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# **How Crisis Redefines Us and Them in a Distrustful Society**

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## **Abstract**

## Contemporary society confronts a series of crises; climate disasters, political upheavals, economic uncertainty, and social conflicts dominate the public discourse. The current generation has witnessed an unbroken chain of emergencies, characterized by escalating anxiety and ever-declining institutional trust. Such context has exposed concerning patterns in societal crisis responses: a systematic preference for psychological comfort based on an adversarial framework, over collaborative problem-solving approaches.

This paper analyzes different reactions throughout global crises, examining how individuals construct "us versus them" boundaries to manage anxiety. Through comparative analysis of diverse global crises—from social movements and political disruptions to natural disasters and pandemics—this research demonstrates how both individuals and groups consistently choose extreme reactions and group polarization as anxiety management strategies. These responses represent maladaptive forms of resilience that generate conflict and division rather than fostering long-term stability through institutional transformation.

***Keywords: Global crises, Psychological responses, False resilience, Social trust, Collective identity***

## **The Anxiety Economy**

"Anxiety economy" refers to a system where fear drives the economy. The COVID-19 pandemic clearly illustrates this dynamic. While the health threat by the virus was real, the anxiety generated frequently exceeded rational risk calculations. Widespread hoarding behaviors including bulk purchasing of food, water, and toilet paper far beyond necessary quantities occurred globally. Historical precedents reveal consistent behavioral patterns across different crisis types. During the 1918 Spanish Flu pandemic, the panic buying of quinine and other remedies occurred at pharmacists and medical facilities, similarly to the hand sanitizer and mask shortages seen during COVID-19. Even seemingly trivial events have triggered similar responses: the 1985 introduction of New Coke led to panic buying of original Coca-Cola as consumers feared permanent removal of original Coke’s flavor.

Yi-Chi Wu et al. note that such purchasing behaviors provide "illusory control" when actual control is limited.

## **The Psychology of Crisis Response**

When confronting perceived threats, humans consistently create psychological boundaries that restore feelings of order and identity. These boundaries typically rely less on risk assessment or scientific evidence than on their capacity to provide moral superiority, intellectual consistency, and social connection with like-minded individuals.

COVID-19 responses reveal this psychological mechanism very clearly. Societies rapidly divided themselves into distinct categories: "responsible mask-wearers" versus "freedom-loving skeptics" (Osakwe et al.) Climate change responses follow identical patterns. Rather than engaging with complex environmental and economic trade-offs, many individuals adopt identities as either "climate activists" or "realists," subsequently viewing available evidence through these identity frameworks (McKenzie).

The 2011 Fukushima nuclear disaster prompted the same response. Korean society constructed narratives of "responsible Korea" versus "reckless Japan"—an adversarial framework serving psychological rather than practical purposes (Funabashi and Kitazawa). Similarly, when the #MeToo movement reached Korea, rather than fostering institutional reform dialogue, discussions quickly devolved into adversarial gender positioning that deepened social divisions (Bennett).

This tendency toward adversarial thinking, identifying with morally superior groups, establishes "us versus them" mentalities direct attention away from the actual problem: focusing on eliminating "COVID-19 vaccine skeptics" neither addresses pandemic management nor creates the foundations for better future health crisis responses.

### **What is “resilience”?**

### **False Resilience**

False resilience encompasses psychological strategies that provide short-term emotional relief away from having to confront underlying systemic problems. At individual levels, conspiracy theories offer false resilience by creating simple explanations for complex crises, reducing anxiety through oversimplification. At collective levels, populist and authoritarian movements function as large-scale versions of this dynamic.

Authoritarian leaders exploit this psychological need by promising decisive, simplified solutions. Donald Trump's declaration that "only I can fix it" exemplifies this approach, offering citizens short-term psychological comfort by replacing complex policy challenges with simple narratives that blame immigrants, refugees, foreign governments, or political enemies (Andre et al.) for chronic social problems.

This false resilience appears across diverse contexts. Trump's exploitation of pandemic anxieties and electoral mistrust failed. South Korea's recent martial law debacle reveals how governments under stress could lead to exceptional measures for social control and therefore creating fragile and temporary feelings of "safety" (Mackenzie). Historical parallels include Latin America's cycles of populist strongmen, Eastern Europe's drift toward illiberal democracy, and established democracies' normalization of emergency powers (Montero).

### **True Resilience**

True resilience, in contrast, might feel uncomfortable at first but ultimately nurtures growth. Genuine resilience requires developing "complexity tolerance,” an ability to maintain multiple perspectives simultaneously, identify common ground, and collaborate across ideological differences. True resilience demands information systems that foster understanding rather than inflame outrage, and leadership prioritizing institutional strength over personal survival. Such approaches demand societies confront difficult trade-offs: climate adaptation requiring both lifestyle changes and economic restructuring, or pandemic responses balancing public health with civil liberties.

### **Brief Analysis of True Resilience in Historical Context**

**Kennedy's Cuban Missile Crisis**

During the Cuban Missile Crisis, U.S. President John F. Kennedy faced intense pressure from military advisors and politicians demanding immediate military strikes against Soviet missile sites in Cuba. The "false resilience" response would have been to project strength through decisive military action: a simple, emotionally satisfying solution that would have unified Americans against a clear enemy. Instead, Kennedy demonstrated true resilience by:

* Building institutions (the ExComm advisory group) that encouraged diverse perspectives rather than groupthink
* Maintaining secret diplomatic communication channels with Soviet leaders while publicly appearing firm
* Resisting the psychological comfort of "us versus them" military thinking
* Tolerating anxiety over prolonged uncertainty

This approach required Kennedy to endure criticism for appearing "weak" while privately working toward a solution that avoided nuclear war. True resilience meant accepting complexity and uncertainty rather than choosing the psychologically easier path of military confrontation.

**South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission**

Post-apartheid South Africa faced a choice between two psychologically appealing but false resilience strategies: either denying the severity of past atrocities (protecting white South African identity) or seeking comprehensive revenge against perpetrators (satisfying black South African anger). Both would have provided immediate psychological relief to different groups.

True resilience emerged through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's approach:

* Creating space for multiple perspectives rather than establishing simple victim/perpetrator categories
* Prioritizing institutional transformation over individual punishment or denial
* Building new national identity through shared truth-telling rather than through opposition to "others"

This process was psychologically difficult for all parties, requiring white South Africans to acknowledge complicity and black South Africans to forgo revenge, but it created foundations for genuine democratic institutions.

**Netherlands' "Room for the River"**

The Netherlands had used massive dikes and barriers aimed at keeping water out entirely to manage floods—a strategy based on a belief that human engineering could dominate natural forces, escalating the “human versus nature” framework. But catastrophic floods, particularly the devastating 1953 North Sea flood, exposed the limits of such a control-based approach, making it clear that no human-made wall offers absolute protection, and that clinging to technological dominance provided only an illusory sense of security. True resilience emerged when the Netherlands embraced the "Room for the River" program:

* Accepting that nature cannot be completely controlled rather than maintaining illusions of dominance
* Redesigning flood management to work with natural systems not against them
* Tolerating the complexity of relocating communities and redesigning landscapes
* Building adaptive capacity rather than rigid resistance mechanisms

This approach required Dutch society to embrace adaptation and flexibility, abandoning the comforting belief that technology could provide complete security. Building true resilience requires societies to endure psychological discomfort in service of building genuine adaptive capacity.

## **Not One Society is Better Than Others**

Even successful crisis responses can mask underlying vulnerabilities. South Korea's initially praised COVID-19 response demonstrated effective institutional coordination, but as the pandemic prolonged, familiar polarization patterns emerged around vaccination policies and economic priorities (Kwon et al.).

Similar psychological patterns appear across vastly different societies. Whether examining vaccine hesitancy in the United States, Brexit polarization in the United Kingdom, or climate policy debates in Australia, identical tendencies toward binary thinking and identity-based responses emerge during anxious periods (Yasmin et al.).

This suggests that no nation is inherently crisis-adaptive and more truly resilient than all others; the same country, throughout history, swung back and forth between false and true resilience, implying that a resilient society is not something set in stone. A truly resilient society is built on how the society responds to each crisis, and it can, at a moment, fall back to a non-resilient society.

It is, therefore, suggested that nations tolerate their crisis anxiety and maintain space for disagreement and debate–while managing a transparent and accurate information system, developing superior management methods for both conflict and uncertainty.

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## **Building Resilience for Future Generations**

First, we must cultivate intellectual humility and patience. We must recognize that complex problems rarely have simple solutions and that initial crisis responses often require adjustment through learning processes (Porter et al.). This approach maintains strong values and decisive action capacity while building flexibility and course correction mechanisms (John Templeton Foundation).

Second, we need to develop "distress tolerance", the psychological ability to function effectively while experiencing anxiety or uncertainty. This skill proves crucial because future crises are unavoidable, and effectiveness depends more on anxiety response management than anxiety elimination (Centre for Clinical Interventions).

Third, we must practice coalition building with individuals from significantly different backgrounds and perspectives. Future challenges–from climate adaptation to economic inequality–to technological governance will require perspective-taking, barrier-breaking, and cooperation across traditional social boundaries. These problems cannot be solved by retreating into ideologically pure communities that make us “feel good” about ourselves (Spangler).

## **The Path Forward**

Climate change requires massive economic and social transformations. Technological change will disrupt traditional structures. Demographic shifts will challenge existing political arrangements. These challenges remain surmountable if approached with appropriate tools: accurate information systems, flexible institutions, social trust, and psychological capacity for collaborative work under uncertainty and stress (Fridh).

Future research should examine these patterns across different cultural contexts to understand which responses represent universal human tendencies versus culturally specific adaptations. The crises defining this historical moment can become an opportunity to build more adaptive, resilient societies.

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