Behavioral Strategies of Students as a Condition of Psychological Safety in Difficult Situations

This research focuses on behavioral strategies of students which provide for psychological safety in difficult life situations. The first-year and fourth-year students of the "Technosphere Safety" and "Fire Safety" programs of Penza Cossack Institute of Technology which is a branch of FGBOU VO MGUTU named after K. G. Razumovsky (PKU) participated in the research. The test questionnaire "Methods of coping behavior" by R. Lazarus, S. Folkman was used. According to the research findings, the senior students adopt constructive behavioral strategies: rational analysis, problem-focused coping, exercising self-control and managing emotions, positive rethinking and reappraisal of difficult situations as the result of both the advanced training and the diverse forms of military sports training. The most common behaviors for the junior students are seeking help and support in the nearest social environment (friends, parents, teachers), confrontation involving offensive activity and the search for some emotional benefits reducing stress. The research revealed that in the process of professional training the students of the mentioned programs can develop behavioral strategies that optimally ensure psychological safety.

Keywords: psychological safety, coping behavior, coping strategies, difficult situation, students, professional training

Introduction

In modern society the number of situations that pose a threat to human security has significantly increased. These are technological accidents, environmental disasters, social and economic instability, biological threats, rising crime, terrorism, etc.

In times of crisis and global instability it is the need for safety that becomes the main demand of an individual determining his or her behavior and activities. In order to meet the challenges and requirements of the modern world, an individual should have mechanisms for psychological defense and develop specific behavioral strategies that will enable him or her to adapt to such conditions effectively and flexibly. The inability of a person to cope with dangerous and difficult situations reduces the efficiency of professional activity, affects mental and physical health, and, in general, worsens the quality of life of an individual.

Psychological safety is considered to be the protection of a person from threatening influences of the external world and internal environment, which implies the capacity and readiness of an individual to discern, foresee and avoid dangers, as well as adequate behavior in dangerous and extreme situations.

Higher education creates for a student many various difficult situations that disturb his or her psychological safety. In addition to traditional credit tests
and examinations, it might be psychologically difficult for a young person to overcome the challenge of changing from school to a university system (at the beginning), to meet the requirements of higher education level, to acquire a new social role of a student, to present oneself to a new group, to adopt norms and behavior patterns in a new group and university, to cope with the difficulty in communicating with a lecturer. In order to adapt to the student life difficulties and to protect oneself from possible everyday dangers, a student needs to adopt certain behavior strategies to ensure psychological safety. In psychology behaviors based on conscious efforts of an individual to overcome a difficult life situation have been called coping (R. Lazarus, S. Folkman) or coping behavior (T. L. Kryukova, S. K. Nartova-Bochaver).

Pedagogical and psychological support of the teaching process which involves behavioral strategies used by students to adapt to difficult situations emerging during higher education training plays an important role (Barbot, Besancon, Lubart, 2016; Corazza, 2016; Harris, Reiter-Palmon, 2015). Thus, the need to study coping behavior strategies of students is dictated by the increased level of requirements for the professional socialization of future specialists.

The purpose of this research is to reveal the peculiarities of coping strategies in difficult life situations among individuals of student age.

The subject of the research is to determine the differences in the choice of coping strategies used in difficult life situations by the first- and third-year students.

The results of this study may be useful for improving the system of psychological and pedagogical support for students, as well as for developing psychological education programs aimed at increasing resilience to difficult situations and finding psychological resources to resist stress.

This research presents a brief theoretical overview of the problem of coping and coping behavior strategies, the results of empirical study of the junior and the senior students' coping strategies. The most preferred junior and senior students' coping strategies have been analyzed. The distinguishing features of coping behavior of the students of different courses have been defined. The final part of the paper draws conclusions and reveals the practical significance of the research.

**Literature Review**

In psychological science the problem of copying behavior or copying is quite well developed by foreign and domestic researchers J. Amirhan, R. Lazarus, S. Falkman, L. I. Antsiferova, I. G. Malkina-Pykh, A.V. Libin, S. K. Nartova-Bochaver and others.

Copying behavior is defined by the majority of authors to be one of the types of human social behavior manifested in threatening and dangerous situations. This behavior enables a person to react differently to a problem or a dangerous situation (to adapt, change and prevent it). Copying behavior is
performed through conscious, purposeful actions chosen by a behaver according to situation characteristics and personal resources.

Leading researchers of this problem R. Lazarus and S. Folkman interpret coping behavior to be an intentional effort (cognitive, emotional, behavioral) that a person makes to reduce the impact of a stress situation. At the same time, the interaction of an individual with the situation can be both active (transformation, change) and passive (adaptation, acceptance, avoidance). The authors note that coping behavior as a form of adaptive behavior in a difficult situation is aimed at:

• reducing negative effects of stress;
• managing a situation (adaptation or transformation);
• maintaining intrinsic emotional balance;
• stabilizing the ego image, maintaining self-appraisal, increasing self-confidence;
• maintaining social relationships with other people.

In the process of socialization an individual develops various behavioral strategies in difficult situations, both constructive (active) and passive. Constructive behavior involves a variety of active and transformative actions aimed at solving a problem situation and neutralizing stressor’s influence. This behavior can be implemented into such strategies as situation analysis, problem-solving planning, information search, reappraising the situation in a positive light, etc. In general, these strategies focus on behavioral activity and rational approach to the problem.

The strategy of seeking help and support in a difficult situation is partially accepted as constructive. The inadequacy of this strategy can be manifested in the fact that its constant application contributes to the formation of an individual’s intention to impose the solution of problems on other people.

Passivity as a behavioral strategy is related to avoidance, escape from the situation, lack of readiness for active threat managing and does not involve actions aimed at transforming the situation, so it is considered non-constructive.

The group of emotion-focused strategies assuming different variants of reducing emotional experiences which have arisen in a difficult situation: suppression, containment of emotions, positive reappraisal, self-blaming, distracting, and others also belongs to passive strategies. This makes it possible to reduce a stressor and partially achieve psycho-social adaptation.

Researchers note that if a person has insufficiently developed constructive strategies of behavior in difficult and dangerous situations, then the risk of reduce in social adaptation and deterioration in his mental and physical health increases.

The future professional activity of "Technosphere Safety" and "Fire Safety" students belongs to the spheres with a high probability of situations threatening the health and life of a person. This specificity of the profession makes it necessary for students to develop constructive behaviors that will
enable them to cope with future professional difficulties and ensure psychological safety (Tsvetkova, Ivanova, 2017; Vinogradov, Vinogradova, Kachan, Bochkareva, Nazarova, 2021). The first-year students also demonstrate an intense willingness for rapid professionalization, which seems to be linked to their strong career focus, especially in cadet classes or operational services staff families (Strielkowski, Kiseleva, Popova, 2018; Zvereva, 2015).

Professional training of "Technosphere Safety" and "Fire Safety" students includes specific practice-focused educational technologies helping students gain experience in solving problems in extreme and emergency situations which may arise in their activities in the future. At the stage of career education this can contribute to students’ adoption of constructive behavioral strategies which promote coping with difficult situations not only in professional activities, but also in various spheres of life (family, health, communication) (Bezborodova, Vinogradova, Tertychnaya, Vinogradov, Kachan, 2019, 2020; Strielkowski, Kiseleva, Popova, 2018; Schukina, 2018). In this regard, senior students are expected to adopt more constructive strategies for dealing with difficult life situations than junior students are.

Methodology. Materials and Methods

Methodological basis of the research is the coping-behavior concept stated in works of foreign researchers R. Lazarus, R. Plutchik S. Folkman and others and the notion of coping behavior as one of conscious and purposeful forms of activity of a behaver by L. I. Antsiferova, T. L. Kryukova, M. V. Saporovskaya, S. K. Nartova-Bochaver and others.

The study participants were the 1st-4th year students of the "Technosphere Safety" and the "Fire Safety" programs at Penza Cossack Institute of Technology (branch) of the Federal State Budgetary Educational Institution of Higher Education named after K. G. Razumovsky (PKU). Due to the purpose of the research two groups were allocated: the first included senior students (3rd - 4th year), the second included junior students (1st - 2nd year). The groups were gender-balanced.

For revealing behavioral strategies in difficult situations the test-questionnaire "Methods of coping behavior" (by R. Lazarus, S. Falkman in adaptation of T.A. Kryukova and others) proved to be the most valid and reliable tool of diagnostics of coping behavior was used. This test defines 8 types of coping behavior related, according to R. Lazarus’ concept, to the three basic behavioral strategies: problem-focused, emotion-focused and escape strategies.
Research Result

The diagnostic study of behavioral strategies of the senior and the junior students allowed us to obtain generalized results in the form of group average rates.

Tables 1 and 2 demonstrate the results of the ranking of the average group rates of the students' behavioral strategies.

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<th>Table 1. Group Averages of Behavioral Strategies of the Senior Students</th>
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The results of the tables reveal that there are differences in the behavioral strategies used by the senior and the junior students in difficult life situations. The analysis of the data obtained is presented below.

Discussion

The dominant strategy in difficult life situations for the senior students is rational analysis of a problem and finding solutions. In doing this way the students tend to regulate their behavior by controlling their emotions, i.e., they tend to self-regulate. This is proved by the high importance of such strategy as self-control (rank 2). Furthermore, the positive reappraising strategy which involves rethinking of a problem encountered and finding out new positive personal experience takes the leading position (rank 3) among the students. In general, these behavioral strategies provide for rational, adaptive behavior of an individual in dangerous and difficult situations involving control of his or her emotional state. As a rule, such people are able to remain calm and self-
confident, to perform the necessary self-protection measures, and that ensures their safety. The use of effective behavioral strategies in case of difficult situations by the senior students can be explained not only by their age characteristics and life experience, but also by the specifics of professional training at the graduate level providing for skills to overcome various extreme and emergency situations through the use of certain practice-focused educational technologies. The students also acquire safe behavior skills and problem-solving experience in various unforeseen work situations during taking professional practice at Fire and Rescue Training Center. The development of volitional qualities and self-regulation skills of the senior students is promoted by various types of military-sports training owing to the specific nature of the future professional activity in the emergency protection state system.

Seeking social support in a difficult situation is a lot less common with the senior students. This is probably due to senior students’ increasing independence, the greater focus on their own life experience. The behavioral strategies of accepting responsibility and confrontation are seldom used by the senior students (ranks 5 and 6). This testifies to the fact that students facing a difficult life situation are not always inclined to realize their responsibility for its occurrence and overcoming. However, they are less assertive and aggressive in dealing with the problem.

Such passive behavioral strategies as distancing and escape-avoidance are the least important for the students of this group. This result reveals that the students do not ignore the problem situation, do not seek to distract from it or diminish its importance.

Thus, the senior students use constructive and psychologically appropriate ways of overcoming difficult life situations and do not avoid the difficulties and problems that arise in their lives, but rather prefer to solve them through active, transforming actions.

Next, let's discuss the results of the study of the behavioral strategies of the junior students.

The analysis reveals that the most frequently used strategy by the junior students in difficult life situations is seeking social support. This indicates that when faced with a difficult situation in life, young people focus not so much on their personal resources, but on external help and support from the social environment in solving the problem situation that has arisen. This focus among the students in this group can be seen as a manifestation of their age-specific characteristics (dependence on family, certain infantile behavior, lack of experience in overcoming life difficulties, etc.). The focus on help and support can also be explained by the fact that at this age there is an active learning of behaviors that contribute to the successful difficult life situations overcoming by communicating with important people. It is therefore appropriate for a student to use this coping strategy.

Confrontation is the second most important strategy in the students’ behavior indicating the willingness to an active action to overcome the difficulties encountered. However, for the young people these actions may
become too offensive and even aggressive and that may have a negative impact on relationships, and may not always contribute to problem-solving, especially, if it involves interpersonal interaction (for example, a conflict situation). At the same time, we consider this strategy to be justified and able to give quite an adequate adaptation in terms of student age (early youth) and the initial stage of the higher education which requires energy and assertiveness when entering a new social environment.

The strategy of positive reappraising of a difficult situation (rank 3) was among the leading ones among the students. This strategy is manifested in the students’ behavior due to their age, not so much in the rational rethinking of the problem, as in the intention to find some emotionally positive moments that contribute to reducing the level of stress in a difficult situation. This strategy, therefore, provides students with only a temporary adaptation to the situation by changing their attitude to it, but ultimately does not contribute to its constructive solving.

Significantly less than the above strategies, the students use a constructive strategy related to the seeking a rational way out of a difficult life situation (problem-solving planning strategy, rank 4). This may be due to the fact that young people cannot yet objectively assess difficult life situations, analyze the reasons of their failures, find the best way out of the current situation because of intellectual and personal resources limit and lack of life experience. Furthermore, the process of junior year studies does not yet include practice-focused tasks for future professional activities, so students do not have sufficiently developed skills to deal with difficult work situations.

Low-value coping strategies for the students are self-control (rank 5) and accepting responsibility (rank 6). This suggests that the junior students have little ability to control emotions in difficult situations and take personal responsibility for the problem. Perhaps this is due to students' lack of mature personality qualities, namely the ability to self-regulate and to use the intrinsic locus of control.

The least important strategies for the students in difficult situations are distancing and avoidance. These results reveal that the students do not seek to avoid a difficult situation, to try to diminish its importance, to debase it, etc.

Conclusion

Thus, our research revealed that in the process of professional training the students develop constructive behavioral strategies in difficult life situations. This is evidenced by the senior students’ readiness for active seeking a rational solution, controlling emotions and managing their behavior in difficult and dangerous situations.

The junior students unlike the senior ones in difficult situations are more focused on the nearest social environment assistance (friends, parents, teachers). There is a lack of such constructive strategies as problem-solving planning, self-control, accepting responsibility, which may be related to
personal immaturity of young people and lack of experience in overcoming
difficult and dangerous situations.

Therefore, it seems appropriate for the junior students to organize
professional business games and trainings at practical classes, which provide
them with constructive coping skills in extreme situations.

The general trend among both the junior and the senior students is the lack
of behavior diminishing or ignoring the harm of a dangerous and difficult
situation, which can be regarded to be a perfectly adequate behavioral strategy
to guarantee psychological safety.

Thus, it is possible to conclude that the specificity of professional training
in the "Technosphere Safety" and "Fire Safety" programs by providing students
with safe behaviors and experiences in dealing with various unforeseen work-
related situations contributes to the formation of student’s behavioral strategies
that optimally ensure psychological safety.

The results obtained should be used for promoting the psychological
aspects of the educational process and organizing training sessions aimed at
teaching students of a higher education institution productive copying.

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