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PSYCHOLOGICAL DEFENSE AND COPING STRATEGIES OF STUDENTS

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The need to study psychological defense and coping strategies of the individual is due to the increase in emotional stress and anxiety of a modern person living in a dynamically changing environment: development, relationships, educational and professional activities against the background of interaction with the digital environment. Data on the unconscious component of coping resources with situational challenges can serve as a basis for developing optimal programs for emotional resistance, human psychological health, prevention of mental stress, and destructive ways of overcoming difficulties.

Key words: personality, individual, psychological defense, coping resources/behavior, adolescence.

Introduction

Human development and activity can be viewed as a series of “encounters” with situations of varying difficulty. The dynamism of the modern world, often the excessive variability of local social, economic, and cultural conditions initiates the functioning of such mental formations as psychological defense and coping resources. Socialization and achieving personal goals are impossible without overcoming difficulties or obstacles.

Difficulties range from those causing minor confusion to those threatening life, health, or significant objects in the life of an individual. As a result, there is a disturbance of the emotional state, leading to the development of negative consequences for the psyche. Forecasting such consequences and protecting the psyche from destructive disorders is the main function of human psychological defense mechanisms [1; 2]. In a “defensive” state, an individual is able to control their thoughts, emotions, and behavior; anxiety and negative experiences are reduced, and a constructive assessment of the situation and the individual’s capabilities increases [3]. Psychological defense is an unconscious mechanism for regulating an individual’s behavior, leading to a decrease in the intensity of negative experiences and an increase in a person’s adaptability to the situation [1; 4].

Defense mechanisms are formed mainly in early childhood as a result of the child’s search for ways to maintain a balanced emotional state when confronted with prohibitions from an adult. The family aspects are of key importance in the formation of psychological defense: the nature of parent-child relationships, the level of education, social status, and professional activity of adults. When family relationships are deformed, there may be a risk of increasing the role of non-constructive defensive behavior in difficult situations during adulthood.

In modern literature, along with psychological defense, researchers place the concept of coping strategies (coping behavior) [5; 6]. A number of them nevertheless differentiate these formations, indicating that psychological defense mechanisms are aimed at avoiding the problem, blocking information about it, while coping works to resolve the problem in an optimal way [6]. It can be assumed that the concepts of “psychological defense” and “coping strategy” are not synonymous, but they probably complement each other.

Coping behavior is a purposeful, conscious behavior of an individual, formed with the purpose of resolving a difficult life situation or a situation perceived as dangerous and life-threatening to the individual or something significant in life [2; 3]. The main types of coping behavior are: resistive coping, distancing, self-control, seeking social support, taking responsibility, avoidance, planned problem solving, positive reassessment [5]. In the structure of coping behavior, coping resources (a set of resources thanks to which an individual is able to overcome a stressful situation) and coping strategies (a purposeful action aimed at overcoming a stressful situation) are distinguished [5].

Main Body

The empirical study was conducted in three stages: 1) analysis of students' psychological defense mechanisms (the Lifestyle Index method by R. Plutchik and H. Kellerman) [7; 8]; 2) analysis of students' coping strategies at higher education institutions (the Ways of Coping Questionnaire (WCQ) by S. Folkman and R. Lazarus, adapted by T.L. Kryukova, E.V. Kuftyak and M.S. Zamyshlyayeva) [9]; 3) statistical analysis and interpretation of data (Mann-Whitney U test).

The study was conducted at the educational institution "Mogilev State A. Kuleshov University" (hereinafter referred to as "MSU") and the interstate educational institution of higher education "Belarusian-Russian University" (hereinafter referred to as "BRU"). A total of 100 respondents aged 17 to 22 years (the average age of respondents was 19.2 years) took part in the study, including 50 students (25 young men and 25 girls) of "MSU" majoring in "Social Pedagogy" (hereinafter referred to as "pedagogical major"); 50 students (25 young men and 25 girls) of "BRU" majoring in "Innovation" (hereinafter referred to as "non-pedagogical major").

Let us consider the primary data on the study of psychological defense mechanisms of the respondents (Table 1).

Table 1 – Predominant psychological defense mechanisms of the respondents, N=100 (in %)

Defense mechanism	Number of respondents
Projection	44
Regression	31
Rationalization	23
Denial	13
Displacement	7
Compensation	5
Hypercompensation	1
Substitution	0

Table 1 reflects the results of the prevalence of psychological defense mechanisms, taking into account the possible prevalence of several psychological defense mechanisms in one respondent. Based on the results of the analysis of the presented data, it can be concluded that the most common types of psychological defense among respondents aged 17–22 are projection, regression, rationalization, which generally agrees with the main ontogenetic patterns, personal development during early adolescence [2].

Next, we will consider the results of a comparative analysis of the data by gender (Table 2).

Table 2 – Psychological defense mechanisms of young men and girls

Defense mechanism	Young men	Girls	<i>U</i>	<i>P</i>	
Displacement	3,5	2,9	937	0,031	
Regression	5,1	6,2	966	0,049	
Substitution	1,6	2,2	952,5	0,036	

Denial	4,2	4,8	1074	0,226	
Projection	6	6,8	1041	0,151	
Compensation	3,8	3,9	1202,5	0,746	
Hypercompensation	2,8	3,1	1162,5	0,549	
Rationalization	5,9	4,6	861,5	0,007	

According to the data presented in Table 2, the compositional psychological defense mechanisms of the young men and girls differ. Projection, rationalization, and regression prevail among the young men. The young men tend to attribute their feelings and thoughts to others. They justify their contradictory feelings and actions in a seemingly logical way, avoiding recognition of the truth. Rationalized conclusions are ultimately accepted as a guide to further actions. The young men focus on easier situations, avoiding difficulties. Projection, denial, and rationalization prevail among girls. Like the young men, in ambiguous situations the girls attribute their unwanted feelings and thoughts to another person. They often avoid difficult situations and decision-making, justifying this with logical constructions that are quite reasonable for them.

Next, we will consider the primary data on the respondents' coping strategies.

Table 3 – Coping strategies of the respondents, N=100 (in %)

Coping strategy	Level		
	high	average	low
Positive reassessment	49	43	8
Planning a solution	41	49	10
Search for social support	30	57	13
Self-control	29	55	16
Escape/avoidance	28	60	12
Distancing	14	64	22
Confrontation	9	70	21
Taking responsibility	1	52	47

The data presented in Table 3 allow us to make a preliminary conclusion: the respondents demonstrate a relatively established subjective position in operating the situation, coping with circumstances in a preferred way. The stabilization of subjectivity may well be due not only to increasing psychological maturity, but also to its acceleration in connection with studying at an institution of higher education.

Table 4 presents the data on gender differences in the respondents' predominant coping strategies.

Table 4 – Coping strategies of young men and girls

Coping strategy	Young men	Girls	<i>U</i>	<i>P</i>
Confrontation	8,4	9,3	1075,5	0,231
Distancing	9,2	8,3	1113,5	0,349
Self-control	11	10,1	1039,5	0,128
Search for social support	10	10,3	1233,5	0,913
Taking responsibility	6	7	1038,5	0,146
Escape/avoidance	11,5	10,5	1036	0,072
Planning	11,9	11	1072	0,221
Positive reassessment	12,4	11,3	1080,5	0,244

As can be seen from Table 4, the prevalence of coping strategies in the young men and girls is mostly similar. The young men mostly resort to:

- positive reassessment of negative experiences, considering them as a resource for personal growth;
- planning a solution to the problem through situation analysis, forecasting one's own actions taking into account past experience;
- distraction such as active/passive leisure, including drinking alcohol, eating a lot, etc., that is, switching attention from anxious thoughts and states associated with the current difficult situation to other types of activity;
- self-control as the means of suppressing emotions to move on to rational actions;
- seeking social support as a resource in solving problems.

The girls differ somewhat in their desire to take responsibility, seek social support, and confront. A nearly statistically significant trend was found in the differences between the young men and girls in the "escape/avoidance" indicator ($U=1036$; $P=0.072$). Avoidance of situations involving obstacles is more typical of the young men.

Let us consider the features of psychological defense mechanisms and coping strategies of the students of pedagogical and non-pedagogical majors.

Table 5 – Psychological defense mechanisms of the students of pedagogical and non-pedagogical majors

Defense mechanism	Students of pedagogical majors	Students of non-pedagogical majors	<i>U</i>	<i>P</i>
Displacement	3,3	3,1	1226,5	0,874
Regression	6	5,4	1094	0,283
Substitution	2,4	1,5	896	0,012
Denial	4,9	4,1	1021	0,115
Projection	7	5,8	924	0,024
Compensation	4,2	3,5	1070	0,215
Hypercompensation	3,4	2,5	869	0,008
Rationalization	5,4	5,1	1167	0,569

The data in Table 5 indicate that the students majoring in pedagogical specialties are characterized by:

- rationalization – a desire to think logically and focus on the causes of a stressful situation, avoiding getting stuck on their own experiences associated with the situation;
- denial – distancing themselves from negative experiences that cause discomfort; denial of obvious facts and any attempts to discuss the problem;
- compensation as a desire to find a replacement for a deficiency or defect, which will allow the individual to maintain a positive self-attitude and self-sufficiency.

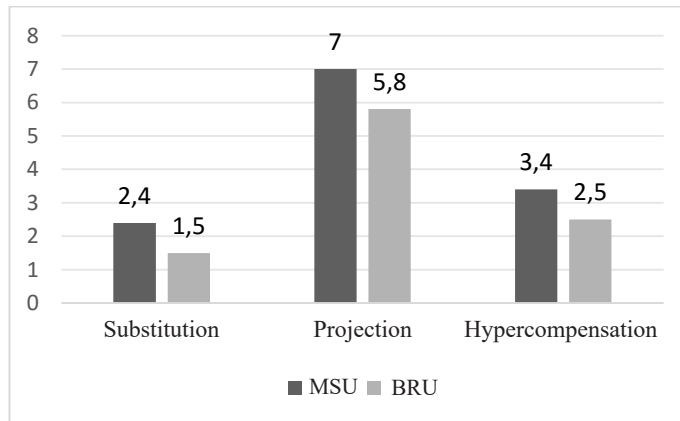
The students majoring in non-pedagogical specialties have revealed a preference for:

- projection – an unconscious transfer by the student of their own unacceptable feelings, emotions, thoughts, and attitudes to other people;
- regression as a transition to a lower stage of ontogenetic development when faced with a stressful situation, as a result of which the student seeks to solve problems of an easier nature (washing the dishes) rather than the situation that has arisen (writing a term paper);
- rationalization.

The respondents of pedagogical majors are distinguished by a greater desire to express their negative experiences and thoughts on a safer object (anger at a teacher is expressed in aggressive behavior with classmates), to transfer their own unacceptable feelings, thoughts and attitudes to other people, to spend all their efforts on achieving missing qualities, forming a feeling of inferiority.

The differences between these psychological mechanisms are clearly shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1 – Psychological defense mechanisms of the students of pedagogical and non-pedagogical majors



Based on the data in Figure 1, the highest values were found for the “projection” feature for both the non-pedagogical and pedagogical students. None of the psychological defense mechanisms were typical of the majority of non-pedagogical students surveyed.

The characteristics of coping strategies of the students of pedagogical and non-pedagogical majors are presented in Table 6.

Table 6 – Coping strategies of the students of pedagogical and non-pedagogical majors

Coping strategy	Students of pedagogical majors	Students of non-pedagogical majors	<i>U</i>	<i>P</i>
Confrontation	8,9	8,7	1212,5	0,799
Distancing	7,5	9,9	774	0,001
Self-control	10,4	10,7	1213,5	0,804
Search for social support	11	9,3	893,5	0,014
Taking responsibility	6,8	6,5	1129,5	0,408
Escape-avoidance	10,1	11,8	938,5	0,032
Planning	10,8	12,1	955	0,042
Positive reassessment	11,6	12,2	1138	0,442

According to Table 6, the majority of surveyed students of pedagogical majors prefer to use the following strategies of coping with behavior:

- positive reassessment – allows students to consider a difficult situation from a positive point of view in order to search for opportunities or consider it as a life experience;
- planning – when faced with a stressful situation (for example, an exam), students plans further steps to achieve the goal, consider possible options and choose the most effective ways of coping;
- self-control – when faced with a stressful situation, students prefer to maintain the ability to regulate their emotions and behavior, which helps in rational consideration of the situation and finding the most effective way to resolve the problem;
- escape/avoidance – the desire to distance oneself from the problem, postponing its solution for a longer period until the last opportunity to resolve it; avoidance of discussion and reflection on the problem that has arisen and possible options for its solution.

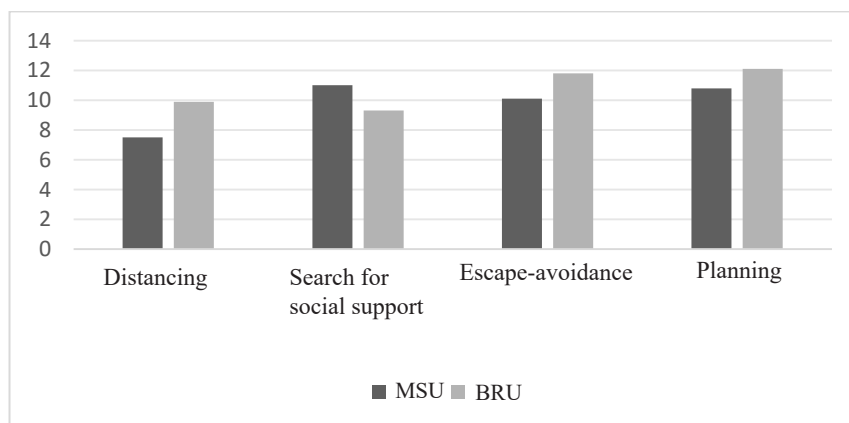
The students of non-pedagogical majors are characterized by the same preferences, but the priorities of coping strategies are somewhat different:

- positive reassessment;
- planning;
- escape/avoidance;
- self-control.

In other words, most of the surveyed students of non-pedagogical majors, after planning a solution and possible failure in this strategy, try to avoid further solving the problem. Only then self-control is used. Among the students of pedagogical majors, on the contrary, the regulation of emotions and behavior has a higher priority than the desire to avoid the problem. This is probably due to the fact that when failing to solve problems, students accumulate various negative experiences (anger, guilt, helplessness, etc.). However, the students studying in the pedagogical direction have a higher level of stress resistance, since this is one of the necessary personal characteristics for their professional activity.

The differences in psychological coping mechanisms are clearly shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2 – Coping strategies of the students of pedagogical and non-pedagogical majors



Among the students majoring in pedagogy, the indicators of distancing, escape (avoidance) and planning are lower than among the students majoring in non-pedagogy. At the same time, the search for social support is more typical among the respondents studying in pedagogical specialties. This may be due to understanding the importance of facilitative communication both in professional activities and in everyday life.

Conclusion

The mechanism of psychological defense is an unconscious formation with the function of blocking the destructive influence of unfavorable situations that a person may face.

Coping strategies should be considered as a personal resource, expressed in a sequence of actions and deeds of the individual with the purpose of overcoming a difficult life situation. Early adolescence is a period of intensive functioning of the listed personal formations against the background of independent educational activity, professional self-determination, building relationships with the opposite sex.

Among the young men, tendencies were revealed to manifest such defense mechanisms as “escape/avoidance” in difficult life situations. At the same time, the young men tend to use displacement and rationalization. For the girls, regression and substitution are typical, which is probably due to the functioning of their social stereotypes - ideas about social roles and basic personality traits of men and women, about sharing responsibility between them. Thus, it is unacceptable for men to show excessive emotionality, a man is stereotypically considered stronger both physically and psychologically, while women are considered the “weaker sex”.

The priority coping strategies among the young men and girls are positive reassessment,

problem-solving planning, escape, self-control, and seeking social support.

Statistically significant differences in preferred coping strategies were revealed between the students majoring in pedagogy and non-pedagogy. Distancing, escape/avoidance, and planning a solution are more characteristic of the students of non-pedagogical majors. This is probably due to the content and requirements of the chosen profession, immersion in the corporate professional environment. For the students majoring in pedagogy, the above-mentioned coping strategies with the inclusion of a search for social support are more preferable. This difference can be interpreted as a manifestation of a higher level of sociability, empathy, and a desire to jointly search for a solution to a personal or professional problem or task.

Among the psychological defense mechanisms, substitution, projection, and hypercompensation were found to be statistically significant as a result of comparing the students of pedagogical and non-pedagogical majors. The indicators of all the listed psychological defense mechanisms are higher among the students of non-pedagogical specialties. The differences may be related to childhood experience of relationships with adults, requirements for students to master the chosen profession, and ideas about their upcoming professional activity.

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Джанашиа А. З., Карасёва О. А. ПСИХОЛОГИЧЕСКИЕ ЗАЩИТЫ И КОПИНГ-СТРАТЕГИИ СТУДЕНТОВ

Необходимость исследования психологических защит и копинг-стратегий личности обусловлена повышением эмоционального напряжения и тревожности современного человека, пребывающего в динамично меняющемся окружении: развитие, взаимоотношения, учебная и трудовая деятельность на фоне взаимодействия с цифровой средой. Данные о бессознательном компоненте ресурсов совладания с ситуативными вызовами могут выступить основанием в вопросах разработки оптимальных программ эмоциональной резистентности, психологического здоровья человека, профилактики психического напряжения, деструктивных способов преодоления трудностей.

Ключевые слова: личность, субъект, психологическая защита, копинг-ресурсы/поведение, юношеский возраст.