technologies, etc.) changes, the terminology—even in the literature explicitly referring to change—is clearly heterogeneous. Terms as diverse as political, economic, or social *crises* or *transitions*; *transformation* of societies; periods of *instability*, and

many more, are used to refer to the contexts in which psychological research is done under very heterogeneous social conditions, hampering the understanding of these complex phenomena.

In addition to this terminological problem, there is a tendency in the psychological literature to treat issues that are considered to have ideological content from a distance; seen from this perspective, psychology appears as a completely neutral science. Issues that may provoke very different opinions among different ideological sectors are treated in an acontextual way by psychology (unlike other social sciences). These approaches have been criticized by authors such as Cushman (1990), who noted that psychology, despite wanting to appear as a neutral discipline, actually has a high level of ideological content, is very involved in economic and political influence, and chooses its research topics using economic and political criteria.

In this chapter, I use the term *sociocultural change*, to refer to both sociopolitical and cultural changes. While it may be obvious that these two processes are interrelated, social change (and related terms) is commonly used to refer to the most rapid changes caused by political or economic changes, while cultural change often refers to a slower process involving the transformation of the perceptions of a culture and its meanings by the members of that culture. As I discuss below, ecological systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), psychological theories on coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Rotter, 1954), and metaphors related to social identity as cultural trauma (Eyerman, 2001; Sztompka, 2000) have all served as conceptual frameworks to address these issues in psychological and sociological research.

The measurement of psychosocial well-being

Psychosocial well-being is a concept that applies to both individual and collective levels of evaluation. In this regard, it is important to differentiate between two superposed concepts.

On the one hand, *emotional* or *psychological well-being* is defined in the literature of social change and well-being not only in terms of mental health conditions (incidence and prevalence of psychiatric comorbidity, depression, anxiety, mental hospital admissions, suicide rates, etc.) but also, especially after the inception of positive psychology, in terms of subjective measures of well-being such as self-rated physical health, enjoyment and interest in life, positive attitudes, and self-esteem (Grob, Little, Wanner, & Wearing, 1996; Pinquart & Silbereisen, 2004), in contrast with ill-being or negative well-being, conceptualized as negative affect, stress, and psychosomatic symptomatology (Kim, 2008; Smith, 1996).

On the other hand, *psychosocial well-being* is a superordinate construct that includes emotional or psychological well-being as well as social and collective well-being (Larson, 1996; Martikainen, 2002). According to Martikainen, concepts grouped under the term "psychosocial" usually refer to "meso" levels (in relation to the theory of ecological systems; Bronfenbrenner, 1979) such as support and social networks, perceived control over certain social situations, balance of effort and reward at work, security, autonomy, or family conflicts. Recently, it has been proposed (Prilleltensky et al., 2015) to incorporate all these meso-level variables into psychometric instruments applicable to individuals within diverse contexts. Finally, the term *quality of life* is similar to psychosocial well-being in that it involves emotional, social, and physical components. At the same time, it is often used in healthcare research to specify how an individual's well-being may be impacted over time by a medical condition (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2016), thus muddying its conceptual clarity and specificity. Therefore, although it should be considered as a keyword in literature reviews, we consider the term psychosocial well-being better suited to the objectives of this chapter.

The relation between sociocultural changes and psychosocial well-being

There is a growing interest in the measurement of human well-being and its relation with sociocultural changes such as globalization (e.g., Okasha, 2005), economic crises (e.g., Goldman-Mellor, Saxton, & Catalano, 2010), new communications technologies (e.g., Gross, Juvonen, & Gable, 2002), rapid political changes (e.g., Pinquart & Silbereisen, 2004), and political polarization (e.g., Lozada, 2008). Although research addressing the influence of sociocultural changes on psychosocial well-being has been a major issue in psychological research, it has been carried out under very heterogeneous methodological approaches and ideologies. From the pioneering work of Benjamin Rush about fertility in American women during the War of Independence and Pinel's work on psychotic disorders during the French Revolution, to the work of authors such as George Rosen (with his classic work *Madness in Society: Chapters in the Historical Sociology of Mental Illness*, 1968) and more recent empirical developments (e.g., Almeida-Filho, 1998; Eiroa-Orosa, 2013; Kim, 2008; Pinquart & Silbereisen, 2004), dozens of research projects have addressed the relation between sociocultural change and individual well-being or mental health.

On the basis of the theory and research outlined above, it can be concluded that Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy theory, Rotter's (1954) notion of locus of control, Lazarus & Folkman's (1984) theory of stress and coping, and Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory are all key concepts in the understanding of the relation between sociocultural dynamics and individual well-being. That is to say, cognitive features, related mainly to our sense of mastery over life, mediate the perceived impact of sociocultural changes on psychosocial well-being, and this sense of life mastery should be analyzed using an ecological paradigm that allows us to look into the structure of these interrelations among different social strata. For example, if legislation changes access to social welfare (macro level), this might produce changes in the structure of families (meso level) and ultimately affect the development of the locus of control, self-efficacy and coping strategies of individuals (micro level). This structure

of relations would presumably be observed in the case of both positive and negative changes (i.e., whether social benefits increase, and are distributed appropriately and accompanied by processes of empowerment and proactive search for alternatives, or, conversely, when these benefits are reduced, accompanied by difficulties in obtaining them and increased social exclusion). Thus, people who have had a favorable upbringing, free from economic deprivation and lack of opportunities for social interaction and personal development; tend to have a higher level of self-efficacy and an internal locus of control, and to use more flexible strategies and appropriate coping, whereas it may be adaptive to actually reduce one's use of coping strategies when developmental opportunities (e.g., higher education or jobs) are not present (Tomasik, Silbereisen, & Heckhausen, 2010). In the current context of financial crisis, we can imagine that this latter phenomenon is occurring, in different forms, in many different segments of the population at the European level.

Furthermore, subjectivity also appears to play an important role. The work of Jungsik Kim (Kim, 2008; Kim & Ng, 2008, 2010) shows that subjective views of the pace and scope of social changes are a better measure of the impact of social changes in individual well-being than objective indicators such as economic recession, unemployment, or rapid transformations of political power. Similarly, the ideological view of the changes can affect psychological well-being. Pinquart, Silbereisen, and Juang (2004) conducted an investigation in East Germany after the fall of the Berlin Wall comparing adolescents formerly committed to the communist regime to those without such a commitment. Those teenagers who were strongly committed to the former East German political system showed greater psychosocial stress after the reunification, although that stress was manifested only in those adolescents who had low self-efficacy beliefs before the political upheaval took place.

Finally, some researchers—often from a standpoint more influenced by qualitative than quantitative research—have used various ideas related to the concept of collective identity to

explain how different groups face up to cultural changes. In one of Kim's works (Kim & Ng, 2008), social identity—in this case, feeling Hongkongese versus feeling Chinese—was influenced by the perception of social change. It was found that those subjects who perceived a more rapid pace of social change in the unification of Hong Kong with China were less able to feel a double identity and preferred to endorse a single identity. Sztompka (2000, 2004), based on his analysis of the political transition from communism in Poland, used the clinical concept of trauma to develop a metaphor about how a human community faces change that is socially defined and culturally interpreted as sudden, radical, profound, externally imposed, and unexpected. Eyerman (2001) addressed the intellectual and generational conflicts of African-American identity from a postcolonial perspective. Similarly, Pfaff (1996) emphasized the importance of collective identity in the popular mobilization that led to the unification of Germany. Lozada's (2008) work, carried out in Venezuela, analyzed the impact of political polarization on the identity of various groups and social sectors. Finally, many publications have explored the impact of violence and political authoritarianism on collective identity (e.g., González Gil, 2009; Páez & Basabe, 1999). These works can be framed in the international analysis of the protective role of social identity when facing political violence. An example is a large-scale study conducted in Northern Ireland where it was shown that identification with a national group (Irish or British) was a source of psychosocial well-being within the context of the political conflict (Muldoon, Schmid, & Downes, 2009).

Although there are obvious differences at the conceptual level as well as in the tools we use to approach different phenomena, I believe that subjective perception determines the vital impact of difficult experiences. This happens whether or not these experiences are sharp and/or violent. In this regard, the work of Pfaff (1996) shows the validity of applying the concept of psychological trauma to other realities that do not directly involve interpersonal violence, disasters, or accidents. In the case of those life experiences that are determined by social and

cultural dynamics, and therefore do not fit the psychiatric concept of trauma, the concept has to be used with caution, especially because people who go through these circumstances will have had a range of different subjective experiences. For example, people who have suffered sexual abuse, regardless of their coping approach, know that others see them—to a greater or lesser extent—as victims of a heinous act, while an indigenous population threatened by the industrialization of their land, or a European unemployed person affected by the consequences of severe financial crisis, will likely have very different subjective narratives.

For these and other reasons (primarily related to bureaucratic or taxonomic questions of academic discipline, institution, perimeter of intervention, and other forms of atomisation), the possibility of developing a multidisciplinary field that could have multiple applications, from clinical or psychosocial practice to public health management, is still hampered by the heterogeneity of social change itself, and the lack of communication between different disciplinary approaches. However, I believe that an approach that connects the dynamics of sociocultural change with subjective, individual, and collective psychosocial well-being will facilitate, from a multidisciplinary perspective, the design of psychosocial interventions and mental health, and hence the management of social capital, mental health systems, and public policy. In the following sections, therefore, I offer a brief review of the methodological aspects to be considered in this type of research.

Methodological Aspects

Mediational processes between sociocultural change and psychosocial well-being

In a systematic literature review informed by my personal experience as an international student in the former communist bloc (Eiroa-Orosa, 2013), I tried to identify mediators between social variables derived from the Eastern European transition from communism to democracy and measures of psychosocial well-being. My main inspirations were the work of Pinquart and

Silbereisen (2004) and Kim (2008). The results of this review showed that mediators such as locus of control, perceived control, self-efficacy beliefs, and the subjective evaluation of the social changes, explained a great amount of the variance in the relation between the macro sociocultural changes and psychological well-being in different contexts. For instance, in the above-mentioned study on self-efficacy and distress carried out with German youth, the impact of the change was negative only for adolescents who were engaged with the old system and who also had low self-efficacy; that is, self-efficacy beliefs mediated[1] the impact of change on well-being (Pinquart et al., 2004).

Cross-cultural aspects

Although there are some studies that have shown stable intercultural interactions between mediators such as locus of control and subjective well-being (SWB; Spector et al., 2002), a recent meta-analysis of the collectivist-individualist continuum tells us that these

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[1] Note here that it is very important not to confuse the terms *mediator* and *moderator*. According to the classic article by Baron and Kenny (1986), a moderator is a variable that affects the direction and strength of the association between a predictor (or independent variable) and the criterion (or dependent variable). A mediator, however, explains the relation between a predictor and the criterion. Wu and Zumbo (2007) described it even more simply: A mediator links cause and effect while a moderator modifies the causal effect. The case of the young Germans is clearly a phenomenon of mediation, because the relation between identity and well-being is apparent only if the effect of self-efficacy is controlled. In contrast, we could hypothesize that optimism would moderate the effect of job loss on psychosocial well-being, in that the effect always occurs, but to a degree that depends on the optimism of the person.

relations are circumscribed to changing cultural elements (Cheng, Cheung, Chio, & Chan, 2013). On this basis, and considering that the research on locus of control and SWB has been carried out mostly in organizational contexts using exclusively quantitative approaches, one can assume that the relation between the variables we have identified as mediating or moderating the effect of sociocultural change on psychosocial well-being depend on the context and culture, and therefore can be better addressed by combining ideographic and nomothetic approaches. In other words, although it is accepted that some cognitive mediators are universal, I believe that many coping strategies and their underlying mechanisms can be rather dependent on the cultural context. This suggests that quantitative approaches are not sensitive enough to unravel the differences between very different populations. Following the example used above, we can see how a quantitative approach could obscure the richness of the difference between the strategies used by Europeans who face unemployment and professional instability due to the financial crisis, and indigenous populations facing the new challenges posed by globalization.

Subjective aspects of the perception of sociocultural changes

In the work of Jungsik Kim (Kim, 2008; Kim & Ng, 2008, 2010), two key concepts in the approach and conceptualization of socio-cultural changes appear: *scope* and *pace*. While scope refers to the extent to which a population is affected by a change, pace describes the speed with which this change occurs. The properties of these concepts have been analyzed both objectively—using econometric or sociological measures—and subjectively, by asking people about their perceptions of the scope and pace of a given change. Another subjective consideration, already cited above, is the ideological agreement of groups and individuals with a given sociocultural change. There has been very little empirical research conducted on the ideological implications of social change (usually referred to as psychological or psychosocial

impact), although there are some theoretical reviews. A good example of this is the work done by Lozada (2008) regarding the psychosocial impact of political polarization in Venezuela, based on the theory of social representations.

Differences in the understanding of sociocultural changes

There is extensive literature from the public opinion field on political knowledge, the acquisition of orientations, beliefs, and values, and their influence on political participation. Obviously, within any given society, people have different degrees of knowledge about the current political situation and how it affects their lives, and very different ways of explaining the relation between these two phenomena. An reductionist approach to these phenomena by measuring self-identification with political left or right (Democrats or Republicans, or liberals and conservatives, in the case of U.S. literature) is common in psychology, although it tends to mask the great diversity of thoughts and existing political identifications, as in fact there are many more dimensions in the so-called "political spectrum," ranging from the acceptance of multiculturalism to the agreement with state intervention in different aspects of life (see also Lomas, Chapter 22 in this volume).

The introduction into the World Values Survey (Inglehart, 2008) of the traditional–secular ("traditional" regarding religion-related values, respect for authority, or national pride) and survival–self-expression (understood within the transformation of industrial to postindustrial societies, i.e., how people changes from appreciating material satisfaction to the possibility of cultural and ideological expression needs) dimensions represents a step forward in the understanding of how different people living in different cultural and political systems understand sociocultural changes. The model developed by Inglehart enables a novel interpretation of the regional (including religious traditions and the influence of liberal and socialist revolutions) and generational (from materialism to post-materialism) differences in

the popular understanding of the political spectrum, going beyond the left–right continuum (cf. Lomas, Chapter 22 in this volume). This might help inferring how economic development, democratization, and increasing social tolerance has led to higher levels of happiness around the world (Inglehart, Foa, Peterson, & Welzel, 2008).

Sampling: from general population surveys to participatory research

To close the section on methodological considerations, and before addressing the conclusions of this paper, I will briefly review the main ways of obtaining valid samples to be able to draw conclusions about the impact of a sociocultural change on the psychosocial well-being of a given population. While we can imagine that the aforementioned *World Values Survey*, and the *European Social Survey* (which includes an SWB module in whose construction several representatives of the European positive psychology movement were involved; Huppert et al., 2008) or the multitude of emerging international projects for the measurement of well-being, would be the logical scenarios to address the hypotheses exposed in this chapter, it is possible that a quantitative approach based on only a few variables may mask the complex process by which people affected by multiple expressions of sociocultural change transform their behavior and social representations. It seems likely that a mixed approach (i.e., the incorporation of qualitative techniques combined with quantitative data) would capture the process better. Accordingly, the participation of researchers in spaces where people affected by these changes gather to share experiences and cope together could make for a richer contribution than the simple administration of psychometric instruments, which may mask many different forms of interaction between sociocultural and psychosocial factors.

Conclusion and proposal

Research on the influence of sociocultural changes in psychosocial well-being is an emerging field. While there are conceptual models that have received empirical support in previous historical processes such as the fall of the Soviet bloc or the South Korean crisis of the late 90s, there is still work to do regarding the psychosocial impact of more recent events, such as the 2008 financial crisis, the political changes in Latin America during the first decade of this millennium, the wave of terrorist attacks perpetrated worldwide by radical Islamists since 2001, or recent developments in Western politics including the rise of far-right political movements, Donald Trump's candidacy for the presidency of the United States of America, and the United Kingdom's referendum vote to leave the European Union ("Brexit"). In the case of the financial crisis, although recent objective data on variables such as the rate of suicides or infectious diseases seem to reveal a strong impact (Karanikolos et al., 2013; Stuckler, Basu, Suhrcke, Coutts, & McKee, 2011), we do not yet know the impact from the citizens' subjective perspective.

In this chapter I have described both nomothetic and ideographic approaches, as well as an ecological model based on cognitive and identity elements, with the aim of stimulating the study of the impact of sociocultural change on psychosocial well-being. I have also reviewed various methodological challenges in addressing these phenomena. In my opinion, the creation of research networks on the impact of crises and major sociocultural changes on psychosocial well-being under these paradigms should be high on the agenda of academic and applied psychology.

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