

# **Resilience in the Face of Catastrophe: Optimism, Personality, and Coping in the Kosovo Crisis**

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Optimism, personality, and coping styles may alter the effects of stressful events through appraisal and stress reduction. The 1999 Kosovo crisis offered an opportunity to test this proposition under real-life, traumatic stress conditions. Dispositional optimism, personality, and coping contributions were predicted based on geographical distance and degree of reported stress for 3 groups: Kosovar refugees, Albanian citizens helping the refugees in Albania, and Albanian immigrants living in the United States. Results showed Kosovars significantly higher on all stress measures, and on maladjustment. Reduced optimism and reduced control coping were related to higher levels of maladjustment. Pessimism and escape coping showed no relation to psychological adjustment. Resilience was related to a combination of higher optimism, extraversion, openness to experience, conscientiousness, and control coping, paired with lower neuroticism.

The frequently predicted and feared war in Kosovo finally erupted in the Balkan nations in 1999. During the spring and summer of 1999, Serbian forces backed by tanks, helicopter gunships and fighter aircraft “cleansed” whole areas of Kosovo of their majority ethnic Albanian population (Kearns, 1998). Homes were destroyed, civilians were attacked, and hundreds of thousands of refugees fled for their lives into the neighboring Balkan countries of Albania, Macedonia, and Montenegro.

During the Kosovo crisis, traumatic stress was rampant. Kosovars clearly suffered the most severe harm and loss, but other groups were exposed to stressors as well. Albanians in Albania were exposed to stress as they helped the refugees and often opened their homes to them. Immigrants to the United States from Kosovo and Albania also suffered losses of extended family and witnessed the traumatic harm vicariously through press and television reports. The Kosovo

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crisis, as cruel and tragic as it was, set the stage for the current study of stress, appraisal, and coping. Human resiliency was put to a terrible test.

In an attempt to discover how various groups dealt with the stressors of this crisis, the current study will briefly review important components of what Lazarus (1999) has called *background* conditions of individual personality, dispositions, and coping. Then, three groups who experienced qualitatively different configurations of stressors will be compared to determine how they dealt with their stressful conditions and what psychological adjustment outcomes resulted. Finally, high and low functioning participants will be compared in an effort to discover possible keys to resilient responses in the face of traumatic stress.

According to Lazarus and Folkman (1984), optimism, personality factors, and coping styles might alter the effects of stressful events through appraisal and stress reduction. Lazarus (1999) emphasized the person–environment relationship, in which individuals construct meanings concerning specific stressful events based on the combination of the objective stressors themselves and the individuals' subjective interpretations (Figure 1). Contributors to the appraisal component in this process are the personal characteristics of the individual including, but not limited to, personality variables, optimism, and coping styles. According to Lazarus, the relational meaning between the individual and the stressors, rather than the stressors alone, produces the outcomes of emotion and personal well-being or maladjustment. The current study tests the model by focusing on real-life situations that could shed light on how dispositional optimism, personality, and coping might alter perceived stress for individuals under traumatic stress conditions.

Prior to examining the methods and results generated by this study, a brief elaboration of key theoretical terms and research findings will set the stage. This review will follow components of the cognitive mediational theory of stress and coping (Lazarus, 1999).

### Traumatic Stress

Several authors have reported an increasing interest in traumatic stress (Green, 1996; Kessler, Price, & Wortman, 1985). One trend of this research has focused attention on samples of people who have been victimized by some specific life crisis, such as widowhood, rape, or job loss, and have assessed the impact of these life crises on general well-being and functioning (Kessler et al., 1985). Case studies of people who have survived wars or disasters have analyzed the consequences of these crises on distress (Dohrenwend & Dohrenwend, 1981). Additionally, more controlled research paradigms have been applied to disaster victims to describe their mental health adaptation (Green, 1996). Following this trend of examining the effects of traumatic stress, the current study attempts to

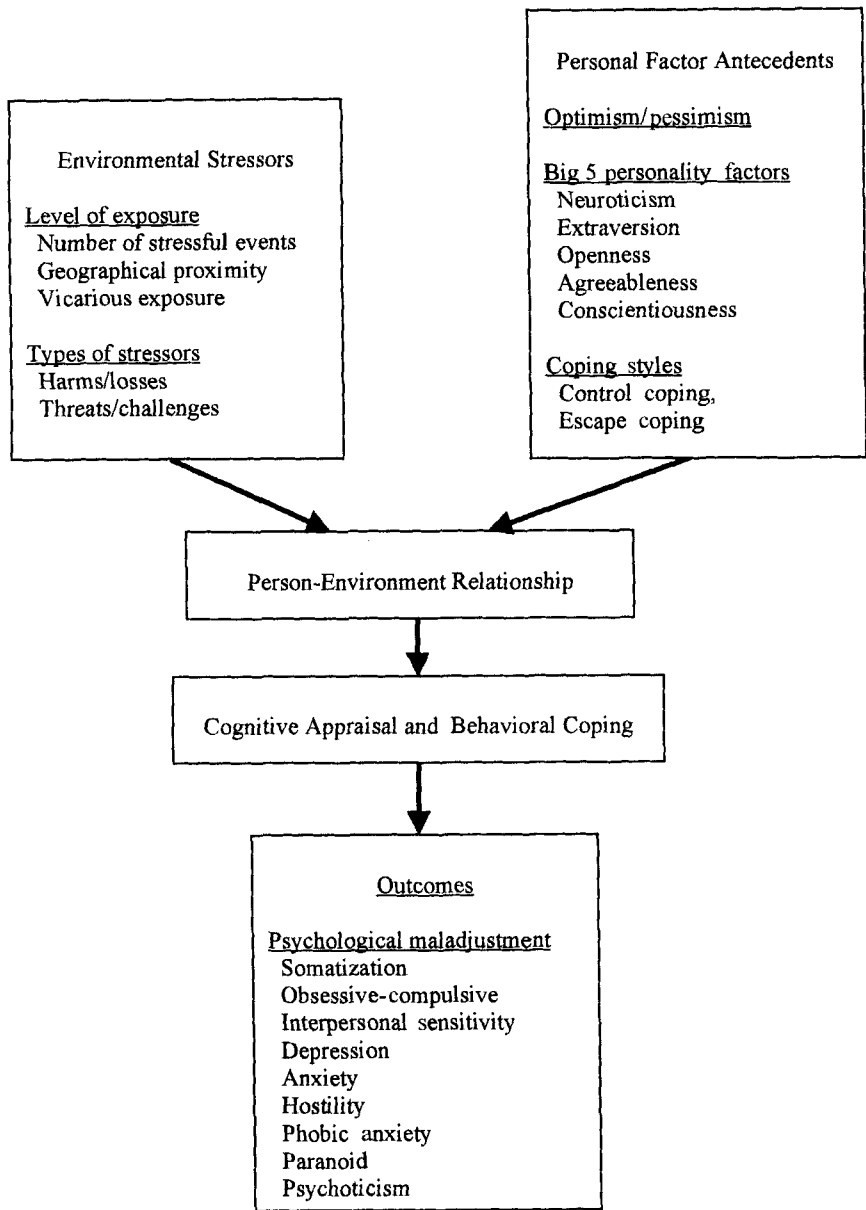


Figure 1. Adaptation of Lazarus' (1999) model of stress and coping applied to the Kosovo crisis.

understand life traumas and their impact on psychological functioning in Kosovar refugees, Albanian aid providers, and immigrants to the United States from the region affected by the Kosovo crisis.

Psychological stressors might be categorized on several dimensions: harm/loss, threat, or challenge. Harm/loss exists when individuals are actually injured or subjected to loss. Lazarus (1999) indicated that this stressful experience focuses on recovery from past events. Threat and challenge are more future-oriented dimensions of stress. The greater the intensity or scope of stressors, the more likely that crucial personal resources and beliefs about the self and the world will be called into question (Lazarus, 1999). Therefore, the perceived intensity of stressors will interact with the appraisal process.

The categorization of stress as harm/loss, threat, or challenge depends, to some extent, on the extent of exposure to stressful conditions. Severity of exposure "often involves life threat (defined subjectively or geographically), loss of loved ones or friends, property damage, or community destruction" (Green, 1996, p. 196). In general, the more severe the exposure, the higher the likelihood of negative symptoms. Those individuals (e.g., the Kosovar refugees) who directly experienced harm/loss could be expected to have a qualitatively different experience than others not so exposed. At the same time, individuals who witness trauma or who are called upon to help victims of harm/loss events are also exposed in a vicarious fashion to those events and suffer adverse psychological reactions (Berk, 1998; Clohessy & Ehlers, 1999; McCammon, Durham, Allison, & Williamson, 1988). In the Kosovo refugee crisis, both geographical and subjective factors combined to affect the level and type of stress experienced. Albanians in Albania who housed and helped Kosovar refugees can be considered to be both geographically and psychologically closer to traumatic harm/loss events than were Albanian immigrants to the United States, who were only exposed via "cooler" media, such as newspapers, television, letters, and phone calls. Although not rigorously controlled, the three groups in this study, to some degree, approximate the research strategy suggested by Lazarus (1999) of clustering people on the basis of shared sources of stress. Analysis of the three groups addresses the questions posed by Lazarus: "Coping by whom? At what time in response to what stressor? And in what context?" (p. 201). Fortuitously, culture, as a background condition, was controlled among the three groups since all participants shared the Albanian language and lived in or came from the affected region (Chemtob, 1996). Combining the components of stress and exposure to stress, the following hypothesis is proposed:

*Hypothesis 1.* The closer individuals are to stressful events, the higher the perceived stress and the more intense the psychological reaction. Specifically, based on both geographical distance and subjective distance, Kosovars will perceive higher intensity stress

than will Albanians living in Albania, and Albanians will perceive higher stress than will immigrants from the region now living in the United States.

### Cognitive Mediation of Stressful Events

According to the cognitive mediational approach, individuals confronted by an environmental event complete two types of cognitive appraisal processes (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). First, they evaluate whether or not the event is relevant to them as a potential source of danger or life disruption (primary appraisal). If the event is not relevant, it is not a stressor and thus does not compel psychological or physical resources to deal with it (Lazarus, 1999). However, if the event is seen as relevant to individual goals, the event is seen as stressful and must be evaluated further. During the secondary appraisal process, the individual evaluates the balance between the demands of the event and his or her resources to deal with it. At this point, personality, dispositions to believe that things will turn out well, and generalized styles for coping enter into the equation. The degree of distress experienced depends to some degree on the evaluation of the individual about his or her ability to cope with the environmental event. Personal factors of optimism, personality, and coping styles will be reviewed in relation to their potential to alter the impact of stressors.

### Optimism/Pessimism

*Dispositional optimism–pessimism* has been described as a generalized inclination to expect favorable or unfavorable life outcomes (Hjelle, Busch, & Warren, 1996). In general, optimists have a brighter perspective, whereas pessimists have a gloomier outlook. As Scheier and Carver (1985) pointed out, optimism and pessimism, as stable personality characteristics, have important implications for the manner in which people regulate their actions. Much of the research on optimism–pessimism has been clinical in nature, dealing with such topics as depression (Seligman, Abramson, Semmel, & Von Baeyer, 1979), anxiety (Seligman et al., 1979), and physical illness (Peterson, Seligman, & Vaillant, 1988). Optimism and pessimism are explicitly cognitive in nature, and each is related to the passivity with which individuals meet the demands of the world. In this study, we take the position that dispositional optimism will function as a buffer against the adverse effects of intense traumatic stress during the Kosovo crisis, and pessimism will exacerbate them.

### Personality Constructs

Although optimism and pessimism might be considered components of personality because of their dispositional nature, they were distinct in origin from

more classic personality traits. Current theorizing regarding distinct personality constructs has identified a set of five factors (The Big Five) that are major dimensions of personality; namely, Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness to Experience, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness (Compton, 1998). These traits have been considered important factors in determining how individuals adapt to both traumatic stress and to the ongoing stresses of their lives (Green, 1996; Watson & Hubbard, 1996). In an attempt to explore some of the child-population issues during the Bosnian war, Berk (1998) considered ability to manage anxiety (neuroticism) and proneness to depression as factors that contributed to the decrease or increase of the traumatic impact of war to children already harmed. In a natural disaster, McFarlane (1988) found that neuroticism predicted longevity of post-traumatic psychological disorder, while extraversion did not. In the case of the Kosovo crisis, personality traits are seen as either contributing to or detracting from the ability of affected individuals to resist psychological disturbance or to attain resilience.

As Lazarus (1999) suggested, differences in exposure to stressors should combine with differences in optimism and pessimism to produce different reactions in each experimental group. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

*Hypothesis 2.* Personal dispositions of optimism and the Big 5 personality traits combined with differential exposure to stressors will relate differently to psychological adjustment in the Kosovar, Albanian, and United States Immigrant groups.

### Coping Styles

Coping mechanisms are attempts by individuals to overcome conditions that tax or exceed their adaptive resources (Monat & Lazarus, 1977). These attempts might be more or less successful; and individuals might use a variety of mechanisms in their search to restore a less stressful condition. Over time, individuals develop a preferred style of coping that they are likely to employ across situations (Lazarus, 1999). Although there are many ways to describe coping styles, one broad conceptualization identifies two general types: control and escape (Latack, 1986). *Control coping* can be defined as individuals' stress-reduction efforts that are problem-focused, "proactive, take-charge in tone" (Latack, 1986, p. 378); while *escape coping* is emotion focused, aimed at reducing the negative feelings associated with the stressful condition. Both actions and cognitive reappraisals are included in these definitions. Individuals can use one or both of these styles in the face of stressful conditions. Although control and escape coping are theoretically independent, the general pattern has been for control coping to be linked with lower levels of distress, while escape coping is linked to higher levels of distress (Leiter, 1991; Savicki, 1999).

As Lazarus (1999) suggested, differences in exposure to stressors should combine with differences in coping to produce different reactions in each experimental group.

*Hypothesis 3.* The personal background factor of coping style combined with differential exposure to stressors will relate differently to psychological adjustment in the Kosovar, Albanian, and United States immigrant groups.

### Resilience in the Face of Stress

The cognitive mediational approach to understanding stress posits that there will be substantial individual differences in psychological adjustment in the face of common stressors. Indeed, even in the face of traumatic stress, individuals do not uniformly decompensate: "diagnosable pathology is the exception rather than the rule" (Green 1996, p. 187). One way to frame these differing responses is to examine individuals whose psychological outcomes indicate more resilience in the face of stress. In general, *resilience* has been defined as "efforts to restore or maintain internal or external equilibrium under significant threat by means of human activities including thought and action" (Smith & Carlson, 1997, p. 236). This concept is also viewed as "recovery in the face of trauma such as abuse or injury" (p. 236). Consistent with previous studies, the current study examines the relationship of resilience to individual personality and coping variables.

During the last decade of wars in the Balkans, research has looked at resilience focusing on specific populations (e.g., children, humanitarian workers; Berk, 1998). *Resilience*, as a concept, was treated as "factors which promote well-being and stout-heartedness in individuals who are undergoing unusually stressful conditions" (Berk, 1998, p. 639). King and colleagues (King, King, Foy, Keane, & Fairbank, 1999) looked at postwar resilience-recovery variables, such as hardiness and social support, in order to explain posttraumatic stress disorder in a sample of Vietnam veterans. Other studies have looked at personal resilience as an adaptation factor to stressful life events; for example, how women with more resilient personalities appraised their abortions as less stressful and had higher self-efficacy for coping (Major, Richards, Cooper, Cozzarelli, & Zubek, 1998).

Lazarus' (1999) model suggests that the personal resources of optimism, personality, and coping will alter the impact of stressors, and that some individuals will be more successful than others at staving off negative outcomes based on individual differences in those personal resources.

*Hypothesis 4.* Consistent with the definition of resilience as higher than predicted psychological adjustment in the face of stressors, resilience will be related to higher optimism and lower pessimism,

higher extraversion and lower neuroticism, and higher control coping and lower escape coping.

## Method

### *Participants*

Participants were 112 (57 male, 55 female) individuals from three different groups: 38 Kosovar refugees who had fled Kosovo and were staying in Albania during the crisis, 41 Albanians living in Albania who were aiding refugees, and 33 Albanian immigrants who had come to the United States prior to the refugee crisis in Spring 1999. The average age was 34 years (range = 17 to 65). On average, they had 18 years of formal education (range = 6 to 25).

### *Materials*

*Psychological adjustment.* Psychological adjustment was measured using the Brief Symptom Inventory (BSI; Derogatis & Melisaratos, 1983). This 53-item measure has nine symptom cluster scales and a summary global severity index (GSI). The GSI, a combination of number of symptoms checked and their perceived severity, can be seen as an indicator of overall adjustment. The symptom cluster scales are as follows: (a) Somatization: distress arising from perceptions of bodily dysfunction; (b) Obsessive–Compulsive: thoughts, impulses, and actions that are experienced as unrelenting; (c) Interpersonal Sensitivity: feelings of inadequacy and inferiority compared to others; (d) Depression: dysphoria and lack of motivation and energy; (e) Anxiety: nervousness, panic attacks, apprehension, and dread; (f) Hostility: thoughts, feelings, or actions of anger; (g) Phobic Anxiety: irrational fear of specific people, places, or situations; (h) Paranoid: suspiciousness, grandiosity, and fear of loss of autonomy; and (i) Psychoticism: withdrawn, isolated, and alienated. Derogatis and Melisaratos reported alphas for the nine cluster scales ranging from .71 to .85.

*Stressful events.* A 29-item, locally constructed measure asked for three indicators of stress: number of stressful events (e.g., death of spouse, separation from child, loss of possessions), a 5-point mode of event occurrence scale (anticipated–gradual, anticipated–sudden, unanticipated, violent) ranging from 0 to 4, and a 6-point perceived severity of events scale ranging from 0 to 5 (*low to extreme*; see Table 1 for specific items).

*Optimism–pessimism.* Dispositional optimism was measured using the 12-item Life Orientation Test (LOT; Scheier & Carver, 1985). The factor-analyzed LOT has two subscales: Optimism factor (4 items) and Pessimism factor (4 items). The optimism scale includes items such as “I always look on the bright side of things.” The Pessimism scale includes items such as “If something can go wrong for me, it will.” Rather than combine these scales into a longer optimism



Table 1

*Stressful Events Reported by Kosovars, Albanians, and United States Immigrants*

Stressful event	Kosovar	Alba- nians	Immi- grants	$\chi^2$	<i>p</i>
Death of spouse	0	0	1	2.36	<i>ns</i>
Death of child	0	0	0	0.00	<i>ns</i>
Death of other relative	22	9	12	6.94	.03
Death of close friend	14	1	5	12.63	.002
Death of acquaintance	29	15	13	12.25	.002
Serious injury/illness to self	5	2	1	2.48	<i>ns</i>
Serious injury/illness to spouse	5	1	3	2.28	<i>ns</i>
Serious injury/illness of a child	3	0	2	2.62	<i>ns</i>
Serious injury/illness of other relative	18	1	2	27.72	.001
Serious injury/illness of a close friend	14	1	4	14.63	.001
Serious injury/illness of an acquaintance	21	3	6	21.03	.001
Separation from spouse	2	2	2	0.00	<i>ns</i>
Separation from child	3	3	0	2.67	<i>ns</i>
Separation from other relative	24	1	7	31.10	.001
Separation from friend	26	5	10	23.96	.001
Separation from an acquaintance	23	6	8	16.82	.001
Physical assault on self	9	0	1	15.13	.01
Physical assault on family member	10	0	1	14.81	.001
Physical assault on relative	15	0	1	27.04	.001
Physical assault on friend	17	0	3	24.42	.001
Sexual assault on self	2	0	1	2.43	<i>ns</i>
Sexual assault on family member	1	0	0	1.61	<i>ns</i>
Sexual assault on relative	7	0	0	12.09	.01
Sexual assault on friend	3	0	0	4.88	<i>ns</i>
Loss of house/apartment	24	3	1	37.82	.001
Loss of possessions	24	6	3	26.11	.001
Loss of job/livelihood	22	2	2	34.91	.001
Loss of homeland	13	0	6	15.18	.001
Loss of security	21	4	5	21.85	.001

scale, as suggested by Scheier and Carver, the two separate subscales were retained, consistent with findings that these subscales are not necessarily mirror images of each other, but may each account for differing results (Peterson, 2000). Internal consistency for the current sample was .64 for optimism. For pessimism, an alpha of .60 was reached in the current sample by dropping one item from this scale. All analyses were conducted with this shortened scale.

*Coping.* This 28-item, cluster-analyzed scale was developed to measure individual coping strategies (Latack, 1986). The first cluster (Control Coping) consists of both actions and cognitive reappraisals that are proactive and take-charge in tone. They address the actual source of stress. The second cluster (Escape Coping) consists of both actions and cognitive reappraisals that suggest an escapist, avoidance mode. They are oriented to decrease the negative feelings of stress. In the current sample, the alpha for control coping was .88, while that for Escape Coping was .75.

*Big 5 personality dimensions.* Personality was measured using a short version of the Big 5 personality factor approach (Fossum, Weyant, Etter, & Feldman Barrett, 1998). For this 35-item scale, each subscale had 7 items. The scales and key defining traits for each include: (a) Neuroticism: anxious, hostile, and self conscious; (b) Extraversion: outgoing, sociable, upbeat, and assertive; (c) Openness to Experience: curious, flexible, and unconventional attitudes; (d) Agreeableness: sympathetic, trusting, cooperative, and straightforward; and (e) Conscientiousness: diligent, disciplined, well-organized, and dependable. Alphas for the subscales in this sample are as follows: Neuroticism = .58; Extraversion = .71; Openness to Experience = .67; Agreeableness = .65; and Conscientiousness = .77.

### *Procedure*

A questionnaire with the scales mentioned in the previous section and several demographic items was subjected to a back-translation process to produce a final version in the Albanian language. In order to control for potential translation problems, all participants answered the Albanian language version.

All participants were voluntary. A local contact person in the appropriate country solicited their participation. It was a convenience sample. Data were collected over a 3-month period prior to the conclusion of the NATO bombing campaign that allowed the refugees to return to Kosovo.

## Results

### *Stressful Events*

Table 1 indicates that in 19 of the 29 stressful events measured, Kosovo refugees experienced a significantly higher number of such events than did Albanians

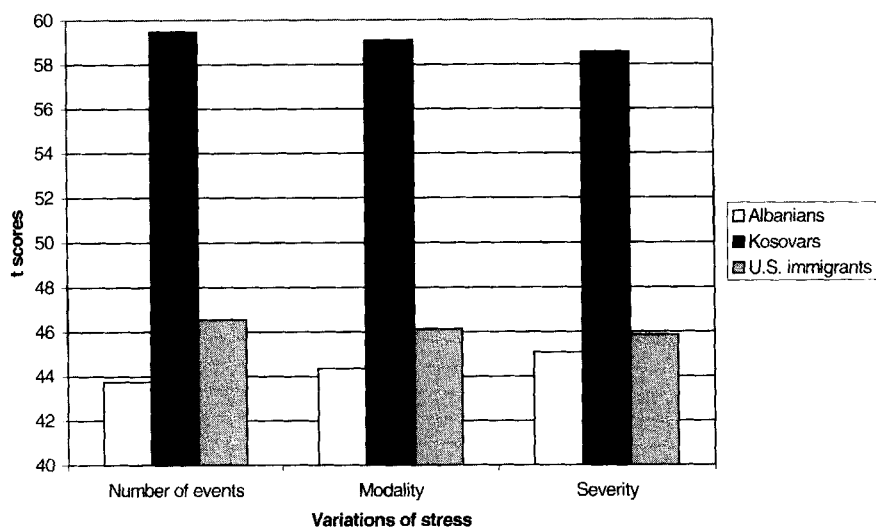


Figure 2. Number of events, modality of events, and perceived severity of events for three groups.

or United States immigrants. It is tragic to note that of the Kosovar sample, 58% had a relative die; 76% knew of an acquaintance who died; 55% knew of an acquaintance who was seriously injured or ill; over 60% listed separations from relatives, friends, and acquaintances; over 60% reported losses of homes, possessions, and jobs; and, possibly most telling, 55% noted a loss of security in their lives.

Figure 2 uses standardized  $t$  scores ( $M = 50$ ,  $SD = 10$ ) to illustrate the comparative standing of the three groups on number of stressful events, mode of occurrence, and perceived severity. For all three measures, Kosovar refugees were significantly higher than either Albanians or immigrants: number of events,  $F(2, 107) = 51.61$ ,  $p < .001$ ; modality,  $F(2, 106) = 43.67$ ,  $p < .001$ ; and severity,  $F(2, 106) = 34.77$ ,  $p < .001$ . Albanians and immigrants were not different from each other.

Interestingly, even though Albanians and immigrants were not exposed to the number or severity of stressors, some of them also listed death of relative, death of acquaintance, and separation from friends. Geographical distance from the events in Kosovo did not insulate the Albanian and immigrant groups entirely. In terms of distance from the stressors, it might be that psychological distance is more important than geographical distance, since the Albanian and immigrant groups were not different from one another on the stress measures, even though there were living on different continents.

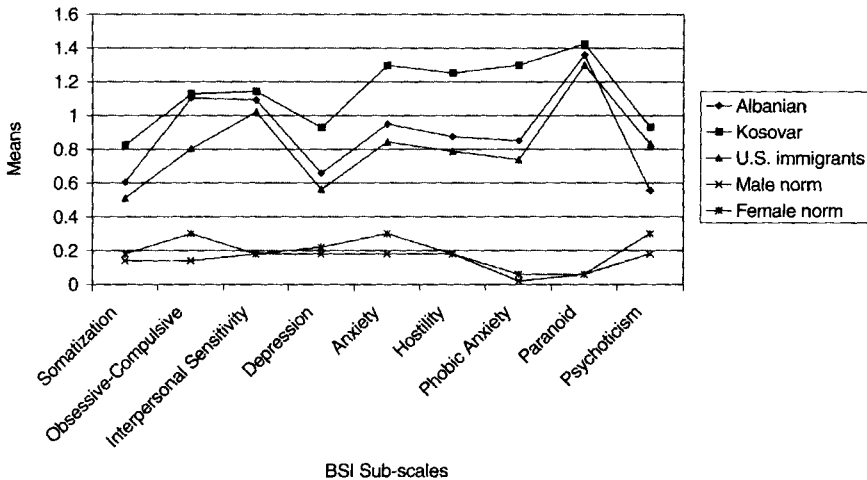


Figure 3. Comparison of Kosovar, Albanian, and United States immigrants on subscales of the Brief Symptom Inventory (BSI; Derogatis & Melisaratos, 1983), with further comparison to male and female nonpatient norms for the general United States population from the Symptom Checklist-90-R (Derogatis, 1994).

### *Psychological Adjustment*

A MANOVA in which the three groups were compared on all nine symptom cluster scales of the BSI (Derogatis & Melisaratos, 1983) showed that the groups were significantly different,  $F(18, 196) = 2.77, p < .001$ . Scales showing significant univariate  $F$ s included depression,  $F(2, 107) = 3.48, p < .05$ ; anxiety,  $F(2, 107) = 4.17, p < .05$ ; hostility,  $F(2, 107) = 4.06, p < .05$ ; phobic anxiety,  $F(2, 107) = 6.13, p < .01$ ; and psychoticism,  $F(2, 107) = 4.46, p < .05$ . Post hoc analyses show that Kosovars were higher than both other groups on anxiety, hostility, and phobic anxiety. Kosovars were higher than immigrants, but not than Albanians, on depression. Albanians were lower than both other groups on psychoticism. In general, higher exposure to stress was related to higher levels of psychological maladjustment (see Figure 3 for a further comparison of the three groups with norms for United States nonclinical respondents). One scale on which all groups agreed was a heightened paranoid response; indeed, it was the highest score for all three groups. Given the circumstances regarding ethnic cleansing, such a response seems warranted and was not diminished by geographical distance. Interestingly, Kosovars and immigrants both scored higher than Albanians on psychoticism, which might be interpreted as isolation and alienation. It might be that these groups' sharing of the displacement inherent in

the refugee/immigrant experience differentiated them from the Albanians who continued to live in their own country in their own homes.

In general, Hypothesis 1 received moderate support. The closer the participants were to stressful events, the higher was their perceived stress and the more intense was their psychological reaction.

### *Optimism–Pessimism*

The three groups were not significantly different on optimism or pessimism. However, the linkages between these variables and overall adjustment did differ between the groups. A multiple regression was done for each group to see whether optimism–pessimism contributed to overall psychological maladjustment beyond stress alone. The number of stressful events (Events) was used as the indicator of stress level. It was judged to be less prone to subjectivity, and it correlated highly with the other stress measures (.93 with modality, and .87 with perceived severity). The GSI was used as the indicator of overall psychological maladjustment. The GSI combined psychological symptoms checked with their perceived distress from all symptom cluster scales of the BSI; higher scores indicated more severe maladjustment. The Events factor was entered first into the model, followed by the personality variables.

As a general precursor to the following analyses, it is interesting to note that the number of stressful events alone was not significantly related to overall psychological adjustment for any of the groups. It is only when Events was combined with Optimism–Pessimism (in this section) and with the Big 5 and Coping (in later sections) that significant relations with psychological adjustment emerged. As other researchers have noted, only a modest proportion of people exposed to traumatic stress develop severe symptoms (McFarlane, 1995). Such a finding replicated in the current study supports the notion that Optimism, the Big 5, and Coping might have altered the effect of stressors on psychological adjustment of participants, as predicted by Lazarus' (1999) model. For the sake of clarity in presenting results, the independent variables of Optimism–Pessimism, the Big 5, and Coping will be addressed separately in the following sections, even though Table 2 shows significant relationships between these variable clusters. In the final resiliency analysis, all variables will be considered together.

For Kosovars, Table 3 indicates a significant relationship of stress and optimism/pessimism with psychological adjustment ( $R^2 = .37$ ),  $F(3, 33) = 6.43$ ,  $p < .01$ . A high number of stressful events, combined with lower optimism, were related to greater maladjustment. This might be related to Carver's (1998) theory that individuals, in the face of overwhelming stressors, might either temporarily or permanently give up. That is, there might be a relatively sudden switch of perception from an optimistic view to one that nothing can be done to ameliorate stress in the present situation. For Albanians, Table 3 indicates a significant

Table 2

*Correlation Matrix of Antecedent Personal Variables*

	Optimism	Pessimism	Control cope	Escape cope	Neurotic	Extroverted	Openness	Agree- ableness
Pessimism	-.077	—						
Control cope	.459***	-.094	—					
Escape cope	.046	.076	.111	—				
Neurotic	-.180	.089	-.147	.335***	—			
Extroverted	.459***	-.057	.513***	.098	-.224*	—		
Openness	.391***	-.022	.572***	.127	-.080	.589***	—	
Agreeableness	.459***	.074	.528***	.192*	.051	.514***	.540***	—
Conscientiousness	.294**	.022	.518***	.069	-.201*	.498***	.541***	.554***

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

Table 3

*Multiple Regression of Stress and Optimism and Pessimism With Psychological Adjustment*

Stress and optimism–pessimism	Kosovars $\beta$	Albanians $\beta$	United States immigrants $\beta$
Stressful events	.424*	.211	.213
Optimism	-.541***	-.444**	-.055
Pessimism	.023	-.131	.208
Overall $R^2$	.369**	.265**	.121

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

relationship of stress and optimism–pessimism with psychological adjustment ( $R^2 = .27$ ),  $F(3, 36) = 6.43$ ,  $p < .01$ . Only low optimism related to greater psychological maladjustment for Albanians. That is, lower optimism, independent of stressful events, was significantly related to the number of symptoms reported. For this group, it seems, the appraisal of one's situation overshadowed the stress itself. For the immigrant group, optimism–pessimism and measured stressful events showed no relationship to psychological adjustment.

The three groups showed quite different reactions when stress and optimism were considered together. Kosovars, in the face of significantly higher stressful events, registered the impact of those events on psychological adjustment in relation to specific dispositions. It is interesting to note that lower optimism, but not higher pessimism, seems to foster this relationship. Although optimism and pessimism seem theoretical opposites, they were statistically independent of one another in the current sample ( $r = -.08$ ). In previous studies, they have acted in concert, as well as alone (Rioli & Savicki, 2002). Albanians and immigrants showed differing responses, possibly related to geographical distance. While the most distant United States immigrants showed no relationship of optimism and stress to adjustment, the middle distant Albanians showed only the appraisal of lower optimism with maladjustment.

In general, there was some support for Hypothesis 2 that optimism–pessimism altered the effects of stressors. The significant factors changed with the different groups, possibly as related to the proximity to and intensity of stress.

*The Big 5 Personality Factors*

The three groups were not significantly different on the Big 5 personality scales. However, the linkages between personality and overall adjustment did

Table 4

*Multiple Regression of Stress and Personality Variables With Psychological Adjustment*

Stress and personality	Kosovars $\beta$	Albanians $\beta$	Immigrants $\beta$
Stressful events	.362*	.317*	.143
Neuroticism	.134	.325*	.416
Extraversion	-.122	-.422**	-.047
Openness	-.072	-.151	.103
Agreeableness	-.141	.184	-.146
Conscientiousness	-.226	-.002	-.179
Overall $R^2$	.327*	.414**	.295

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

differ between the groups. A multiple regression was done for each group to see which personality variables contributed to overall psychological adjustment above and beyond stress itself.

For Kosovars, Table 3 indicates a significant relationship of stress and personality with psychological adjustment ( $R^2 = .33$ ),  $F(6, 31) = 2.51$ ,  $p < .05$ . Stressful events seem to overshadow specific personality factors, although the addition of these factors increases the relationship of stress to psychological adjustment. In other words, although personality factors increase the explanatory power of stress alone, no specific factor or pattern of factors emerges beyond the impact of stressful events. For Albanians, Table 4 indicates a significant relationship of stress and personality with psychological adjustment ( $R^2 = .41$ ),  $F(6, 32) = 3.76$ ,  $p < .01$ . The combination of higher neuroticism and lower extraversion in the presence of stressful events was related to greater maladjustment. This combination of higher anxiety and lower ability to utilize social support is consistent with previous research (Quirk & McCormick, 1998). For the immigrant group, personality and measured stressful events showed no relationship to psychological adjustment. In the extreme groups, with relation to geographical proximity to stressful events (Kosovars being closest and immigrants being furthest away), the Big 5 factors were not clearly related to psychological adjustment. In the former case, stressful events probably overwhelmed the variance accounted for by the Big 5; while in the latter case, even though individuals in this group identified stressors, as a whole, the group might have been too isolated from the events on the ground for them to have made an impact. Alternatively, other stressors and other personal factors might have been more relevant for the immigrant group.



Table 5

*Multiple Regression of Stress and Coping With Psychological Adjustment*

Stress and coping	Kosovars $\beta$	Albanians $\beta$	Immigrants $\beta$
Stressful events	.368*	.253	.079
Control coping	-.362*	-.221	-.383*
Escape coping	.023	-.146	.243
Overall $R^2$	.197†	.127	.252*

† $p < .06$ . \*  $p < .05$ .*Coping Styles*

The three groups were not significantly different on coping. However, the linkages between these variables and overall adjustment did differ between the groups. A multiple regression was done for each group to see whether coping contributed to overall psychological adjustment above and beyond stress alone.

For Kosovars, Table 5 indicates a marginally significant relationship of stress and coping with psychological adjustment ( $R^2 = .20$ ),  $F(3, 34) = 2.78$ ,  $p < .06$ . A high number of stressful events combined with lower control coping were related to greater maladjustment. Again, this result might be related to Carver's (1998) theory of reduced efforts to change stressors in the face of an overwhelming situation. For Albanians, coping and measured stressful events showed no relationship to psychological adjustment. For the immigrant group, Table 5 indicates a significant relationship of stress and coping with psychological adjustment ( $R^2 = .25$ ),  $F(3, 28) = 3.14$ ,  $p < .05$ . Lower control coping, independent of stressful events, was related to psychological maladjustment for immigrants. This most geographically distant group might show lowered control coping while the geographically closer Albanians did not because the Albanians remained in their own homeland, in the social and cultural web of people and institutions in which it is easier to determine who to see and what to do under stressful conditions. The immigrants, less connected to those supports, might find it more difficult to take a direct approach, thus they might have used this mode of coping less. It is interesting to note that in none of the groups did escape coping emerge as significant. Given the distress reported, it might have been expected that individuals would attempt to reduce their unpleasant feelings, even if they could not influence the source of stress. In this traumatic situation, it seems that reduced attempts to deal directly with stressors have a more potent connection with psychological maladjustment than do attempts to reduce the negative impact of stress. It might be that

everyone used escape coping, but only those who reduced control coping showed maladjustment.

In general, there was some support for Hypothesis 3 that coping altered the effects of stressors through different approaches to dealing with stress. Lowered control coping seemed most related to psychological maladjustment, while escape coping showed no relationship to adjustment in the three groups.

### *Resilience and Optimism, the Big 5, and Coping*

In the preceding sections, the focus has been on how optimism, the Big 5, and coping relate to psychological maladjustment under the qualitatively different conditions experienced by Kosovars, Albanians, and United States immigrants. A different way of looking at psychological functioning is to consider who best withstands the deleterious effects of environmental stressors. In an attempt to discover which optimism, personality, and coping variables contributed most to resilience or resistance to psychological distress, the entire sample ( $N = 112$ ) was divided into high resilient and low resilient groups on the basis of their deviation from the predicted regression line between overall psychological adjustment (GSI) and reported stressful events (Events). That is, if a participant showed a lower GSI score than predicted in relation to the number of stressful events they reported, they fell into the high resilient category ( $N = 64$ ). Conversely, if their GSI score was higher than predicted for the number of reported stressful events, they fell into the low resilient category ( $N = 45$ ). The deviation from the regression predicted score had the advantage of incorporating both stress levels and psychological adjustment at the same time. Kosovars, Albanians, and immigrants were not significantly different on this resilience measure.

A MANOVA indicated a significant difference between resilient and non-resilient groups based on optimism, personality, and coping variables,  $F(9, 98) = 2.54, p < .05$ . In Table 6, univariate  $F$ s indicate that resilience in the face of stress was related to a combination of higher optimism, extraversion, openness to experience, conscientiousness, and control coping, paired with lower neuroticism. Thus, the personal characteristics of individuals who tolerated stressors with less psychological distress (the resilient group) combined a more positive outlook, a tendency to engage others, a receptiveness to new experiences, a tendency to be more disciplined and organized, and a style of coping that focused on changing sources of stress. These individuals were also less anxious and emotionally reactive. Such findings are consistent with previous research showing resiliency linked to feelings of self-efficacy, access to social support, opportunities to exert control, and hardiness (Major et al., 1998; Smith & Carlson, 1997).

Thus, some support for Hypothesis 4 emerged. That is, specific patterns of personal resources (optimism, personality, and coping) were related to resilience (higher psychological adjustment) in the face of stressors.

Table 6

*Comparisons of Resilient and Nonresilient Groups on Optimism, Personality, and Coping*

Personal variable	Group				Univari- ate <i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
	Resilient		Nonresilient			
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Optimism	15.06	3.04	13.80	3.03	12.36	.001
Pessimism	7.23	2.69	7.80	3.01	0.40	<i>ns</i>
Neuroticism	16.57	4.79	18.57	4.39	5.95	.05
Extraversion	27.91	4.03	25.23	5.06	9.14	.01
Openness	27.32	3.61	24.55	6.22	9.02	.01
Agreeableness	26.57	4.32	24.86	5.77	3.35	<i>ns</i>
Conscientiousness	29.46	4.03	27.32	5.33	6.27	.05
Control coping	58.64	10.39	50.93	11.40	13.21	.000
Escape coping	29.40	9.54	30.38	6.45	0.50	<i>ns</i>

### Discussion

This study showed that different patterns of personal factors combined with unique situational stressors were related to psychological distress. Although the present study did not assess the appraisal process directly, these differing patterns show that the person–environment relationship seems to impact the appraisal process proposed by cognitive mediation theory (Lazarus, 1999; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Certainly, individual differences in optimism, the Big 5 personality factors, and coping altered the relationship of psychological adjustment to more objective environmental events.

Beyond the differences between the groups, some generalizations can be drawn about resilience in the face of stress, and even traumatic stress. Resilient individuals showed characteristics that seemed to aid them during and after exposure to stressors. Their psychological functioning was higher than that of individuals not showing those characteristics. The difficulty now is to cast these characteristics in a form that can be taught, encouraged, and supported, rather than in the form of fixed, unchangeable traits. Such is the challenge of providing psychological aid to victims of traumatic stress.

The results seem to support interventions with individuals suffering from traumatic stress that increase their sense of control over their life, encourage social interaction, focus on active efforts to reduce stress, organize and structure

daily living, and soothe anxieties, worries, and concerns. Given the amount of disorganization and chaos accompanying most traumatic stress situations, such interventions might be quite difficult, yet they seem to support the kinds of behaviors captured by the personality variables examined in this study.

A limitation in the manner in which the current study measured stress must be addressed while considering how to interpret the results of this research. Although the narrow focus on traumatic stressful events of the stressful events scale captured important stressors for Kosovar refugees; that very specificity might have restricted the range necessary for accurate measurement in the other groups. Albanians and immigrants might have suffered different types of stress that were not adequately measured by the approach used in this study. Future research might devise stressful-events questions that better assess all of the various situations to which the groups were exposed.

Consistent with previous research (Green, 1996), there seemed to be qualitatively different reactions based on the severity of stress. Only Kosovars consistently showed stressful events as significantly related to psychological outcomes when combined with personal variables. For the other groups, such a relationship was infrequent. This lack of relationship might have been a function of limitations in the stressful-events measure, as mentioned, or it might be that recovery from traumatic levels of harm/loss draws on different personal resources than does exposure to more moderate levels of loss or experience of threat. Additionally, Kosovars' goals were more likely aimed at physical survival than were those of the Albanians or the immigrants. As Lazarus (1999) indicated, goals and goal hierarchies are important background variables that influence reactions to stress. Unfortunately, the goals of Albanians and the immigrants were not assessed, therefore, we can only conjecture about the relational meanings that these groups constructed when exposed to stressors.

Although Kosovars indicated 3 to 5 times as many stressful events as did the Albanians or immigrants, there was a substantial number of individuals in the latter groups who indicated that they knew people who had died or had been injured (33 deaths or injuries reported for Albanians, 49 deaths or injuries reported for immigrants). Even geographical distance could not shield these groups entirely. A contributing factor to high levels of subjectively experienced stress by Albanians and immigrants might be related to the strong cultural identity among the three groups considered in the study. A common geographical origin overlapped with the perspective that "family and friends are the essentials of a clan society from which Albania is only now emerging" (Richmond, 1995, pp. 214-215). Even distant events were likely felt intensely. Their level of psychological adjustment was elevated above nonclinical norms for the BSI (Derogatis & Melisaratos, 1983), indicating their reactivity to measured and unmeasured stressors acting in concert with personal variables. Further, it would have been interesting to measure other adjustment outcomes (e.g., physical illness and disruptions in work

and family living) since disruptions on one level may or may not have appeared on other levels.

Although the Kosovo refugee crisis was, in some ways, a unique event, it resembles events happening not only in the Balkan region but also in other areas of the world where ethnic problems have been prevalent. By studying optimism, personality, and coping styles under real traumatic stress conditions, light can be shed on other types of crises that force us to confront our own vulnerability (e.g., natural disasters, rapes, life-threatening illnesses, physical assaults, debilitating accidents, deaths of loved ones). This study started with the assumption that all people do not react the same way to the same event. Thus, our study suggests that an important avenue for interventions to help trauma victims who are not adjusting well after the trauma is concluded. Some of the findings from this study can be helpful for aid workers and other help organizations during interventions to help victims in the cases of crisis and natural disasters. Another limitation of this study, as with all cross-sectional studies, is that correlation does not mean causation. The cognitive mediation theory of stress posits a direction from personal and environmental variables through appraisal to psychological outcomes (Lazarus, 1999; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The theory also states that this process is repeated as individuals discover the effectiveness of or need for alteration in their appraisal and coping processes. Clearly, the current study shows only a snapshot in time of this ongoing process. For example, the theory states that a disposition to higher optimism will alter the individual's relationship with stressors, thus making that person's appraisal different from the appraisal of someone with lower optimism. Therefore, two individuals facing the same stressors would experience differing psychological outcomes. However, it might be equally appropriate to say that the experience of lower psychological adjustment has led individuals to abandon optimism while leading individuals with higher adjustment to retain it. We fall back on the theory and previous research to propose the direction of causality, though further research is necessary in traumatic situations to confirm this presumption.

Speculating about prevention, Seligman (1991) suggested that optimism is learned early in life. It might be possible to inoculate groups to the ravages of further trauma by instilling optimism in children. Then, they might develop immunity from feelings of helplessness. For the general population of children and adults, one way of learning to exploit the strengths of self is learning to think more optimistically in the face of obstacles. According to Seligman, learned optimism helps us to achieve more and to maintain better health. This learned optimism would help to develop resilience for Kosovo refugees who lost their optimism during the refugee crisis. Optimism helps not only individuals but also population groups such as Kosovo refugees to overcome their problems through appraisal and direct coping. Resilience seems to capture the human need to live, to search, and to find closure and healing—to find health again, a never-ending journey.

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