

RESEARCH NOTES

*Economic Reform in the Czech Republic: Economic Strain, Depression, Hostility, and the Difference Gender Makes**

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The Czech Republic is changing rapidly and its current economic transformation is a strain on Czech families. In this study, the connection between economic strain and individual well-being is investigated via mailed questionnaires from 234 households in the Czech Republic. For Czech women, depression rises more with economic strain than does hostility, while Czech men become more hostile than depressed in the face of economic strain. For women, social support is a buffer between economic strain and hostility, whereas self-esteem is a buffer for depression. For men, both self-esteem and social support exacerbate hostility in the context of economic strain.

Introduction

Transforming the Czech Republic into a market economy and a democracy makes it a distinctive case for studying the impact of macro change on individual well-being. In the United States, researchers have studied the social and emotional costs of the Great Depression (e.g., Elder 1974); plant closings (e.g., Jahoda, Lazarsfeld, and Ziesel 1971; Buss and Redburn 1983; Perucci and Targ 1988), and the farm crisis in the 1980s (e.g., Armstrong and Schulman 1990; Belyea and Lobao 1990; Rosenblatt 1990). This stress-distress tradition is applied to the Czech Republic in this study.

Although there was wide support for the reforms, the Czechoslovak economy was in trouble in 1990 at the time these data were collected. Its economic output was in decline, and it was facing inflation and unemployment at levels not seen in Europe since the Great Depression. Food prices

increased by 26 percent in July of 1990, petrol prices by 50 percent, and the cost of train travel rose by 100 percent (Pechacova and Hraba 1991). Prices of goods and services in the third quarter of 1990 were 14.1 percent higher than they were in the same quarter of 1989. Income increased from 1980 through 1990 by six percent (only 3.4 percent for wages), but money loaned to people rose by 24 percent (Pechacova and Hraba 1991). According to economic projections at the time, the Czech Republic was at risk of the unemployment of 1.2 million workers out of a total labor force of about 8 million by the end of 1992.

Over 80 percent of a national sample in 1990 believed their personal circumstances would deteriorate over the next two years, over 80 percent found it necessary to economize, over 65 percent reported problems in getting desired food, and 60 percent said they had problems in obtaining good clothing (Institute of Sociology 1990). Respondents in this study reported that they were simply making do by using savings and seeking additional financial support from family and friends; working more hours, if possible; and curtailing certain expenditures by not taking vacations, switching from private cars to public transportation, and even buying cheaper food.

Following the stress-distress paradigm, the link between economic strain, and depression and hostility is examined in this article. On the basis of earlier findings (Elder 1974; Conger, Lorenz, Elder, Simons, and Ge 1992) in the United States, it is expected that economic strain will result in depression for women and hostility for men. Also found in stress-distress research is that people are differently vulnerable to stress because of mediating and moderating variables. For example, self-esteem has been found to be a resource in recognizing stress and doing something about it, and social support from others can ameliorate the effects of stress (Lin and Ensel 1989; Coyne and Downey 1991). Social support and self-esteem are introduced as variables elaborating the relationships among economic strain, depression, and hostility by gender in this article.

Methods

The Sample

From a 4,000-household sampling frame by the Czech Statistical Bureau in 1990, 294 households in the Czech Republic were randomly selected. Questionnaires were distributed in person during October 1990, with instructions to mail completed questionnaires to the Agriculture University of Prague, at which time respondents would receive a stipend (\$1.50). Questionnaires were returned by 234 persons. Because of missing data, the actual cases analyzed were slightly fewer than the total 234 returned

questionnaires (see Figures 1-6). The mean age of respondents was 39.1 years, more than 78 percent of the respondents being between 26 and 50 years of age. As to living arrangements, 8.6 percent of the respondents lived alone, 5.7 percent lived with five or more people, and the remainder lived with two to four people. A total of 122 of the respondents worked in agriculture, 24 were in nonagriculture manual labor, and 88 were in white-collar work. Obviously, people in agriculture are overrepresented in this sample. In regard to education, 5.6 percent had only an elementary education, 10.3 percent had completed training school, 47.6 percent had finished practical high school, 5.1 percent had completed gymnasium (highest level of high school), and 21.8 percent were college graduates. As to gender, 154 of the respondents were women (66.4 percent) and 78 were men (33.6 percent). An overwhelming majority of the respondents ($N = 126$) reported per capita household incomes of 901-2,700 Czech Crowns (US\$32-96) per month.

Variable Measures

In accordance with a previously developed methodology (Pearlin, Lieberman, Menaghan, and Mullan 1981), economic strain was defined as the experience of economic hardship measured as a mismatch between a desired standard of living and the means to obtain that standard. Economic strain has been found to link negative economic events to a subjective perception of economic problems (Conger et al. 1992). Economic strain is operationalized as a seven-item scale that specifically measures the perceived affordability of housing, household goods, automobiles, sufficient food, clothing, medical care, and desired leisure activities. Responses on each item range from 1 to 2, no or yes; the scale was reliable at $\alpha = .67$, and the range of actual scores was 1-14.

The measure of depression was that developed by Derogatis (1983), which is part of the SCL-90-R (a symptomology checklist of 90 items for depression, anxiety, hostility, and related psychological distress). The depression dimension of the SCL-90-R is composed of 13 items, measuring symptoms such as loss of sexual interest, susceptibility to crying easily, low energy levels, thoughts of suicide, blue and worried feelings, hopelessness, and worthlessness. Responses to each item range from 0 to 4; the scale is reliable ($\alpha = .86$), and the range of actual scores was 0-38.

The hostility measure is also part of the SCL-90-R. The hostility dimension consists of six items, measuring the following symptoms: feeling easily irritated, getting into frequent arguments, having temper outbursts, having the urge to harm someone, having the urge to break things, and shouting or throwing things. Responses to each item range from 0 to 4; the scale is reliable ($\alpha = .75$), and the range of actual scores was 0-20.

Based on Sheldon Cohen and Harry Hoberman's (1983) Interpersonal

Social Evaluation List, the social support measure includes perceptions of support from others, reports of tangible support from others, and a sense of belonging. Respondents are asked questions such as whether they have someone who can give them advice on how they are handling their problems (perception of support), if they have someone who can help them make household repairs or take them to the doctor (tangible support), and if they have someone with whom they can talk when feeling lonely (sense of belonging). The scale consists of 40 items with four response categories each. Social support was reliable ($\alpha = .89$), and the range of actual scores was 90-155.

As originally defined by Morris Rosenberg (1965), self-esteem indicates a high evaluation of oneself. The scale used is composed of 10 Likert items that indicate feelings of self-worth and ability, attribution of good qualities to oneself, satisfaction and respect for oneself, and so on. The scale was reliable ($\alpha = .74$), and the range of actual scores was 10-40.

Results

The associations of economic strain with depression and hostility for both women and men are shown in Figures 1 and 2, respectively, with all variables split at the median. As shown in Figure 1, Czech women report more depressive symptoms than men regardless of economic strain—a finding that is consistent with previous findings in the United States (Aneshensel, Rutter, and Lachenbruch 1991; Lennon 1987). Furthermore, 51.1 percent of the women low on economic strain are above the median in depressive symptoms, and 66.7 percent of those high on economic strain are above the median in depressive symptoms. For men, the proportions also increased, from 26.2 percent to 35.3 percent, with increased strain. Economic strain is more closely associated with increased depression in women than men, although the relationship only approaches statistical significance in a 2×2 contingency table with dichotomies at the medians ($\chi^2(1) = 3.52, p < .06$).

As shown in Figure 2, Czech women also report more hostility symptoms than men regardless of economic strain. However, in consonance with previous findings in the United States, economic strain is more closely associated with increased hostility in men than women ($\chi^2(1) = 7.0, p < .01$). Among men under high economic strain, 54.4 percent report high hostility symptoms, compared with 26.2 percent of the men under low economic strain (Figure 2). The increase in hostility with economic strain for Czech women is from 44.7 percent to 55.9 percent.

On the basis of past studies in the United States, it was hypothesized that self-esteem and social support would reduce the relationship of economic strain with depression and hostility. That is, the relation of strain with

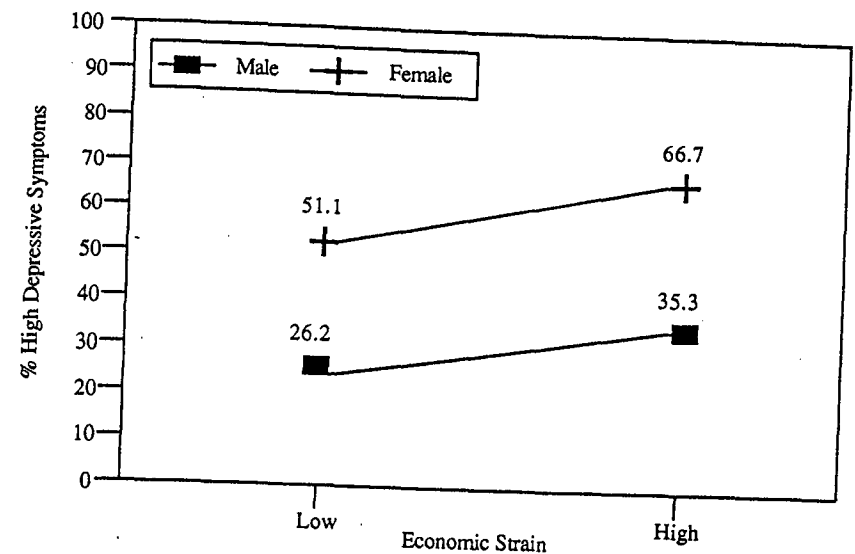


Fig. 1. Economic strain and depression in Czech men ($N = 75$) and women ($N = 141$). Low and high in the figure mean below and above the median. N varies from figure to figure because the number of missing cases fluctuates with the relevant variables.

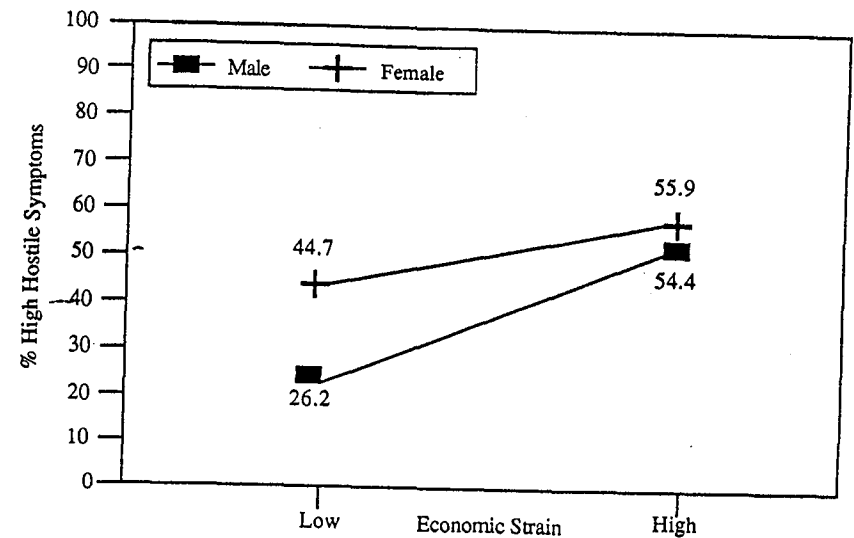


Fig. 2. Economic strain and hostility in Czech men ($N = 75$) and women ($N = 141$). Low and high in the figure mean below and above the median. N varies from figure to figure because the number of missing cases fluctuates with the relevant variables.

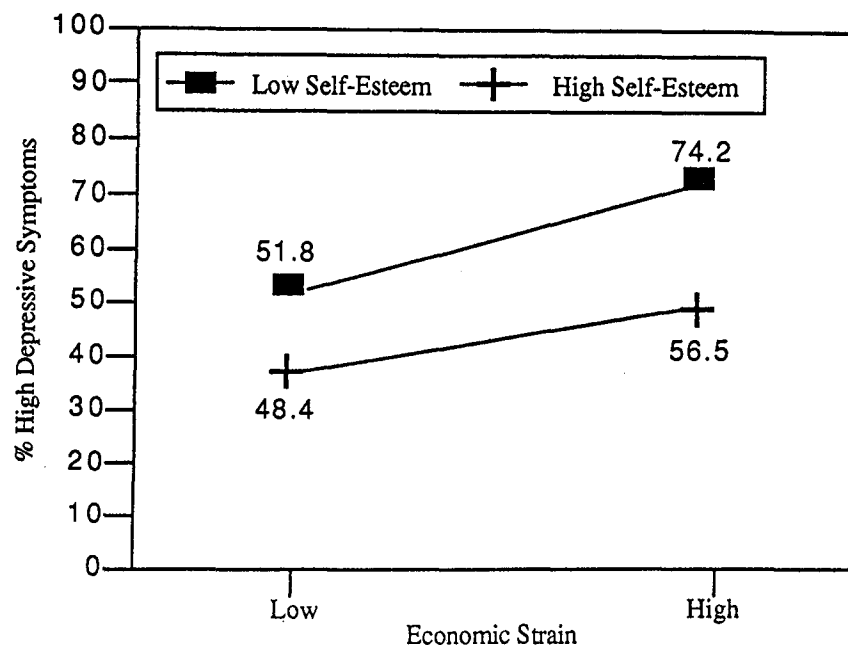


Fig. 3. Self-esteem as a buffer between economic strain and depression for Czech women ($N = 141$). Low and high in the figure mean below and above the median. N varies from figure to figure because the number of missing cases fluctuates with the relevant variables.

depression and hostility would be more modest for respondents who measured above the median in self-esteem and social support. For Czech women, the relationship between economic strain and depression was more modest for those with high self-esteem ($\chi^2(1) = 4.3, p < .03$), but self-esteem did not reduce the relation between economic strain and hostility. Women's social support buffered the relation between strain and hostility ($\chi^2(1) = 3.2, p < .07$), but not that between strain and depression. Figures 3 and 4 show the significant relationships.

The findings for Czech men were entirely different; Figures 5 and 6 show the significant relationships. For men, self-esteem increased the relation between economic strain and hostility ($\chi^2(1) = 9.8, p < .002$). The relation between strain and hostility is stronger for men above the median in self-esteem. In a similar way, social support increased the relation between economic strain and hostility ($\chi^2(1) = 4.87, p < .02$).

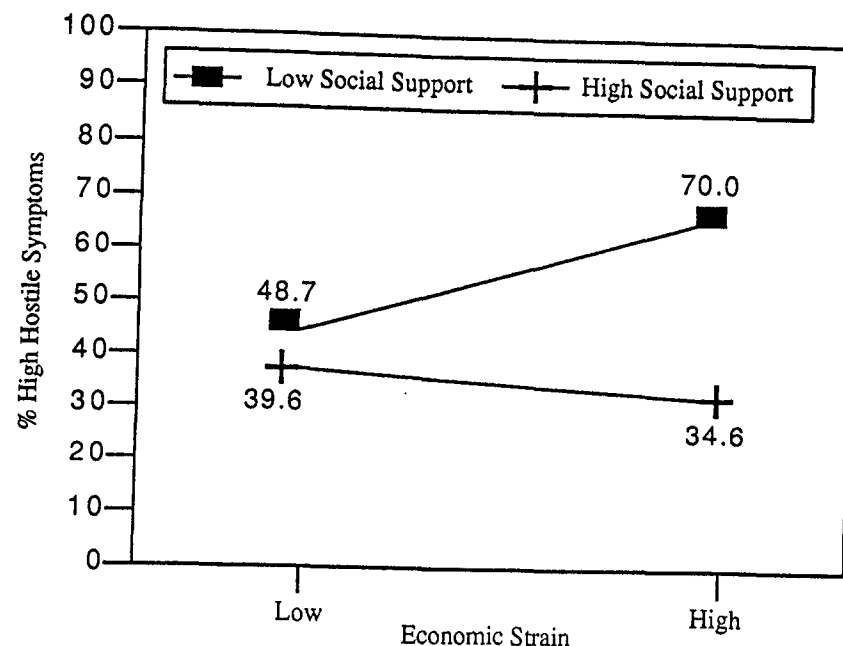


Fig. 4. Social support as a buffer between economic strain and hostility for Czech women ($N = 143$). Low and high in the figure mean below and above the median. N varies from figure to figure because the number of missing cases fluctuates with the relevant variables.

Discussion

Economic strain was associated with depression for Czech women and with hostility in Czech men. This finding is consistent with studies conducted in the United States in which stress is reported to differentially affect women and men (e.g., Elder 1974; Aneshensel et al. 1991; Conger et al. 1992). Czech men under economic strain appear to externalize their feelings in the form of hostility, while women under economic strain internalize their feelings in depression.

For Czech women, social support reduces the relation between economic strain and hostility, and self-esteem reduces the relation between economic strain and depression. This pattern of buffering has been commonly

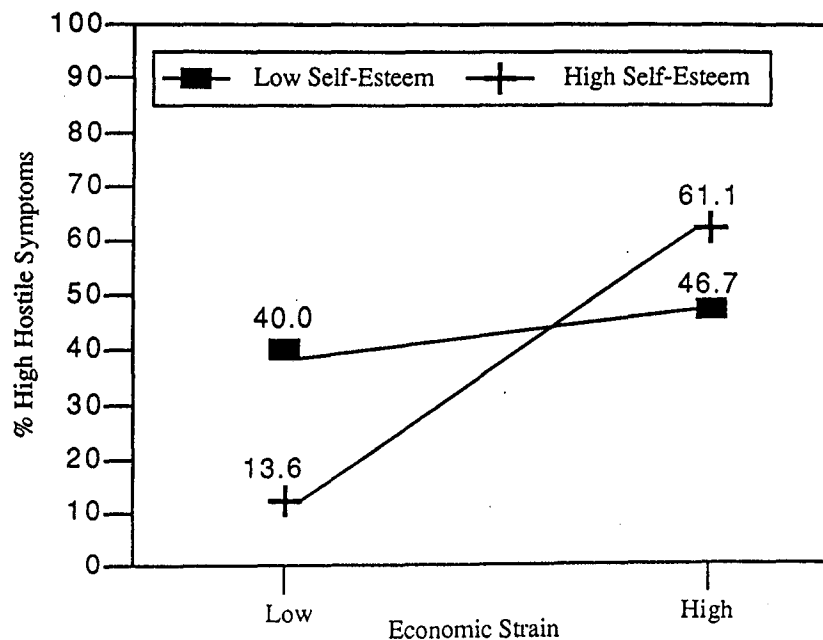


Fig. 5. Self-esteem exacerbating the relation between economic strain and hostility for Czech men ($N = 75$). Low and high in the figure mean below and above the median. N varies from figure to figure because the number of missing cases fluctuates with the relevant variables.

observed in the United States (Coyne and Downey 1991). It is the pattern for Czech men that is truly different, not only from that of Czech women but also from findings of past research. Social support and self-esteem for Czech men actually exacerbate their hostility.

There are two ways to interpret these gender differences. Self-esteem and social support are considered to be resources that buffer people from distress that is due to economic strain in the stress-distress tradition (e.g., Elder 1974; Lin and Ensel 1989). Only the lack of these resources can make matters worse. However, only for women did we find that self-esteem and social support buffered the relation between economic strain and distress (depression). As listed for men self-esteem and social support exacerbate their hostility.

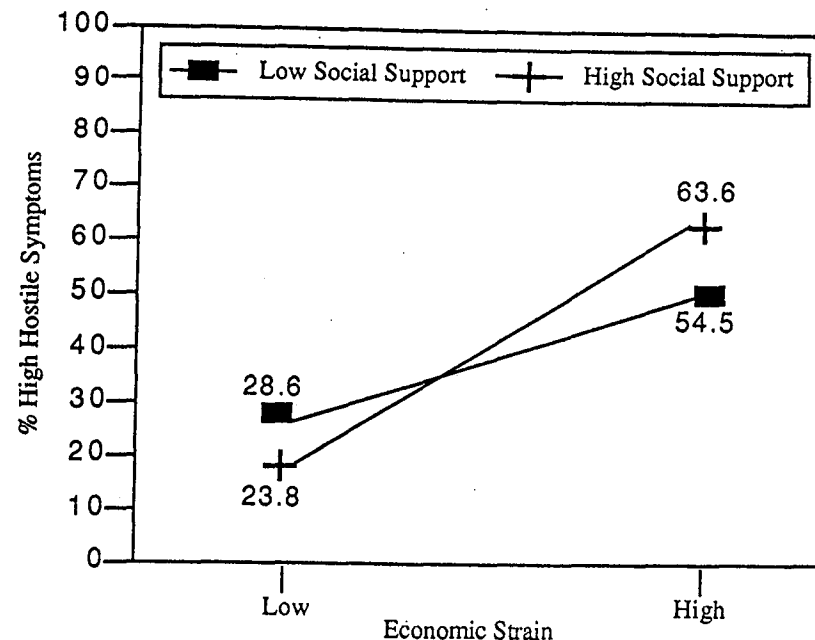


Fig. 6. Social support exacerbating the relation between economic strain and hostility for Czech men ($N = 75$). Low and high in the figure mean below and above the median. N varies from figure to figure because the number of missing cases fluctuates with the relevant variables.

A second interpretation from the stress-distress tradition may help in understanding this finding (e.g., Burke 1991; Thoits 1991). The meaning of economic strain might be different for Czech men than for women. Perhaps not meeting family needs with current income (economic strain) is taken to be a specifically male failing, and more so for males with high self-esteem. Males as primary breadwinners is an ideal gender relationship in Czech culture, although the economic reality after World War II has been for many Czech women to work outside the home. Currently, 50.3% of adult women in the Czech Republic are full-time workers. There is more of an incongruence between self-esteem as an identity standard and economic strain as a current reality for men with high self-esteem. Thus, economic

strain exacerbates men's hostility, the more so for high self-esteem males. Social support seems to work in the same way for men. Social support may merely reinforce the failure implied by economic strain, appearing as condescension rather than help. For women, self-esteem reduces the relation between economic strain and depression, and social support is a buffer for hostility.

It is commonly assumed by students of the region that the consequences of reforms in East Europe will be unevenly distributed (e.g., Przeworski 1991). The focus of investigation has been on the uneven economic consequences for different economic classes. Explored in this research, however, are the uneven consequences of the reforms on well-being for men and women. These findings sensitize us to the differential effect of the reforms not only on economic classes, but more specially on men and women.

ENDNOTE

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