

# **Stress Appraisal and Coping among Immigrants from the Former Soviet Union in Israel**

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## **Abstract**

Since 1989, Israel has absorbed over a million immigrants from the former Soviet Union (FSU). The research literature refers to immigration as a potentially stressful event that may induce psychological distress. This distress, usually linked to significant losses and stresses that are part of the adjustment to a host country, is viewed as a normal if transient reaction to cross-cultural transition.

Generally, FSU immigrants originate in large cities, are well educated, and have relatively weak connections with Jewish cultural and religious traditions. Some choose Israel for ideological reasons but most do so in search of economic opportunities and family reunification. The migration of FSU Jews to Israel since the 1990s is perceived in the literature more as an act of immigration than of repatriation and is assumed to be based on financial motives and a desire to emigrate to the West. These characteristics may aggravate FSU immigrants' exposure to several unique difficulties in their adjustment process.

Although numerous studies assess immigrants' adjustment difficulties, few investigate the stress and adaptation of FSU immigrants in Israel via a cognitive model of stress and coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The main components of this model are cognitive appraisal, through which the individual evaluates the stressful event as a threat, a challenge, or a loss and evaluates h/her degree of control over it, and coping processes, i.e., cognitive and behavioral efforts aimed at managing situational demands to restore the individual's relationship with h/her the environment. Coping is generally seen as serving two major purposes: trying to change or solve the problem and to regulate feelings of distress. Some researchers add a third coping function, avoidance.

According to the model, the appraisal and coping processes are perceived as dependent on situational factors and personal resources such as self-esteem, locus of control, ego development, intelligence, social competence, and optimism. The personal resources that this study examines due to their specific relevance to the immigrant experience are tolerance of ambiguity and cognitive flexibility. Ambiguity tolerance is defined as a range of reactions (from rejection to attraction) to stimuli perceived as unfamiliar, complex, uncertain, or subject to conflicting interpretations (McLain, 1993), or as an individual's tendency to deem ambiguous situations desirable. Tolerance of ambiguity is frequently identified as one of the key characteristics of a successful and well-adapted sojourner and an important factor in learning a new language. Cognitive flexibility denotes a person's awareness that s/he has options and alternatives in any given situation and h/her willingness to be flexible and adaptive (Martin & Anderson, 1998). Cognitive flexibility is also widely examined in the context of migrants' cross-cultural adaptation and is thought to be important for successful cross-cultural functioning. It appears that both cognitive flexibility and tolerance of ambiguity may abet successful cross-cultural adaptation at two levels: an appraisal and coping strategy that allows the migrant to perceive alternative modes or ways of coping and the application of diverse coping strategies that fit specific situational demands.

According to this model, immigrants' objective difficulties affect distress and adaptation through the mediating mechanisms of cognitive appraisals and coping strategies, with personal resources affecting both types of mediators.

The study investigated the adaptation of FSU immigrants via a sample of 301 participants (aged 25–45, 67% women), who completed inventories that measured personal resources of tolerance of ambiguity and cognitive flexibility, cognitive appraisals of various adaptation problems, coping strategies that they used to deal with these problems, and their sense of well-being, level of distress, and willingness to remain in Israel. Using a Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) analysis, the study found that tolerance of

ambiguity and cognitive flexibility contributed positively to the participants' control appraisals, task-oriented coping, and well-being, and contributed negatively to threat/loss appraisals, emotion/avoidance-oriented coping, and distress. The participants' control appraisals, in turn, contributed to task-oriented coping, whereas their threat/loss appraisals contributed to emotion/avoidance-oriented and task-oriented coping. Control and challenge appraisals and task-oriented coping contributed positively to participants' willingness to remain in Israel, whereas emotion/avoidance-oriented coping contributed positively to distress levels, which, in turn, were negatively related to willingness to remain in Israel.

The results of this study have significant implications for aspects of immigrant adjustment such as absorption policies and the provision of individualized care by professionals and organizations. They also raise several questions that merit future research. Thus, it may be useful to examine the adjustment processes among groups of immigrants to Israel from other cultural backgrounds and to study other stressors. An investigation of stressors related to difficulties in social and cultural integration, for example, may expand our understanding of the effectiveness of the appraisal and coping strategies that immigrants use in relation to these stressors.

