

**Understanding the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Career Development:
Insights from Cultural Psychology**

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has become a significant global crisis that requires individuals, organizations and nations to take necessary steps to cope. To develop a comprehensive and systematic understanding of the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on individuals' career development and possible coping strategies, we adopt a cultural psychological perspective to analyze: (1) how internalized cultural orientations (e.g., values, thinking styles, regulatory focus) may shape individual responses and coping strategies to COVID-19 pandemic; (2) how national culture influences the collective actions and norms during COVID-19 pandemic; (3) how to integrate insights from cultural psychology to enrich research on career management strategies in response to a fast changing environment. While this paper primarily focuses on the role of national culture (i.e., the shared meanings and practices in a nation), these discussions can largely be applied to other cultural settings. Practical implications are also discussed.

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Theories and research on individual coping (e.g., Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), self-regulation (e.g., Rothbaum, Weisz, & Snyder, 1982) and career transitions (e.g., Fouad & Bynner, 2008) are of great relevance to understand individual responses and reactions to emerging stressors associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. As humans are a cultural species, an investigation of the career implications of the COVID-19 also benefits from a cultural perspective. Theories and research from cultural psychology help to explain not only differences observed across cultures (e.g., Fouad, Hansen, & Arias-Galicia, 1986; Fouad, 2002; Hofstede, 1980; House et al., 2004) but also commonalities shared universally (e.g., Bond & Smith, 1996; Gelfand et al., 2011; Heine & Norenzayan, 2006; Kitayama, 2002; Oyserman & Lee, 2008).

In this paper, we adopt a cultural psychological perspective to understand individuals' coping, self-regulation, and career management processes in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. We propose that, because members of a cultural group are socialized to endorse the shared cultural meanings (e.g., values, thinking styles), these cultural orientations will provide important guidance to their personal evaluations of stressors and choices of coping strategies. In addition, culture-directed collective actions and norms in response to the COVID-19 pandemic will serve as a top-down influence on individual members' behaviors. We then discuss how to integrate these insights from cultural psychology to enrich career management research and offer important future directions.

Culture as Internalized Orientations

A nation's culture refers to the shared psychological meanings and collective practices that distinguish one nation from another (Hofstede, 1980). The shared cultural meanings have been operationalized in various ways, such as cultural values (Hofstede, 1980; Schwartz & Bilsky,

1987; Triandis, 1995), self-construals (Markus & Kitayama, 1991), thinking styles (Ji, Nisbett, & Su, 2001; Nisbett, Peng, Choi, & Norenzayan, 2001; Spencer-Rodgers, Williams, & Peng, 2010), regulatory focus (Higgins, Pierro, & Kruglanski, 2008; Kurman & Hui, 2011), and so on. Given that members from the same nation are socialized to use their culture-specific orientations to guide their daily coping processes, there are significant cross-cultural differences in individuals' appraisals of stressors, choices of coping strategies, and indicators of adaptive outcomes (Heppner, 2008; Wong & Wong, 2006). In this section, we discuss how culture plays a pervasive role in shaping the ways people assess and cope with career-related stressors associated with the COVID-19 pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic emerges as a stressful and even traumatic event that requires individuals to make sense of the new situation and choose appropriate coping actions. Since cultural values reflect the desirable end states that are worth pursuing (Hofstede, 1980; Schwartz & Bilsky, 1987; Triandis, 1995), they are likely to influence members' attentiveness to and prioritization of stressors in the appraisal processes. For example, in a country that values individualism (vs. collectivism), people tend to form an independent (vs. interdependent) self-construal (Markus & Kitayama, 1991) and prefer to use ideal self (vs. ought self) to guide their behaviors (Higgins et al., 2008; Kurman & Hui, 2011). These cultural orientations will direct members' attention to stressors closely related to their personal career development (Heppner, 2008), such as job insecurity, difficulties of working from home, emergence of new career opportunities, and so on. In contrast, in a collectivistic culture, people's attention may go beyond their personal career development considerations to include issues related to their work groups, organizations, and social networks (Guan et al., 2015; Guan, Deng, Risavy, Bond, & Li, 2011a; Wong & Wong, 2006). Based on different appraisal processes, the choices of coping strategies and their effects may differ (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), which will be discussed below. As

individualism, self-construals and regulatory focus only represent limited aspects of cultural influence, future research should adopt a more comprehensive framework of cultural orientations (e.g., Schwartz & Bilsky, 1987) to advance existing literature on cultural differences in appraisals of stressors.

To cope with the various stressors associated with COVID-19, individuals may choose to use primary control (e.g., directly solving the associated problems) or secondary control (e.g., accommodating and reappraising existing problems) strategies (Rothbaum et al., 1982). The choices of coping strategies have also been found to be shaped by national culture (e.g., De Vaus, Hornsey, Kuppens, & Bastian, 2018; Heppner, 2008; Weisz, Rothbaum, & Blackburn, 1984). For example, through comparing Japanese and American cultural traditions and practices, Weisz et al. (1984) found that primary control strategies are heavily emphasized in American society whereas secondary control strategies are more valued in Japanese society. Evidence points to cultural differences in thinking styles (Ji et al., 2001; Nisbett et al., 2001; Spencer-Rodgers et al., 2010) helps to account for such Eastern-Western differences in coping strategies. Specifically, Easterners (e.g., Chinese, Japanese) are more likely to use holistic (vs. analytical) and dialectical thinking styles than Westerners (e.g., Americans), which are characterized by the emphasis of context (vs. objects) as the determining forces, the expectation of constant changes (e.g., bad things can be transformed into good things), as well as the tolerance of contradiction (e.g., opposite characteristics or elements can coexist with each other). Although the primary control strategies are generally preferred by Westerners, the holistic and dialectical thinking styles give rise to the tendency of valuing the secondary control strategies and using both among Easterners (De Vaus et al., 2018; Heppner, 2008), which helps to explain the high levels of resilience, or even optimism, of Easterners when facing difficult situations (De Vaus et al., 2018; Ji, Zhang, Usborne, & Guan, 2004).

The above discussions suggest that culture is a useful angle to understand the variations of coping strategies and their effects (Heppner, 2008; Wong & Wong, 2006). More importantly, this line of research may help to advance extant research on career management strategies by recognizing a fuller range of functional strategies arising from different cultures, which has the potential to enrich the repertoire and flexibility of individual career management activities in response to the fast situational changes (Cheng, 2009).

In addition to its manifestation in individual orientations, culture is also embedded in a nation's social systems, collective actions and daily practices (Hofstede, 1980; Kitayama, 2002). As the COVID-19 pandemic is a threat to nations' security, prosperity and social order, collective actions led by governments are deemed as crucial steps to overcome the emerging problems associated with it. In the subsequent section, we continue to analyze how national culture influences the collective decision-making processes and subsequent actions, and how these factors may impact members' behaviors.

Culture as Normative Forces and Collective Practices

The collective decision-making process of a nation is closely related to the dominant leadership prototypes and styles in that culture (House et al., 2004; Smith et al., 2002). Smith et al. (2002) found that managers from high power distance cultures are more likely to seek guidance from vertical sources (e.g., superiors, authorities) rather than lateral sources (e.g., peers). Similarly, the Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness (GLOBE, House et al., 2004) study of 62 societies shows that people in low (vs. high) power distance cultures tend to endorse participative leadership (i.e., leaders include others in decision-making processes). These findings suggest that in high power distance cultures (e.g., China, Singapore, Saudi Arabia), a centralized decision-making process dominated by top leaders is more likely to be viewed as a legitimate way to formulate and implement collective coping strategies, whereas in low power

distance cultures (e.g., USA, UK), participative decision-making process that involves stakeholders from diverse backgrounds is preferred. For example, in China, the central government requires all schools to be closed to prevent the spread of the virus; while in America, this is not unanimously decided by the Federal government but is individually assessed by each school, at least at the beginning (Sawchuk, 2020). These distinct ways of decision-making have a great impact on the progress of curbing COVID-19 at the national level, which will consequently impact members' individual coping processes.

Previous research also shows that, people in collectivistic (vs. individualistic) cultures are more likely to use group performance, rather than leaders' personal characteristics to evaluate their effectiveness (e.g., Ensari & Murphy, 2003). These findings suggest that when facing a conflict between collective and individual interest, political leaders in collective cultures (e.g., Japan, China, South Korea) are expected to prioritize national benefits over individual benefits, whereas in individualistic cultures (e.g., USA, UK, Australia), there is a need to balance the two. Accordingly, in collectivistic cultures, governments lock down cities that are most seriously affected by COVID-19 (e.g., Wuhan, China) and mobilize resources from all over the country to support those cities. While these actions are helpful to prevent a national crisis, they impose inconvenience and disruptions on individuals (McKelvey, 2020).

In addition to the above value dimensions, the notion of cultural tightness-looseness, which refers to the strength of cultural norms (Gelfand et al., 2011), offers another unique angle to understand culture as normative forces. A tight culture allows little room for individual liberty and poses high censoring pressure, whereas a loose culture provides members more room of discretion. It has been found that cultural tightness is positively related to more political forces to suppress dissent and control social order (Gelfand et al., 2011). Accordingly, in tight cultures (e.g., Pakistan, Singapore, South Korea and China), governments tend to make strict behavioral

guidance for the public (e.g., social distancing, wearing masks, tracking individual health conditions) and closely monitor and punish deviance (e.g., Brueck, 2020).

For example, China employed nationwide lockdown, individual insulating, community recording, and domestic and international travel tracking. Almost everyone has participated in the coping process through self-isolating and establishing health profiles (Ankel, 2020). The level of collective cooperation and compliance from individual citizens is beyond apprehension to many cultural outsiders, especially members of loose cultures (e.g., Australia, Spain, USA, Netherlands), where governments allow people to have more personal discretion (e.g., Govan, 2020; “LIBERATE”, 2020). The cultural practices discussed above may also impact individuals’ coping, self-regulation and career management practices, over and above the influence of personally internalized orientations. Since high power distance, high collectivism, and tight norms of a society are associated with centralized decision-making process, emphasis of collective interest over individual interest and strict control of social order, they will create a strong situation that heavily influences members’ work and life activities, irrespective of their own preferences.

To cope with the COVID-19 pandemic, many employees, such as “key workers” or “essential workers” whose jobs are vital to public health and security (White & Hope, 2020), are expected to continue working. Those workers contribute to minimizing the collective damage and securing the national interest, at the potential expense of their own physical and mental well-being (e.g. Heren, 2020). In China, many health and medical professionals are deployed to support their peers in other cities. The excessive work stress and risks during the COVID-19 pandemic may lead to decreased self-regulation strengths or even traumas (Fouad & Bynner, 2008; Guan, Arthur, Khapova, Hall, & Lord, 2019). On the other hand, this work experience may also arouse a strong sense of pride and highlight the meaningfulness and significance of their profession. It may also help them build feelings of emotional bonding and connections with peer doctors who fight side

by side with them, creating opportunities for new career skill development and future career opportunities (Fouad & Bynner, 2008; Guan et al., 2019). To cushion the adverse effects of sacrificing self-interest for the collective good, governments and social institutes should take necessary measures to protect key workers' occupational safety, recognize their contributions and support for their recovery from the excessive work demands (Gao & Gurd, 2018).

For people who do not belong to the category of key workers, their work, study and daily life are also disrupted by COVID-19, especially in cultures with high power distance, high collectivism and tight norms. These people may need to use alternative ways (e.g., study and work from home, online supervision and communication) to manage their learning and work activities (McKelvey, 2020). People in low power distance, high individualism or loose-norm cultures may be allowed to have some personal discretion to arrange their work and life, therefore being affected to a lesser degree and experiencing low stress. However, the permission of more individual liberty may influence the efficiency and effectiveness of collective coping policies against the COVID-19 due to the lower compliance (e.g., social distancing). Therefore, governments should carefully balance the considerations of collective and individual interests and effectively manage the tradeoffs of social control and individual liberty, in order to achieve optimal outcomes for the public.

An Integrative and Dynamic View of Cultural Effects

Beyond exploring the multiple ways that culture may influence individuals' responses to the career challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic, we also attempt to develop an integrative and dynamic view by considering the contingency factors that may strengthen or weaken the effects of national culture (Leung, Bhagat, Buchan, Erez, & Gibson, 2005). From a social identity perspective (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), an important individual moderator for the impact of national culture is a member's cultural identification, which refers to the extent to which a member

considers national culture as an important component of his/her self-concepts. In all cultures, there are members who have a low level of identification and they may disagree with the shared norms and collective actions of a nation. For example, even in a collectivistic culture, there are individuals who prioritize personal interests over public benefits and defy collective coping actions, such as escaping from quarantine, hoarding essential hygiene products or concealing health information (e.g. Yiga, 2020).

Since every member has multiple cultural identities, they may identify more with their ethnical culture, professional/occupational culture, or religious culture, instead of national culture. The complexity of social identities and the varied levels of cultural identification may lead to the risks of intergroup prejudice or even conflicts within a nation. For example, people who identify with certain cultural groups may perceive other groups as a threat, leading to intolerance and aggressive behaviors against other groups (Russell, 2020), which may further escalate into a larger-scale social crisis. Governments and social institutions should seek guidance from cultural and intergroup theories to effectively prevent these incidents. Previous research has shown that it is possible to shift members' representations of group boundaries and guide them to include another group into a more inclusive, super-ordinate group (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000; Guan et al., 2011b). For example, by sending strong signals of "shared similarity" or "common fate" (Drury, 2018), governments and social institutions can promote cultural members' perceived similarity and common goals with other groups, to transcend the barrier of group membership.

In addition to the above within-culture factors, in a globalizing world, members of a culture also take influences from foreign cultures (e.g., by accessing international media), thereby forming plural cultural identities (Chen et al., 2016a; Hong, Morris, Chiu, & Benet-Martinez, 2000; Morris, Chiu, & Liu, 2015). This polyculture perspective suggests that nowadays individuals are capable of developing multiple cultural identities, and these identities can be

primed and activated by relevant cues to help individuals adapt to the changing situational demands (Oyserman & Lee, 2008). This approach will not only help to understand cross-cultural differences in coping strategies and career management strategies under the COVID-19 pandemic, but will also provide important guidance for individuals to develop a more flexible and adaptive way to cope with the emerging challenges in their career development (e.g., Cheng, 2009). This dynamic view of culture also carries important implications for the cultural adaptation and career management strategies of sojourners, expatriates, immigrants, and so on (Guan et al., 2018).

Limitations and Future Directions

As national culture can be conceptualized and operationalized in diverse ways, future research should continue to seek insights from other relevant models, such as cultural differences in social beliefs (Chen et al., 2016b; Leung & Bond, 2004), or use an indigenous approach to develop a more comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the different aspects of cultural influence (Gelfand & Denison, 2020; Leung, 2012). In addition to national culture, other characteristics of a nation, such as economical, geopolitical and historical factors, also play important roles in shaping members' behaviors, which should also be taken into consideration in future research (Tsui, Nifadkar, & Ou, 2007). As culture can be manifested at different levels, future research should adopt a multi-level approach to examine how national culture, regional culture, professional/occupational culture and organizational culture interplay with each other in influencing individuals' coping and career management strategies (Leung et al., 2005). Lastly, although national culture is often viewed as a relatively stable factor, it is also subjective to change (Hamamura, 2012; Huang et al., 2018). Whether the COVID-19 pandemic and the individual and collective actions aiming to cope with this crisis would lead to significant changes to culture is an important question that needs to be answered in future research.

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