

# Culturally shared metaphors expand contemporary concepts of resilience and post-traumatic growth: contrasting an indigenous Brazilian community and a Swiss rural community

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## ABSTRACT

The metaphorical concepts *resilience* and *post-traumatic growth* (PTG) reflect the contemporary Western understanding of overcoming highly challenging life events. However, it is known that across different cultures, a broad range of metaphorical idioms for describing adaptive responses to severe adversity exists. This study aimed to explore and contrast two distinct cultural groups' culturally shared metaphors for overcoming severe adversities. Fieldwork was conducted in two rural communities: an indigenous Brazilian community that has experienced severe collective adversity and a mountain village in Switzerland that has survived a natural disaster. We carried out separate qualitative metaphor analyses of semistructured interview data from each community. There were some similarities in the metaphorical narratives of the two cultural groups, for example, in metaphors of *balance*, *changed perspective*, *collective cohesion* and *life as a journey*. The main variations were found in metaphors of *magical thinking*, *equilibrium* and *organic transformation* used by the Brazilian group and metaphors of *work*, *order* and *material transformation* used by the Swiss group. Results from this study suggest that the Western-devised concepts of resilience and PTG can be further expanded, which is highlighted by the variety of culturally shared metaphors. Metaphorical idioms for overcoming severe adversity may be determined by the type of trauma as well as by the sociocultural and historical context. Our findings indicate potential approaches to the cultural adaptation of psychological interventions.

## INTRODUCTION

Cultural phenomena relating to psychological adaptation to trauma and other forms of severe adversity have recently gained importance in research and practice.<sup>1-4</sup> A prominent concept in this field is *resilience*, a metaphorical concept derived from material science that describes an individual's dynamic ability to withstand and bounce back from adversity.<sup>5,6</sup> Another concept, introduced by the US psychologists Tedeschi and Calhoun,<sup>7</sup> is that of *post-traumatic growth* (PTG); this is a strong biological metaphor referring to positive psychological changes experienced as a result of the struggle with highly challenging life circumstances. Assumptions about the world and core beliefs are challenged, which leads to a cognitive reevaluation that goes beyond maintaining

the status quo. Both resilience and PTG have been conceptualised as process and outcome variables, and the overlap between them makes it difficult to distinguish accurately between the two phenomena.<sup>8,9</sup> For the present article, we propose, however, that the various forms of adaptive responses to severe adversity may be subsumed under the broad umbrella category of 'overcoming severe adversity', which encompasses a variety of adaptive or positive responses beyond the two most known concepts of growth and resilience.

Several authors have argued that beliefs about growth following adversity reflect a uniquely Western or sometimes explicitly US American cultural worldview.<sup>10-14</sup> North Americans have been claimed to overemphasise looking at the bright side of life<sup>11</sup> and to overestimate the positive changes that may occur after negative events.<sup>12</sup> This eagerness to enhance the mental state in the aftermath of adversity has also been referred to as the 'tyranny of the positive attitude'.<sup>10</sup>

Numerous studies have shown that the rather biomedical concepts of resilience and PTG can be assessed among people across different cultures, and that those people do report resilience and growth when measured with quantitative research methods.<sup>15,16</sup> These measurements, however, might not necessarily reflect the way people organise their thoughts about adaptation or positive change in the aftermath of severe adversity. Especially regarding PTG, the question whether measured scores represent a meaningful growth-related outcome remains open. The validity of the PTG construct has been questioned due to methodological limitations and overinterpretation of the findings related to it.<sup>17</sup> Little is known about *how* people can adapt to or grow from stressful life events. Pals and McAdams<sup>13</sup> argued that qualitatively assessing narratives among people who experienced severe adversities may be more adequate in understanding how they 'make sense' of it and whether they perceive growth or not (p66). Narratives are moreover said to be helpful to differentiate between resilience and growth-related phenomena, and it has been suggested to reinforce the significance of sociocultural context on the development of narrative.<sup>18</sup>

Cultural research shows that variable narrative accounts on resilience and growth in the aftermath of severe adversity may emerge from different



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sociocultural contexts.<sup>13 19</sup> Accordingly, there might be adaptive processes that do not fit into the Western-devised understanding of PTG and resilience.<sup>1</sup> When working with a culture-sensitive lens, researchers have highlighted the need to recognise the culture-specific aetiology and phenomenology of mental health concerns.<sup>20–23</sup> Individuals from various cultural backgrounds differ markedly in their shared conceptions of perceived causes or explanatory models for mental health problems<sup>24 25</sup> and in their ways of expressing them, what is generally referred to as *idioms of distress*.<sup>26 27</sup> Idioms of distress have been defined as ‘an embodied symbolic language for psychosocial suffering that derives its legitimacy from its shared metaphors, meaning and understanding in a group’.<sup>28</sup>

Exploring metaphors is a valuable technique for unravelling shared cultural understanding of mental health phenomena.<sup>29 30</sup> As ‘cultural footprints’ metaphors allow one to unpack the detailed meanings of myths and shared imaginations, as CG Jung, one of the first psychological thinkers interested in cultural phenomena, noted.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, metaphors help to provide a cohesive sociocultural framework for describing and understanding mental health concerns.<sup>32 33</sup> In their seminal book, *Metaphors We Live By*, Lakoff and Johnson<sup>34</sup> argued that metaphorical speech both shapes our thoughts and our behaviour that emerges from them. Metaphors are thus present in both narratives and practices, which in turn may give rise to new metaphors that are grounded in a folk epistemology and shared ontology (I Meili *et al*, submitted, 2018).<sup>35</sup>

In a recent review article, we identified a broad range of metaphorical concepts relating to positive responses to extreme adversity across various cultural contexts.<sup>1</sup> We proposed a taxonomy of eight metaphorical categories and discussed how selected concepts are embedded in different social realities. We subsequently conducted a field study among the indigenous Pitaguary people in Brazil to provide an in-depth understanding of one particular sociocultural framework; this work is described elsewhere in more detail (I Meili *et al*, submitted, 2018). Here, we aim to extend the scope of this research by contrasting the metaphors used by the Brazilian Pitaguary people with metaphors used by another specific cultural group, namely the villagers of Gondo, a small Swiss mountain community. In assuming that culture shapes metaphorical expressions, including the figurative understanding of overcoming severe adversity, our goal was to explore similarities and variation between selected metaphorical expressions by contrasting the metaphor catalogues of the two different communities. An explorative heuristic approach moreover allows making suggestions, how the sociocultural framework can be used to interpret the similarities and—more particularly—outline variations between the two groups. Such a cross-cultural and interdisciplinary study at the edge between psychology and anthropology adds one important piece of evidence to better understanding how culture—expressed through metaphors and narratives—shapes the process of overcoming severe adversities.

## SOCIOCULTURAL AND HISTORICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE TWO STUDY GROUPS

Culturally shared metaphors and underlying psychological assumptions may become more apparent when communities from very different cultural backgrounds are contrasted.<sup>36 37</sup> We carried out parallel studies of two rural, culturally distinct communities to shed light on the range and variation in their metaphorical concepts. The first study was carried out among

the indigenous Pitaguary community in Brazil, which is known to have experienced a severe form of collective historical adversity. The second study took place in Gondo, a Swiss mountain village, which was struck by natural disaster in the year 2000. We anticipated that the communities would have a different understanding of mental health concepts, with the Brazilian Pitaguary community being more distant from the medicalised and urbanised perspective than the Swiss villagers from Gondo. Our relationship networks facilitated access to these communities, which is why they were selected for the present field work.

### Indigenous Pitaguary community in Brazil

The Pitaguary community consists of nearly 4300 individuals,<sup>38</sup> residing in four villages of the townships of Maracanaú and Pacatuba, on the periphery of Fortaleza, Ceará, in Northeastern Brazil. The research reported here took place in Monguba, one of the four villages, which is home to 800 residents. The Pitaguary are recognised as indigenous people, but legal recognition of their land as their property is currently pending.<sup>39</sup> Like most indigenous peoples in Brazil today,<sup>40</sup> the official language of the Pitaguary is Portuguese; their native language, *Tupí*, is used only rarely, for example, in ritual songs or labels for locally cultivated and manufactured products. Situated between the bottom of a mountain and a busy road, the area where the Pitaguary live is wooded and fairly green, and the community engages in limited livestock farming, agriculture and craft work.<sup>39</sup> The Pitaguary’s primary source of income is employment in one of the few community-based offices, nearby factories or—more rarely—government social benefits. Most members of the community have limited education. The Pitaguary traditionally identify as animists, and they place a high value on nature and spiritual healing. They describe their syncretic religion as a strong blend of Christianity (including Catholicism and Evangelism), Umbanda originating from Afro-Brazilian traditions and indigenous spiritual beliefs.<sup>41 42</sup> Their indigenous identity stems from their precolonial cultural heritage, whereas the Afro-Brazilian influence emerged from the era of slavery, between the 16th and 19th centuries.<sup>40 43</sup> The Pitaguary have a strong tradition of community meetings and ritual performances. They consider the surrounding wild-life and stony mountains an essential source of energy and a home for their spirits. However, their environment has been an important target for raw material extraction, which has recently led to conflict with the local government.

Throughout history, the indigenous peoples of Brazil have suffered from discrimination, racism and oppression. This has resulted in the decimation of the majority of these populations, what has been referred to as the ‘indigenous genocide’.<sup>44–46</sup> The pervasive and devastating collective experiences that indigenous people still face have intensified their conflict with local governments and have given rise to severe mental health problems.<sup>40 47</sup> Elevated rates of alcohol and drug abuse and suicide have been reported both among the indigenous peoples of Brazil generally<sup>38 40</sup> and among the Pitaguary in particular (personal communication from the local research assistant)<sup>i</sup>. Up until now, indigenous people throughout the whole country, including the Pitaguary, have been suffering from

<sup>i</sup>For more details on the sociocultural background, see our publication -I Meili, Heim E, Pelosi AC, *et al*. Metaphors on adaptive responses to severe adversity – A field study among the Indigenous Pitaguary community in Brazil. Submitted, 2018.

what is called ‘historical trauma’, a term coined in the 1990s in the context of Northern American indigenous peoples<sup>48</sup> and subsequently applied to numerous indigenous populations across the globe.<sup>49–51</sup>

### Villagers from Gondo, Switzerland

Gondo is a rural village in the mountain Canton of Valais, Switzerland, located close to the border with Italy. The village has recently suffered from emigration. The village once had 150 inhabitants, but this has dwindled to 80, all of whom speak a local Swiss-German dialect. Gondo is enclosed by two mountain ranges that reach 3500 metres (11 500 feet) and is accessed via a small road from Brig, the nearest Swiss town. In the early 20th century, most of the people of Valais were engaged in agriculture, forestry or worked in the mines.<sup>52</sup> Industrialisation in Gondo was a long time coming. It started with the arrival of the rail network and was boosted by the use of hydroelectric energy produced near the village.<sup>53</sup> Since then, employment in factories has become increasingly common, although some villagers have continued to follow a peasant lifestyle.<sup>54</sup> Today, most of the inhabitants of Gondo are employed in the municipal offices, the border guard or the hydroelectric power station, which provides them with good wages. The Canton of Valais has a strong Catholic tradition, which put it in a minority in the former predominantly Protestant-liberal Switzerland. Owing to mistrust of the modern state, its educational system and the increasing pace of industrialisation in the mid-20th century, many of the region’s people decided to shut themselves off from urban developments<sup>55</sup> and have preserved their conservative religious and ethical values.<sup>56</sup> The community’s Catholic worldview is reflected in its engagement in local societies and the existence of Catholic schools.<sup>55</sup>

In October 2000, as a result of heavy rain, Gondo experienced a landslide that ripped through the security walls that had been built to protect the village from rock falls. The landslide destroyed half the village’s houses, and 13 people—1 in 10 of the population—were killed. In an act of solidarity, the neighbouring villages offered emergency accommodation and temporary housing to the surviving villagers. Subsequently, the Swiss population donated a record CHF 17 million to support the reconstruction of the village. The first inhabitants of Gondo returned to their homes a few months after the catastrophe, but most stayed in other communities for at least a year. The village was reopened in 2004 after reconstruction and implementation of safety precautions. Despite the reconstruction efforts, many villagers migrated in the aftermath of the disaster, although with some feelings of guilt according to the participants in our study. In the aftermath of the disaster, the population of the village shrunk by half, and in 2007, it was forced to close its school.

With this brief sociocultural and historical background in mind, this study explores the metaphorical concepts used by two culturally distinct communities, the indigenous Pitaguary in Brazil and the inhabitants of the Swiss mountain village Gondo. We suggest how these metaphors may be contextualised in order to investigate shared and culture-specific ways of looking at overcoming severe adversity. Throughout this contrasting analysis, we try to avoid the assumption that the main source of differences in metaphor conceptualisation is the ontological perception of the self, traditional religious beliefs or socioeconomic, environmental or historical differences between the two cultural groups. Instead, we follow the principles of cultural anthropological

research, which provide for an exploratory approach to interpretation that may encompass several lines of argument.<sup>57</sup> In taking this approach, we are mindful of the restrictions which need to be considered when contrasting qualitative data. However, we do not claim that the current study group is representative of the culture under study.<sup>36–58</sup> Our interpretations are only valid for the individuals we studied and should be viewed as exploratory findings based on heuristic interpretations that provide a starting point for further research.

### METHODS

The two studies presented here are part of a broader project on cultural–clinical psychology focusing on metaphors for various kinds of responses to adversity among rural communities from different countries (I Meili *et al*, submitted, 2018).<sup>59</sup> The first field study was conducted during 1 month in July 2016 in Monguba in Ceará, Brazil with 14 individuals. The second study was performed over the course of a week in Gondo in Valais, Switzerland in April 2017 with nine individuals. Similar methods were used in both field studies.

### Recruitment of participants and procedure

With the assistance of local research facilitators, a *theoretical sampling* strategy<sup>60</sup> was used to select participants at both sites. The Brazilian study group comprised 7 women and 7 men, 10 of whom were considered key informants in the community—local healers, political leaders or teachers at the indigenous school. They ranged in age from 19 to 63 years, with a mean of 33 years and, except two male participants who were about to obtain university degrees, their education ranged between 0 and 10 years. The Swiss study group comprised four women and five men, all of whom had been resident in Gondo in the year of the natural disaster. They ranged in age from 32 to 65 years, with a mean of 47 years and had a professional apprenticeship, except one male participant who had graduated from university.

All participants provided written, informed consent before being interviewed. The studies were approved by the Brazilian National Commission of Ethics in Research and the Ethical Commission Board of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Zurich.

### Semistructured interviews

In both studies, semistructured interviews were used to identify shared metaphorical concepts relating to overcoming adversity. In Brazil, we moreover applied participant observation to gain a better understanding of social structures and people’s roles within the community (for more detail see reference I Meili *et al*, submitted, 2018). All interviews among the Pitaguary were conducted by the first author<sup>ii</sup> in Portuguese. A Swiss research assistant conducted the interviews in Gondo.

The interviews started with an unstructured question which was followed by a question catalogue modified from that used in the *Stories of Resilience Project*.<sup>61</sup> The questions revolved around (1) descriptions of adversities experienced, (2) potential differences between personal and collective experiences of adversity and processes for overcoming adversity, (3) changes or positive experiences following adversity and (4) language, words and expressions related to adversity and overcoming adversity. Whenever necessary, supplementary questions

<sup>ii</sup>The first author is a native speaker of both Brazilian Portuguese and Swiss German.

**Table 1** Metaphorical concepts used by the indigenous Pitaguary community (Brazil) and the villagers of Gondo (Switzerland) to describe the process and outcome of overcoming severe adversity

Main focus	Theme	Metaphors divided per cultural group	
		Pitaguary (BR)	Gondo (CH)
Process	Acceptance and meaning-making	Balance Task/test (from God) Life is a journey— <i>process</i> Personification of <i>time</i>	Balance Task/test (from God) Life is a journey— <i>new start</i> Personification of <i>adversity</i>
	Resistance and agency	Strength— <i>battle</i> <i>Unity</i> <i>Magical thinking/spirits</i>	Strength <i>Collective cohesion</i> <i>Work</i>
Outcome	Recovery and doing well	Container— <i>liberation</i> <i>Equilibrium</i>	Container— <i>order</i> <i>Normality</i>
	Reconfiguration and adversity-activated development	Changed view Transformation— <i>organic</i>	Changed view Transformation— <i>material</i>

Thematic subcategories are indicated, and variations are highlighted in italics.

were used to explore responses more deeply. We cross-validated the expressions we encountered with other members of the community to ensure that we built up a picture of a consistent, shared understanding of metaphorical speech in each community.

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim, and data were coded in the original language using qualitative data analysis software (MAXQDA, V.12.3).

### Systematic metaphor analysis

The technique of systematic metaphor analysis developed by Schmitt<sup>33</sup> was used in this study. It is designed for discovering collective imaginative patterns and allows the reconstruction and interpretation of social realities through a three-step process. First, metaphorical expressions are identified and collected; second, they are categorised and synthesised into concepts; third, these concepts are interpreted, analysed and put into social, cultural and historical contexts. Although the method aims to build condensed and rather abstract categories, the exploration of shared images plays a critical role. The method is an iterative, inductive–abductive technique for analysing textual data according to the principles of grounded theory.<sup>62, 63</sup> The array of possible metaphorical categories was influenced by other publications,<sup>1, 64</sup> but codes were generated inductively from data, making the process very open. We were rigorous in documenting every step of the analysis, establishing a comprehensible coding system and ensuring good inter-rater agreement in coding. The first author and two other bilingual and one German-speaking researchers were involved in wide-ranging discussions about interpretation of results to ensure the validity of the findings.<sup>65</sup> Throughout the research and analysis process, we reflected constantly on the contextual and subjective influences of the interviewer and interpreter, which we consider vital to the integrity of our research.<sup>33</sup>

### FINDINGS

The descriptions of adversities experienced among the indigenous Pitaguary mostly started with topics around their political oppression and their fight for indigenous rights. Without mentioning this term directly, many referred to the historical trauma they have experienced due to colonisation and subsequent marginalisation. As the respondents gained more trust in the conversations, many of them explained how these difficult circumstances had caused personal problems, such as depression-like symptoms, alcohol abuse and elevated suicide rates. Metaphorical expressions related to their

experienced adversity included, for instance, feeling ‘branded’, ‘marked’, ‘blocked’, ‘empty’ or ‘imprisoned’. The most commonly used expression was to ‘live a constant fight’, which is ‘heavy’ and resembles a ‘battle’ that has even been referred to as a ‘cultural massacre’ (I Meili *et al*, submitted, 2018).

With regard to the natural disaster the villagers from Gondo experienced, most of the metaphors revolved around the ‘rupture’ in their course of life and the ‘chaos’ the disaster had left. Participants expressed the fear of ‘being torn out of everyday life’, ‘losing the ground underfoot’, ‘losing equanimity’, feeling ‘impotent’, ‘stunned’ or ‘in the state of shock’. Many reported of experiencing a ‘loss of orientation’, like the feeling of being in a ‘vacuum bubble’ or having an ‘empty picture’ in front of them after the natural disaster had hit them. The primary focus of this study was on adaptive responses to severe adversities; the adversities themselves (and related metaphors) are described elsewhere.<sup>59</sup>

In the following, a selection of the most frequently mentioned and subjectively most controversial metaphorical concepts on overcoming adversity is presented<sup>iii</sup>. First, we organised the metaphors into two broad categories based on whether they related to the process or outcome of overcoming adversity (see table 1). Process metaphors were further subdivided into the abstract themes *acceptance and meaning-making* and *resistance and agency*. The themes used to subdivide the outcome metaphors were *recovery and doing well* and *reconfiguration and adversity-activated development*. Metaphors were assigned to these four themes using an inductive, data-driven approach similar to that used to generate the metaphorical codes. However, the labelling of the abstract themes was influenced by other publications, as we explain in the Discussion section.

In the following, only metaphorical expressions from the interviews are presented. Statements and observations that are without direct metaphorical content but contribute to understanding are incorporated into the Discussion section.

### Acceptance and meaning-making

Both cultural groups used metaphors implying acceptance of severe adversity and an attempt to find meaning in it. There were both similarities and variations in the way these metaphorical concepts were used. The use of ‘balance’ metaphors was common to both cultures. Individuals from both groups expressed an understanding that ‘in order to win something, you

<sup>iii</sup>For brevity, we have not provided quotations in the original language.

must lose something else' or 'accept the downside'. Two Swiss participants explicitly noted that 'the aftermath of the adversity is like a swing' and that 'at a certain level it counterbalances, just like a pendulum'.

Another shared metaphor for accepting—or rather making meaning out of—severe adversity was the acknowledgement that what had happened to the community is a 'task', which was sometimes seen as a 'test from God'. Several respondents from both study groups claimed that what had been imposed to them would serve as a 'lesson in life', some even described it as 'destiny' or likened it to a period of 'probation'.

A further, very prominent shared image implying an accepting mindset is expressed through the metaphors 'life is a journey' and 'being on a path', but there were fundamental variations in the connotations these metaphors had in the two communities we studied. The Pitaguary used the path metaphor to imply that dealing with severe adversity was a 'process'. Harsh living conditions are perceived as continuous, 'just like the flow of a river', and one is required to 'move on along the path' and 'continue on one's course' by 'confronting barriers' and 'circumventing' or 'overcoming' them. Many indigenous respondents personified the concept of time when talking about dealing with adversity in terms of a journey, expressing confidence that time would 'reconstruct', 'organise everything' and 'bring good things'. One elderly woman noted that at the end of the journey, 'we will be able to look back and tell the story'.

Most villagers from Gondo also referred to 'life as a journey' and articulated acceptance of their hardship through expressions such as 'finding the path again' and 'not standing still'. Many respondents emphasised that the disaster was a discontinuity in the journey of life or, as one participant put it, 'there was a clear point, where you had a *before* and an *after*'. Despite this 'rupture', most Swiss participants reported that the severe adversity they had experienced had allowed them to make a 'new start' or 'reorientation' (ie, 'change in direction'), which implies reconfiguration as much as acceptance, an idea we explore in more detail below. Moreover, several Swiss participants asserted that what had helped them the most in recovering from the terrible life event of the landslide was achieving a 'healthy distance'. In referring to dealing with adversity as a continuous journey, many participants used a personification of adversity in a way that they accepted the adversity as a constant companion in life. Some individuals stated that everyone 'carries a history, a backpack', one has to 'live with it' and later 'has to die with it'. One person summed up the continuing and pervasive impact of the disaster: 'In the end, it made me the way I am today'.

### Resistance and agency

There was a group of metaphors relating to resistance and agency, and once again these revealed both points of similarity and variations in the way the two cultural groups talked about severe adversity. One clearly shared understanding relates to the frequently used concept of 'strength'. Swiss individuals used metaphors such as 'staying strong', 'finding the energy and courage to continue' or feeling 'down-to-earth' and 'having strong legs to stand on'. The Brazilian respondents' strength metaphors were strongly associated with the concept of 'battle', referring to the need to 'fight', 'defeat' or 'conquer' adversity. This group of 'resistance and battle' metaphors was often used in the context of the fight for indigenous rights and usually in relation to the importance of 'collectively sticking together in order to achieve something'.

Both groups emphasised the high level of community cohesion during the challenging times. The Pitaguary spoke about 'unity' or 'being connected' as states that persisted during the process of overcoming adversity and throughout their lives, whereas the villagers of Gondo emphasised that 'collective cohesion' was a short-term consequence of the adversity the community had experienced. Some participants noted, 'after this difficult situation we were one', and 'this ties together', but they also reported that the 'cohesion had broken down' as time passed.

The metaphorical concepts relating to resistance and agency that were specific to the Pitaguary often involved magical thinking. It was clear from their narrative that the Pitaguary were closely connected to their natural environment, which they described as 'Mother Earth', and their spirits and Gods, who all served as sources of energy and strength. Several interviewees reported that they often engaged with their spirits through rituals in search of comfort and support (something we observed directly in community rituals). In contrast, some Swiss respondents reported 'being at odds' with their faith after the terrible life event they had experienced. Their resistance and agency was embodied in the perception that overcoming adversity involves 'work' and 'cleaning up'; this is illustrated by metaphors such as 'putting things in order', 'taking things in hand', 'working through it [what had happened], piece by piece' and 'processing' what had happened in order to 'function like before again'. Others expressed the idea that one had to 'come clean with oneself' and 'make the best of it'.

### Recovery and doing well

There were also many metaphors relating to positive outcomes, expressing the perception that one could recover and do well despite having encountered severe adversity. Several respondents from both groups used a container metaphor to describe their physical relationship with the severe adversity they had encountered, and how they had dealt with it. Adversity was often referred to as a problematic situation 'in' which one finds oneself. Respondents from both study groups said 'when you are trapped in a difficult situation, you need to find something good in it'. Sometimes it was the person dealing with adversity which was the container, being required to 'let it [the adversity] get out' or 'be open to new possibilities'.

The Pitaguary particularly emphasised the need to 'find a way out of the adversity'. Some respondents pointed out that one of the positive outcomes of adversity is 'gaining liberty', being 'liberated from the cage' (symbolically standing for the emotional captivity) or 'flying out [of the captivity] just like an eagle'. A further central metaphorical concept among the Brazilian respondents revealed that they understood recovery and doing well as 'state of equilibrium'. This metaphor differs from the balance metaphor because rather than implying that the good and the bad can coexist it expresses a desire to be 'balanced out' or 'in balance with nature, spirits, and the community'.

The metaphors of one young, male Brazilian respondent clearly deviated from those of the other indigenous participants. He used expressions such as 'going back to who we were before', 'finding normality in our village', 'seeking tranquillity', 'healing the wounds' and 'thickening the leather'. Later we encountered similar metaphorical concepts among the Swiss group.

The Swiss also used versions of the container metaphor. Some individuals metaphorically perceived the adversity itself as something that could be 'stored away' inside a box and as something from which 'one is able to extract the positive elements'. The main metaphorical terms used by Swiss participants to refer to

recovery and doing well were like those of our atypical Pitaguary informant: ‘returning to normality’ and ‘finding order’. Some of the Swiss respondents emphasised their appreciation of ‘tranquillity’ and ‘orderliness’ after the disaster, thus coming close to the metaphors they used to describe their agency vis-à-vis the disaster, when they spoke about ‘working through’ and ‘cleaning up’ what had happened.

### Reconfiguration and adversity-activated development

Participants from both cultural groups used metaphors of reconfiguration and adversity-activated development<sup>66</sup>—both themes implying positive outcomes after severe adversity. Both groups strongly emphasised that after encountering adversity, they had a ‘changed view’ of life or a ‘new perspective’ on it. Some spoke about ‘new doors opening’, reported from ‘an extended vision’ or simply, as one Brazilian participant put it, ‘seeing things differently—more clearly’. Similarly, Swiss participants spoke about being ‘more open and seeing things as less problematic’. One Swiss participant spoke explicitly of ‘being able to draw a new picture now’, that is, after his coherent conception of life had been destroyed. The metaphorical notion of ‘reorientation’, exemplified by the ‘life is a journey’ metaphor, can also be linked indirectly to the ‘changed perspective’ metaphor and implies a reconfigured state. Other Swiss participants emphasised that they had come to ‘recognise what really matters’, implying that their values had changed following the disaster. In both groups, the metaphorical concept of a changed perspective on life was often associated with having a greater appreciation for life or ‘having learned a lesson’.

Further metaphors relating to adversity-activated development were those relating to ‘transformation’; these varied considerably between the two cultural subgroups. The Pitaguary used metaphorical terms such as ‘becoming stronger through adversity’, ‘renewal’, ‘transformation’, ‘growth’ and ‘blossoming just like a tree’. These expressions often referred to properties of the natural world, implying an understanding of organic transformation. In contrast, the participants from Gondo stressed the notion of material transformation, saying that the adversity had ‘shaped and moulded’ them in such a way that they ‘felt stronger’ or ‘like someone else’. Others claimed that they now felt ‘lighter’ or ‘more at ease’. Only one participant likened the transformation to a ‘maturation process’.

## DISCUSSION

The goal of this study was to explore and contrast the metaphorical expressions used by two rural communities with very different sociocultural backgrounds to refer to the process and outcomes of overcoming severe adversity. These communities were the indigenous Pitaguary community in Brazil and the people of the Swiss mountain village of Gondo. These communities were chosen for convenience and differed concerning, among other things, language, environment, their perception of the self, traditional religious beliefs and history.

We identified a number of shared and culture-specific metaphorical concepts that were organised into four abstract thematic categories: *acceptance and meaning-making* (metaphors of balance, task or test, life as a journey and personification of time or adversity), *resistance and agency* (strength, unity and collective cohesion, magical thinking and work), *recovery and doing well* (container metaphors, notions of liberation or order, equilibrium and normality) and *reconfiguration and adversity-activated development* (changed perspective and organic or material transformation). We are aware that restricting the presentation

of our results to four abstract themes risks oversimplifying them and misrepresenting the complexity and context specificity of the metaphors we encountered; however, relating our results to existing frameworks and terminology allows us to review the existing scientific evidence regarding phenomena on overcoming adversity and to integrate the various perspectives.

The variety of metaphorical expressions used to talk about overcoming adversity reveals that there are multiple pathways to adaptive responses,<sup>5</sup> with different possibilities and implications.<sup>33</sup> Our interpretation is based on an inductive–abductive approach and compiles our findings in three main ways (see figure 1). First, we briefly outline three metaphorical concepts that were common to both cultures: images of balance, task or test and changed perspective. Second, we discuss shared metaphorical concepts that were used with slightly different connotations: the concepts of collective cohesion and unity, life as a journey and personifications of time and adversity. Third, we provide an arrangement of culture-specific metaphors. We discuss the Brazilian groups’ use of myths relating to magical thinking and metaphors involving organic growth and the Swiss group’s metaphors relating to effort, order and material transformation. Most of our discussion is devoted to the distinctions between the metaphors of the two communities. In this following section, we move away from an abstract consideration of the above thematic concepts and towards a more in-depth discussion on how shared imaginative patterns may be embedded in various sociocultural frameworks.

### Metaphors common to both cultures

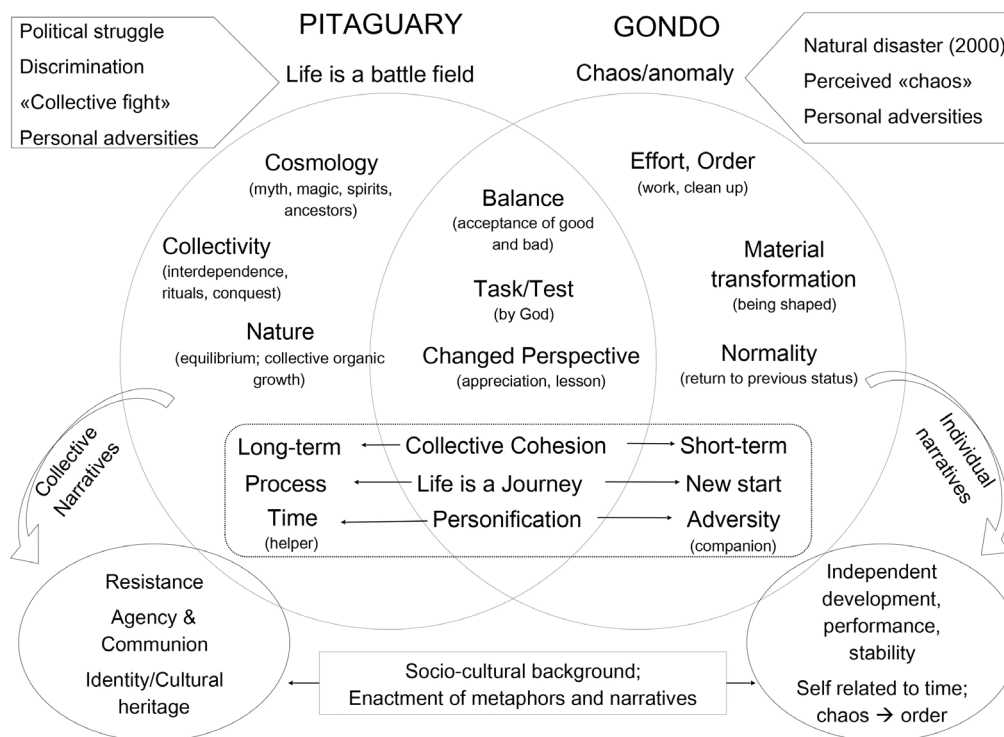
#### The balance of the good and bad in life

The most considerable overlap between the metaphorical concepts of the two cultural subgroups was in expressions relating to acceptance and meaning-making, both of which are widely known to facilitate recovery and positive change following trauma and adversity.<sup>67</sup> Both cultural groups used metaphors relating to ‘balance’, that is, acceptance of both the good and the bad in life. It has been argued that acceptance is one way of finding meaning in adverse life events.<sup>68</sup> Acceptance that life always ‘has two sides that balanced each other out’ may be a universal cultural phenomenon as similar attitudes and phenomena have been described in other reports from countries and regions such as Tibet,<sup>69</sup> South-East Asia,<sup>70</sup> Rwanda,<sup>71</sup> Australia<sup>72</sup> and German-speaking Europe.<sup>73</sup>

#### Task for life or test from God

In both cultural groups, we found metaphors showing that the adversity may be understood as a ‘task for life’ or ‘test by God’, which is a way of attributing meaning to adversity. Meaning-making can be understood as ‘a process in which people engage to reduce discrepancy’ (p259) or a search for comprehensibility and significance.<sup>68</sup> Like this study, research conducted in the Gaza Strip revealed that severe adversity was described as *musiba*, meaning ‘a test by Allah’<sup>74</sup> that requires endurance. Other studies have also shown that making meaning through aspects of religion can help people to overcome adversity, especially in the context of bereavement.<sup>75</sup> Given the strong Catholic influence on both the groups we studied (I Meili *et al*, submitted, 2018),<sup>55</sup> it is not surprising that the metaphors of many respondents implied a search for meaning through religious beliefs.

Religious thoughts guide many people in the aftermath of severe adversity, as they may offer support when core beliefs have been shattered and serve as triggers for positive psychological change. Many world religions foster similar adaptive



**Figure 1** Semantic map of metaphorical concepts from the two study groups divided into common metaphors, shared metaphors with different cultural connotations and culture-specific metaphors.

responses to severe adversity,<sup>15</sup> but it should also be remembered that atheists and agnostics can discover deep meaning in severe adversity, which is why seeking support in religious faith is only one way of overcoming severe adversity.

### Changed perspective and seeing more clearly

A third shared metaphor is that of the ‘changed perspective’; we suggest that these metaphors are related to overcoming severe adversity through reconfiguring one’s worldview, beliefs or goals.<sup>76</sup> It has been argued that to make sense of severe adversity, one must reflect on the various elements making up the traumatic experience.<sup>7</sup> Respondents from both groups reported that reflecting on their experience and ‘looking back’ or ‘looking forward’ enabled them to reorientate themselves and ‘see more clearly’ or ‘learn something’. Several authors have emphasised that in many cultures, ‘understanding’ and ‘knowing’ are often metaphorically described in terms of ‘seeing’.<sup>30 77</sup>

It could be that these three metaphorical concepts of ‘balance’, ‘task from God’ and ‘changed perspective’ represent human cultural universals, but further research in other cultural contexts is needed to substantiate this hypothesis.

### Cross-culturally shared concepts with different metaphorical connotations

#### Short-term and long-term collective cohesion and unity

One set of shared metaphors that had slightly different connotations in the two cultures was that encompassing concepts of ‘collective cohesion’ and ‘unity’. Community cohesion and unity are thought to indicate collective resistance and agency directed towards the process of overcoming adversity<sup>78</sup> based on numerous studies of community resilience from around the world.<sup>79–82</sup> Ungar<sup>19</sup> claimed that resilience must be understood as ‘the capacity of both individuals and their environments to

interact in ways that optimise developmental processes’ (p256), rather than being limited to an individual’s ability to succeed under stress.

However, ways of ‘sticking together’ differed remarkably between the Gondo villagers and the Pitaguary. Among the Swiss collective cohesion, mostly took the form of regional and national solidarity expressed in the contribution of resources for the rebuilding of the village and lasted for a rather short period of time. This short-term cohesion can be related to the purported independent mindset of the Swiss,<sup>83</sup> which is also reflected in their univocal form of speech. In both communities, our interview questions were aimed at soliciting information about the collective community response to adversity, but Swiss respondents often began by saying ‘I can only speak for myself’.

In contrast, our Pitaguary informants reported that the community’s unity was not so much a short-term response to severe adversity, but a persistent phenomenon and backdrop to life. Given the historical background of cultural repression of indigenous communities and the constant fight for indigenous rights,<sup>38 39</sup> engagement in communal activities is an essential resource for indigenous communities.<sup>46</sup> The Pitaguary reported that they performed rituals and ceremonies to celebrate victories, overcome adversity and as expression and way of strengthening their collective identity.<sup>40</sup> The Pitaguarys’ use of polyvocal speech—they almost always used the pronoun ‘we’ instead of ‘I’—also implies a strong sense of interdependence.<sup>40 83</sup>

#### Journey of life and time perspective among the Pitaguary

With regard to metaphors relating to moving through time and space, both groups appeared to share the concept of ‘life as a journey’, a metaphorical schema derived from bodily experiences of walking along the road of life.<sup>33 34</sup> For the Brazilian group, the most compelling feature of the path metaphor was

the understanding that overcoming adversity is a never-ending process. This legitimises the criticism that the ‘Western’ perspective on trauma is limited in its understanding to a singular episode of distress (acute or post-traumatic stress) and highlights the importance of the notion of ‘historical trauma’<sup>51</sup> which recognises the indigenous people’s continuous exposure to adversity since the invasion of European settlers.<sup>48</sup>

The personification of time often occurred alongside the metaphor of ‘process’, but the implications varied. Time was sometimes described as being ‘in charge’ of the healing process, which may imply that the Pitaguary conceive of themselves as stationary, with time moving past them and ‘good events’ moving towards them. Yet some of their metaphors implied the notion that time itself is stationary, while they are moving towards future events.<sup>84</sup> Given that representations of time vary dramatically across cultures,<sup>85</sup> further research would produce more diverse results and provide more insights into how different perspectives on time affect the process of overcoming adversity.<sup>86</sup>

### New starts and personification of adversity in Gondo

Unlike the Pitaguary, who conceived the process of dealing with severe adversity as part of the longer journey through life, the villagers from Gondo viewed severe adversity as offering, in metaphorical terms, a ‘new start’ or a ‘new direction’ to their journey through life. It is plausible that the natural disaster experienced by Gondo constituted a clear rupture in the lives of the villagers, such that retrospectively, they could divide their lives into ‘before the landslide’ and ‘after’. In the aftermath and while dealing with the consequences, they reported of thinking more in terms of everything ‘starting anew’ 1 day. The concept of a ‘new start in life’ following a specific catastrophic event has also been reported in other parts of the world, for example, Tibet<sup>87</sup> and the USA.<sup>88</sup>

Regarding the ‘journey of life’, adversity is often personified, which may have specific implications: accepting the devastating experience as a steady ‘companion’ implies that the villagers of Gondo might have been able to integrate the experience into their life history in a meaningful way, a strategy that appears to elicit beneficial transformative processes.<sup>3</sup> This personification of severe adversity and deliberate integration of the event into one’s biography is strongly reminiscent of what has been referred to as ‘psychologisation’.<sup>89</sup> In this process, the integrity of a healthy self is maintained, and detachment from challenging events is achieved as part of the maturation process.

### Culture-specific metaphors

#### Myths, equilibrium and organic growth among the Pitaguary

Most of the metaphors that were specific to the Pitaguary were related to myths surrounding their spiritual beliefs and relationship to nature, as commonly described for indigenous tribes in Brazil.<sup>40</sup> Metaphors of magical thinking reflected the Pitaguary’s connection to nature and the spirits, generally represented by animals, ancestors or the deceased, which we have described in an earlier study of this community.<sup>42</sup> Interaction with these spirits is often via rituals, symbolic actions used to making sense of adverse experience.<sup>90 91</sup> Such ritual behaviour was not observed in or reported by the Swiss.

The main messages of indigenous Brazilian mythology are the importance of respecting the needs of the rainforest and negating a hierarchy to other living beings.<sup>43 92</sup> Furthermore, many Brazilian indigenous people share a belief in the coexistence of natural and supernatural beings that have both a material and a spiritual dimension.<sup>40</sup> These two dimensions are integrated

into a unified whole and must remain in balance, something that is reflected in the frequent use of the metaphorical concept of ‘maintaining an equilibrium’. Indigenous communities often stress the notion that healing mechanisms rely on ‘counterbalancing’ or ‘even out’ unfavourable conditions.<sup>93</sup>

Like many indigenous Brazilian communities,<sup>40</sup> the Pitaguary believe that their health is intimately linked to their social organisation, nature and cosmology (for further details, see reference I Meili *et al*, submitted, 2018). Illness is not viewed in terms of biomedical aetiology; health is seen as a gift from nature, and maintenance of health requires surveillance of nature’s ‘good’ and ‘bad’ spirits. This conviction greatly exemplifies the Pitaguary’s cultural explanatory model of health in general, which has obviously influenced their mental health beliefs and corresponding metaphorical expressions on overcoming adversity.

When referring to the organic growth happening in nature, our Pitaguary respondents often spoke of their aspiration to transform ‘just as nature does’. This transformation process has often been linked to the concept of PTG described in both clinical and non-clinical samples across the world.<sup>16 94–96</sup> However, in contrast to the Swiss group, only the Brazilian respondents spontaneously used the term ‘growth’ in direct speech, which may lead to a critique of the universal applicability of this metaphorical concept.

By and large, culture-specific metaphorical concepts of the Pitaguary emphasise the interconnectedness of their selves with other selves and their sociocentric, ecocentric and cosmocentric worldview (I Meili *et al*, submitted, 2018). Thus, it appears that the Pitaguary tend to externalise their mental state by making it dependent on outer sources. The interdependent self is characterised as striving for harmony in interpersonal relationships through the consideration of the thoughts, emotions and behaviours of other people.<sup>83</sup> This is achieved through restraint and emotional control and may yield a selective de-emphasis on psychological symptoms.<sup>89</sup> It has been suggested that alienation from psychological symptoms is more frequent in non-Western cultures.<sup>97</sup> For the Pitaguary, this will be further investigated by focusing on adversity-related metaphors.<sup>59</sup>

#### Effort, order and material transformation in Gondo

Mythological narratives and tales did not seem to play a crucial role in the Swiss villagers’ response to adversity. The only common narratives shared in the Gondo village were first, the detailed description of the natural disaster and second—in contrast to the Pitaguary—the notion of nature as a common enemy that elicited short-term collective cohesion. The most notable metaphors specific to the Swiss community revolved around the understanding that one has to ‘work through’ an adversity in order to ‘get back to normal’. In contrast to the Pitaguary—whose container metaphors shed light on their desire to ‘feel liberated’ from adversity—the Swiss tended to speak of ‘putting things in order’ and ‘storing it [the adversity] away’, highlighting their shared perception of the recovery process. Together, this desire to ‘get back to normal’ and the temporary nature of the community’s cohesion suggest a degree of individual detachment among the villagers, potentially emphasising a mindset of independence and the individuality.<sup>83</sup>

Two historical trends that have significantly influenced Switzerland, in general, may have influenced the metaphor conceptualisation among the villagers from Gondo. First, although Gondo has a Catholic tradition, the Canton of Valais certainly bears the imprint of the Swiss Reformation of the 16th century. Traces of the Protestant work ethic<sup>98</sup> are still visible in the metaphorical



concepts used by the villagers of Gondo, as their expressions seemingly emphasise personal effort and diligence. The second influence of Western history may be traced back to the Enlightenment and civil emancipation following the Reformation, which gave rise to a new era of rational thought. The subsequent post-modern era has been claimed to have strongly influenced societal values and beliefs about illness and well-being.<sup>99 100</sup> Ways of thinking in the postmodern era shifted away from the notion of external control towards that of self-determination and personal agency, and personal values started to revolve around individual identity and performance.

The notion that one is responsible for one's success and for 'making the best of' a situation, as some of the respondents in Gondo put it, illuminates the last metaphor specific to the Swiss group, namely the concept of material transformation. Unlike the Brazilian respondents, who frequently referred to an organic transformation process, the Swiss referred to being 'shaped' or 'moulded'—terms that in their conception have positive connotations—when speaking about adversity-activated development. This language is consistent with the claim that Western cultures are strongly influenced by materialist as well as individualist values.<sup>101</sup>

## LIMITATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

In this article, we have demonstrated that there are both similarities and striking variations in the metaphorical conception of overcoming severe adversity in the two cultural groups. Culture-specific metaphors are part of idioms of distress that are rooted in particular sociocultural frameworks.<sup>20 26–28</sup> Some of the variations in metaphorical expression were undoubtedly due to differences in the type of adversity faced by the two cultural groups: the Brazilian indigenous Pitaguary experienced long-term, interpersonal adversity—which is characteristic of historical trauma—whereas the Swiss villagers from Gondo had suffered a one-off natural disaster. As we have stressed throughout the article, this discrepancy is one of the major limitations of the study. Different studies have pointed out how the type of trauma can influence the extent to which psychological adaptation is experienced and also how this is manifested.<sup>102 103</sup> It may be worth attempting a more systematic analysis of the use of metaphors, either examining how one culture refers to several types of adversity or looking at how references to one particular type of adversity vary across cultures. However, even if individuals from distinct cultural backgrounds have experienced the same type of adversity, one would still expect to find variations in their metaphorical expressions and narratives due to, for example, differences in context, environment and history.<sup>18 30</sup> The present study has shown that these factors have considerable influence on metaphorical conceptualisation.

Some further limitations must be mentioned. First, there are the well-known restrictions on contrasting qualitative data, which cannot be entirely representative.<sup>36</sup> In discussing similarities and variations, we stress that these findings are tenable only on the basis of data collected and do not necessarily speak for the culture as a whole. Second, data may be biased because respondents were self-selecting. Individuals who volunteered to participate in this study were overly interested in sharing their positive feelings and thoughts, which might have resulted in a distortion of answer tendencies. Third, it was not always possible to distinguish between metaphorical concepts or allocate them definitively to a distinct category. We argue, however, that this broad variety of metaphorical expressions permits the

development of a locally shared understanding of responses to severe adversity.<sup>104</sup>

By cataloguing a wide range of metaphorical concepts, we have provided a foundation for further research. Looking at metaphorical expressions through a culturally sensitive lens may deliver insights into the complexity of processes of overcoming severe adversity. Terms such as 'resilience' and 'PTG' that are widely used in contemporary research in the context of responses to traumatic experiences may not be adequate to describe the full spectrum of adaptive responses to severe adversity.<sup>1 2 13</sup> These contemporary conceptions may be expanded by specific metaphors shared by various cultural groups. Investigating the metaphors by which different cultures live may help us to understand of how folk epistemologies and culturally shared ontologies influence beliefs about illness and mental health. Such insights can be translated into culturally adapted interventions which contribute to support local healing processes.<sup>105</sup> The study on metaphors shared by various cultures, thus, adds one important piece of evidence to the development of a culture-sensitive approach that includes local idioms without presupposing mainstream assumptions on resilience and PTG.

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